



Rights Now

The newsletter of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee



CREATING LASTING DISASTER RECOVERY

AS WITH MOST CRISES, THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS DEMONSTRATED HOW communities who were already confronting systemic injustices before a disaster are at a greater risk of violation of their rights when another crisis strikes. This has been especially true for people living with disabilities in Kiribati, a remote island in the Pacific Ocean.

People living with disabilities (PLWD) are among the most underserved individuals following a disaster and are often left out of mainstream recovery

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We are delighted to introduce Myra Dahgaypaw, UUSC's newest Senior Partnership Officer for International Justice and Accountability, to our members. Myra was formerly the Director of UUSC grantee partner, the US Campaign for Burma. She now oversees UUSC's Burma portfolio.

Q&A: MYRA DAHGAYPAW

How did you first get involved in the human rights issues you are working on now?

I started my advocacy at a very young age because I saw things that did not seem right in my own community. As a child, I always asked why everything was so unfair. *Why did my family have to move around so often? Why did I grow up without parents? Why was my aunt raped by soldiers? Why did the military torture and kill my uncle?*

[Only] when I was a teenager and old enough to understand did I learn that the Burma Army sent troops to invade our village, burn it down, and kill people. As a result, my family and I could not stay in the village when the Burma military troops came because they would kill us. Unfortunately, half of my family [was] unable to escape the Burmese military – this included my parents and oldest brother.

So, my sense of social justice and accountability came about in my early teenage years. I joined the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) when I was in high school. My work with the KWO drove my passion for speaking out and seeking accountability. To work as a human rights activist, there is a level of responsibility, compassion, values, and a belief of obligation. These resonated greatly with me, because I have the freedoms and platforms that others may not have.

This interview has been edited for length. To read our full interview with Myra, please visit uusc.org/myraq&a.

What is something you'd like people to know about Burma that you think is not highlighted enough in U.S. media channels?

Inclusivity, as well as ethnic and religious minorities' issues, are not highlighted enough in the U.S. media... Most people don't know that Burma's ethnic and religious minorities suffered gruesome human rights violations and mass atrocities at the hands of the brutal Burmese military regime for over seven decades.

Throughout my youth, I was forced to flee from the Burmese military on several occasions... There was one incident when a bomb was dropped on the very spot where a childhood friend and I were moments before. We jumped into [a] trench just as the military dropped the bombs... I remembered yelling, "I'm dead! I'm dead!" My friend shook me and told me that I wasn't dead because I was still talking.

Now, the ethnic civilians are seeing a level of violence that surpasses what I grew up with... The Burma Army is staging scorched earth campaigns – as well as using fighter jets, tanks, and other forms of deadly and sophisticated weapons – across all ethnic states. Within the past year alone, there were more than 8,537 Burmese military attacks on civilians that led to 400,000+ newly displaced individuals of ethnic nationalities. Many other civilians were also killed by shelling and land mines, or they were shot on sight. The daily military attacks on the ethnic civilians will only get worse.

Where do you draw hope to continue in your challenging work?

My hope comes from genuine supporters, such as UUSC members and others. I also draw hope and strength from the impacted communities – their strength, courage, and resilience. It doesn't only give me a sense of hope, but also a sense of responsibility. I have the freedoms and platforms that they do not have. I can raise their voices and share their stories.

They are more than victims of the Burmese military. They are mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, friends, loved ones. They are survivors. They are no longer a number in an article or report. They are no longer the target of the Burmese military. Through advocacy and activism, we at UUSC can help humanize them to the international community and leaders.

A LONG HISTORY OF PARTNERSHIP IN HAITI



UUSC has a long history of working with civil society organizations in Haiti, having partnered with grassroots organizations for a decade following the catastrophic 2010 earthquake. With the generosity of our members, what started out as a humanitarian and food sustainability project in 2011 – best known for its “tire gardens” – turned into a multi-year program to support families displaced by the earthquake through the construction of housing, a school, solar-powered wells, and more.

UUSC members joined efforts to raise relief funds once again in 2016

when Hurricane Matthew made landfall in the region. At the time of the storm, the Dominican Republic had been stripping residents of Haitian ancestry of their citizenship, expelling them from the country, and leaving more than 1,000 displaced people living in makeshift shelters along the Haiti-Dominican Republic border. Whereas most aid agencies focused their relief projects on the western regions of Haiti, UUSC supported displaced individuals at the southeast coast, especially women heads-of-families, children, the elderly, and people living with disabilities.

In August 2021, a 7.2 magnitude earthquake devastated the southwestern region of Haiti, killing more than 2,000 people and injuring nearly 13,000. UUSC moved quickly to reconnect with our partners in the region to learn about the needs on the ground, identify civil society organizations closest to the earthquake impact, and support Haitian-led recovery efforts.

The August 2021 earthquake struck Haiti at a time of heightened gang violence and within one month of the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, both of which have severely hindered the distribution of international aid. On top of this, health care facilities were already overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients, and the country is still facing long-term impacts of the 2010 earthquake.

Due to our previous partnerships in Haiti, UUSC was able to connect with civil society organizations immediately following the

earthquake to respond to needs on the ground. This was made possible thanks to the gifts made toward our **Emergency Response Fund**. Through the generosity of our members, we are pursuing a robust strategy that centers racial justice and decolonization in our recovery efforts. In addition to providing immediate assistance, UUSC is partnering with community leaders to advance Haiti's political autonomy, ensure that aid reaches those most directly affected, and bolster grassroots movements in their long-term efforts to rebuild the nation.

To learn more about UUSC's response to the 2021 earthquake in Haiti, please visit uusc.org/haitirecovery.

Recognizing that Haitians face deeply rooted injustices that stretch beyond the 2021 earthquake, UUSC is committed to strengthening existing partnerships and entering new ones to work toward durable, systemic, and locally-led solutions to Haiti's recovery.

UUSC EMERGENCY RESPONSE FUND UKRAINE RESPONSE



Much like the approach we have been taking since the 2021 earthquake struck Haiti, UUSC is responding to the massive refugee crisis caused by Putin's invasion of Ukraine by connecting with our previous partners in the region and providing funding for immediate needs. We are also identifying the long-term needs of communities who are left out of mainstream relief efforts.

While our portfolio will expand, UUSC has made two initial grants:

The Hungarian Helsinki Committee, pictured above, is our longest-term partner from UUSC's work responding to the Syrian refugee crisis. Our grant is helping to provide free legal assistance and representation so that Ukrainian asylum seekers receive temporary protection in Hungary.

FemFund, a feminist organization based out of Warsaw, Poland with operations in Ukraine, is one of UUSC's newest partners. With our funding, it is responding to the crisis in ways that directly support people in migration, especially for Black, People of Color, and LGBTQI+ communities.

UUSC will continue to listen to and learn from local organizations working on the frontlines. One priority will be to highlight the disparity in treatment of Black communities and other People of Color seeking refuge in Europe (compared to white Ukrainians), which UUSC is supporting as part of our longer-term goal to address justice and accountability during and after the crisis.

Learn more at uusc.org/ukraine.
Donate at uusc.org/erf.

COVID-19 PARTNER HIGHLIGHT: TE TOA MATOA

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plans. In a low-lying region like Kiribati, where climate change impacts such as land erosion and rising seas are more of a threat than ever, a crisis as significant as COVID-19 has only added to the pressures of safety for this community.

UUSC partner Te Toa Matoi is working to advocate on behalf of PLWD, especially Indigenous Peoples, in Kiribati, in the context of climate-related disasters – and now in response to COVID-19.

UUSC's support helps Te Toa Matoi push government agencies to implement inclusive policies around climate change responses, conduct trainings and workshops on rescue and relief missions for PLWD during natural disasters, and perform art and music to advocate for the rights and livelihoods of PLWD during emergencies.

With a supplemental emergency grant from UUSC this past year, Te Toa Matoi has been able to expand this work. As part of a task force, Te Toa Matoi has been collaborating closely with the Ministry of Health to ensure that public health services accommodate PLWD. It is also visiting communities around the island to circulate information on how to address the basic needs of PLWD during the pandemic, and recently reported that, "We are happy to tell you that after the visitation(s), all people on the island were more aware of persons with disabilities' needs."

Te Toa Matoi's impact is enormous, and UUSC is proud to serve as one of its only international funders. Despite its size, Te Toa Matoi continues to demonstrate its expansive reach on climate change and migration, which UUSC has invested in for the past three years.

Since the start of COVID-19, UUSC members have shown tremendous generosity towards our human rights work despite facing challenges of their own. With your help, UUSC distributed \$600,000 worth of emergency and COVID-19 grants on top of our normal operating budget.

MOVING FROM HUMANITARIAN AID TO DISASTER JUSTICE

As natural disasters become more frequent and severe due to the climate crisis, UUSC is working alongside grassroots groups to redefine what it means to respond to a disaster equitably and effectively. As part of this effort, UUSC has adopted a framework for humanitarian crisis response known as Disaster Justice, which we developed in collaboration with our partners Living Hope Wheelchair Association, The Praxis Project, and other allies.

What is Disaster Justice?

Like mainstream humanitarian aid responses, a Disaster Justice approach addresses peoples' immediate needs in the wake of an ecological disaster. At the same time, it focuses on removing barriers that prevent equal access to resources. This requires following the lead and expertise of directly affected communities, transforming unjust policies, and enacting proactive disaster plans.

The Disaster Justice approach is critical to securing a safe and equitable recovery because crises are often layered on top of pre-existing injustices. Frontline communities not only experience the direct impacts of a disaster but also the harmful repercussions of historic and ongoing oppression – and the ways oppression is exacerbated in a disaster context.

In a formal complaint submitted to the UN, UUSC partners describe how First and Indigenous Peoples, “face not only the crisis caused by human-caused greenhouse gas emissions like burning fossil fuels or deforestation, but also a combination of other devastating human-made disasters,” including levee construction, colonialism, and oil and gas exploration.

Take action for climate justice at uusc.org/climigrationresponse.

Identifying root causes and pre-existing inequities helps inform how to respond to a crisis in an impactful and justice-centered way. That is why UUSC has committed to following these **five principles of Disaster Justice** in our approach:

Intersectionality

Broadening the definition of “disaster” to include human-made actions that contribute to oppression and unequal access to aid and resources.

Disaster Preparedness

Addressing disasters and their root causes in an ongoing way, even after media coverage has moved on.

Community-Led

Advocating to shift disaster management from outside entities to community-led initiatives.

Human Rights-Centered Aid

Centering racial and social justice and acknowledging the compounding effects of historic harms to low-income, immigrant, and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities.

Community Wisdom

Pressuring governments to develop policies that affirm the worth, dignity, and power of all people through storytelling and narrative change.

OUR PARTNER’S STORY: THE LOWLANDER CENTER

When Hurricane Ida made landfall in September 2021, low-wealth BIPOC communities in the Lake Charles region of Louisiana were still struggling to recover from the prior year’s Category 4 storm, Hurricane Laura. Basic needs were not being met, and many people faced underlying health risks due to petrochemical facility sites near their homes.

UUSC began responding to Hurricane Ida before it happened, when our community-based partner Lowlander Center asked us for support as hurricane season approached. With the help of our generous members, UUSC provided a \$30,000 grant in support of our partner’s strategy... and within a month, Hurricane Ida struck the region. With the tarps, generators, tents, water, and other basic food items that Lowlander Center was able to purchase ahead of time with our funding, recovery efforts were quickly and effectively put into action for those most impacted.

Save the date!

UUSC HUMAN RIGHTS LEADERSHIP CELEBRATION



A virtual event featuring Isabel Wilkerson, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Humanities Medal, and author of the critically acclaimed bestsellers *The Warmth of Other Suns* and *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*.

Thursday, June 9 at 7 p.m. ET / 4 p.m. PT

uuscs.org/celebration

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Unitarian Universalist Service Committee
689 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02139-3302

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