

A Bridge Journey through Myanmar

Here in Kyar Bin it is six o'clock in the morning. The sun is rising and with Aiklian, my Shan Burmese colleague, we are beginning the final assembly of our bridge number 73 in Myanmar (Burma) and 651 in the world. We are on a typical bridge assembly journey, which means putting up seven bridges within twelve days, travelling included.

It's not that we're rushing. For us it is the natural flow of work. While we are finishing one bridge, a delegation sent from the villages at the next location is already there. They're waiting to take us with them, and that's how we are passed on from village to village across Myanmar.



From here in the Northwest of the country near the border to India we'll cross to the Northeast near China, from there down to Magway in the Southwest, and finally back to Yangon. Something like two thousand kilometres.

At each location hundreds of families are waiting to see their bridge finished. Several weeks ago they already did the most laborious part: they collected sand and stones, dug up the ground, carried the steel structures. Once everything ready, my colleague Aiklian showed up for a few days and with him they did the concrete works.



Then, for three weeks, they waited patiently for the concrete to cure. Meanwhile they had time to repaint all steel plates and frames and to complete the access ramps. These can be huge, especially in areas with danger of floods in monsoon. There the towers are mounted on top of bridgeheads up to 6 meters high.

The day of magic

Yesterday we put up the towers and main cables of this first bridge, a nice one with a 100m span. Now everything is ready. People cannot believe that this afternoon their suffering because of the river will be over. They say it is like magic. Aiklian is giving them the morning speech on safety and our procedures. In a few minutes, I will sit with him on that plank laid across both main cables which is our working platform. Then we will be pulled up to the top of the tower by ropes and strong peasant arms.



From there we will move along the main cables until reaching the other tower. On the way we'll hook up each hanger cable at its specified position. The men below bring the next hanger cable with its bridge deck frame, and the next steel plate. Other men fix the bolts.



About every 6 minutes we continue forward another two meters, and so it will take us about five hours for a bridge of 100 meters. The beginning is always a little slower until the peasants know each step.



It will be extremely hot, typical for this region of Myanmar in April and May. The radio said it will be 43 degrees Celsius, but fifteen meters up in the air with a slight breeze, it could be a little less.

This is just the first one of this series of seven bridges. The emotions along such a journey go up and down, understandably. You can only do this with a mentally and emotionally stable partner. Generally you live the happiness to serve so many people, and in such short time. But you also you live the merciless heat, the rains and mud in rainy season, the unsound sleep in always different places, the back-breaking travelling, and the inevitable technical and human problems... But right now I feel all right, and this afternoon I will feel even better, when this biggest and most difficult one of this series will be finished.

Walking on water

We started at seven in the morning and the assembly was completed at noon. Handrails in place and cleanup finished at three in the afternoon. The people did great, as they so often do here.



The heat was overwhelming. During those 5 hours sitting up on the plank the peasant ladies continuously sent us up plastic bottles of coconut water with a little lemon juice: 5 litres of coconut water in 5 hours, each of us. And no need to go to the toilet.

Our human body is amazing, I often wonder. So I try to make the best use of it that I can imagine: bend down to put up bridges.

Time has come to bid farewell. That's how it is in a bridgebuilder's life: say hello, work with the people, say goodbye. Many smile, others have tears in their eyes. Usually they present us with what they have: bottles full of wild honey or sesame oil, fruits, peanuts, beans. A new shirt or longyi. In a village of oozies (elephant drivers), a beautiful blue piece of cloth to make me a new bag. In a village of woodworkers, a reclining seat made of precious wood, for if one day I should have where to put it.

As it is my habit, I say my own private goodbye to the Argentinean pipes and Swiss cables. Today they begin their new life here in this distant place. I feel like leaving behind a piece of myself, and it touches me like the first time. Will people take care of you? Will they see your beauty and love you for what you stand for, as I do? Here nobody knows where these pipes and cables were born, who created them.

Nor do they know who midwifed their delivery into the country on a complicated journey across the seas and through national customs. Or how in our workshop we've formed them, with skill and much care, so that united as a bridge they will be able to face their lifelong task: to stand strong and serve every human and animal coming their way.

Today they will hear the children run below and shout overjoyed: "Look, I am *walking* on the water!"



Means of transport

A journey of bridges requires precise but also flexible coordination so that time after time Aiklian and myself but especially hundreds of peasants manage to meet at their respective bridge site on the right day at the right time.

The delegates carry us on the vehicles they manage to find: often in the car of the local monastery's chief monk or of a merchant, or on some old truck, or at a minimum on small motorcycles. This makes a string of 10 motos for all the bags with tools, bolts, clips and so we cross mountains and forests for hours.

For the long distance stages we use public transport. For example, on the mighty rivers Ayeyarwaddy or Chindwin we use public boats, sometimes 10 and more hours of sailing.



In past years we used the old railway, too, especially from Mandalay going north towards places in Sagaing and Kachin State. But now better roads are being built and better buses extend their service reach.

So nowadays it's mostly what we call "bridge building by bus", which has numerous advantages: it's very efficient and economical, with drivers who know their road, without costs nor headaches for vehicle maintenance, no Ministry of Transport permits nor license plate renewal.



In this large country, the bus trips are frequently 14 hours and more. On a day bus, I try to do some administrative work on the laptop, as far as the two batteries hold up, with music in the ears to drown out the obnoxious TV shows. On a night bus I use the time to think or sleep somewhat. At the destination bus station the villagers, and on we go.

The people's effort

I highly respect the peasants for the efforts they make. I don't tire of pointing out, especially in the West, that these bridges are built by the peasants.

They clear the land, dig the ground, break the rock. All with the tools they use in their fields: machete, axe, hoe, shovels, hammer and pickaxes. By hand they collect 120 to 400 tons of sand, gravel and stone, depending on the bridge.



But not all communities are lucky to find the required sand or stone in their river. So they have to go and buy it, sometimes several hours far away. This can cost up to two million Myanmar Kyats (about 2'000 US dollars).



In this country, unlike the peasants in Indonesia and in Ecuador, they don't have a generous Holcim Cement factory to help them with the cement. They have to buy it. 500 bags for one of the largest bridges can cost up to 3'500 dollars.



They also find a truck to bring their entire bridge kit from Yangon, where we do the pre-fabrication. This transport can cost from 300 to 3'000 dollars. To illustrate it a bit more, the distance from Yangon to the most far away villages is like the one from Italy to Poland. Or from Ecuador to Venezuela.



Ideally, we coordinate the timing to put two or three bridges on one single truck to the same region so as to share the costs among all villages. We load all the components, without mix-ups of the kits or missing anything. At the end of the entire series we put the remaining 200kg of tools into the cargo hold of a bus and return to Yangon.

So for a 100m span bridge, in the most distant and unfavorable case, the villagers spend up to 10'000 dollars. This is an enormous amount of money for them, but large bridges like this in Myanmar serve two thousand households and more. They collect the money among all the families who benefit from the bridge: many give three to five dollars, the equivalent of about two days of work. Those better off and who want to do a good deed donate more. Sometimes a merchant in a nearby town makes a donation. Usually the monks help, too, and a lot. We don't know how, but the people always manage to gather everything, and we just hear their stories afterwards.

For example, the villagers of the second bridge of this series here couldn't find a truck from their remote area. So they went and hired one straight in Yangon. Bad idea. To their sorrow, after about 80% of the three day journey, in the forest somewhere north of Monywa, the Yangon driver finally refused to continue on this horrible and unknown road. The unfortunate village delegates had no choice but to go find a crane plus another truck, to offload and reload the 20 tons in the middle of the forest.

Or here at Kyar Bin, the current Minister of Industry of Myanmar has some relationship with the area. He donated from his own pocket the cement for the bridge and the transportation costs. No show, no name, just do a good deed. Precisely like all those who in some way contribute to the bridges, just like the most modest peasant with the strength of his muscles and his 3 dollars.

The Right Hand Man

It's worth a thought: no family, no demands, no profit. Instead, total dedication and service. What kind of man lives like this? Not only for a month, but for many years. And in what circumstances.

Aiklian is such a man, and he is my right hand man in Myanmar since the beginning, 6 years ago. Knowing both Shan and Burmese language, he can talk with the villagers of the entire country, and they respect him. He's 41 years old, still single, and doesn't want to take a salary. Without even asking, he receives all he needs along the way from the peasants, from our friends in the cities or from the Swiss families who have been helping from the beginning.



With the experience gained at my side over the years, Aiklian now does much alone. Imagine this one inconspicuous man alone on a bus criss-crossing Myanmar, over and over again. Because of such a man now half a million Myanmar citizens have a better life.

Every tour I do, he actually does it three times: first he goes to check the sites and their topography, and talk with the villagers. The second time he goes for concrete works. The third time with me for final assembly. But many trips are in vain: for each bridge we do build we probably look at up to three locations where we can't build, depending on the country and province. The main criteria are commitment of the villagers, the number of villagers served, topography, transport. Aiklian has been to all regions of Myanmar, and there to the last corners. I would say that few people in the country know its entire geography as extensively as he does.

But why does a man lead such a life, day in, day out? Patiently, brave, consistently. Someday I will tell his astonishing story.

A Letter in Mandalay

We've arrived in Mandalay, after having put up the first 3 bridges. Tomorrow we'll take the bus to the northeastern part of the country, the northern Shan State, bordering with China.



Kyun Shwe War, Sagaing



Thinnitaw, Sagaing

Here in Mandalay they have internet, and among the mails is one from the Minister of Industry who gave his help for the bridge built just 4 days ago. He somehow had gotten my address to send me his letter from the capital Nay Pyi Taw:

"Dear Toni, this letter is written with emotion and my heart playing a melody..." and further down: *"The villagers will definitely be grateful and keep you in their deepest heart whenever they use the bridge..."*.

I don't know how many hundreds of letters I've written to Ministers and other government authorities in 13 countries over the past 27 years, requesting all sorts of permissions or help. But never have I received such a heartfelt letter by a minister.

A missed opportunity

It doesn't happen often to me, maybe once or twice per country. And today it happened here in Myanmar. At eight in the morning we reached the bridge site about two hours from Lashio. The steel plates and frames were laid out, but only halfway painted. The formwork and sandbags had not been removed. And most importantly, no people around. Not one peasant. Of course Aiklian had notified them for today's final assembly, but for some crazy reason the people seemed not to care.



So we did what we do in such a situation: we waited an hour while someone went to drum up the people. About twenty showed up when we need at least eighty. We reminded them that this was an agreement of honour. That we make our effort and the people theirs. We don't waste time, theirs nor ours. For tomorrow in Magway Division another bridge is waiting with hundreds of people, and after tomorrow another one.

They were a bit surprised, then they thought we were just posturing, then the few local officials tried to justify and talk us over. Then they remained just sad. We will come back in a few weeks or months, after taking care of other bridges in the queue.

The Last of Seven

Yesterday noon we reached Minbu with the night bus from Lashio. And today at eleven in the morning we completed number six, near the mountain range between Magway Division and Rakhine Division in western Myanmar. From there the villagers carried us on their little truck for two hours to the seventh and last bridge of this trip.



Kyun Pyar, Magway

There the next villagers were eagerly waiting, maybe 200 men and women and children. The same afternoon we measured, marked, crossed to the other side, lifted up and anchored the main cables.



Now from seven in the evening until nine o'clock we're cutting the hanger cables, right here at the riverside.

This careful process takes about two hours. The people brought a small generator and lights. I mark the lengths. While Aiklian binds off and cuts each of the 36 hanger cables, I always have three minutes in between. I use them to write a few more lines, 36 times.

Tomorrow at about two in the afternoon we should be finished here, and in the evening we will take one more night bus to Yangon. Six of seven bridges completed, 35'000 people served.



"Whatever you do," Gandhi once wrote, "in the grand scheme of things, it is insignificant. But it is still absolutely vital that you do it."

I keep wondering about the very rare opportunity it is to be on this planet. How very short and precious our time we have here. The bridges made of gifts and leftovers, of love and common sacrifice of so many express my highest wish: I am a human. I want to be worthy of it.



Let Pan Ta Khar, Magway