

South Korea’s centuries-old Gounsa temple is left in ruins by unprecedented wildfires

By Hyung-Jin Kim
The Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — Unprecedented wildfires ripping through South Korea’s southern regions destroyed large parts of an ancient Buddhist temple complex, burning down two buildings that had been designated national treasures.

Five days of wildfires, considered among South Korea’s worst, left 24 people dead, destroyed more than 300 structures, and forced more than 28,000 residents to evacuate, according to officials.

The Gounsa temple was reportedly originally built in 681 C.E. during the Shilla dynasty that ruled more than half of the Korean Peninsula. It is nestled at the foot of Deungun Mountain in the southeastern town of Uiseong. While it doesn’t house buildings constructed during that ancient period, it is home to several famous cultural heritages built later.

The temple was engulfed in



TEMPLE TRAGEDY. Pavilions, left photo, are seen at the Gounsa temple in Uiseong, South Korea, on February 11, 2025. In the photo on the right, taken on March 26, 2025, the remains of burnt-out pavilions due to wildfires are seen at the Gounsa temple. Unprecedented wildfires ripped through South Korea’s southern regions, destroying large parts of the ancient Buddhist temple complex.

flames March 25 as strong winds fanned the wildfires. About 20 of its 30 buildings and structures were completely burned down, including the revered Gaunru, a pavilion-shaped structure built in 1668 overlooking a stream, and Yeonsujeon, built in 1904 to mark the longevity of a king, according to the state-run Korea Heritage Service.

Both were constructed during the Joseon dynasty, the last one

on the Korean Peninsula, and were given the government designation of “treasure,” a status given to old buildings, paintings, and other cultural assets with historic and artistic significance and which receive state-level protection and maintenance.

“I went there this morning and found they’ve been reduced to heaps of ashes,” said Doryun, a senior monk who had lived at the temple for more than three years



when he was younger. “I feel really empty. Life is transient.”

Doryun now works for a Buddhist organization in charge of the temple. He said that monks and Buddhist faithful managed to move the temple’s third “treasure,” a stone Buddha statue reportedly built in the 8th century, to a safe place.

“Many buildings were burned down, but we moved and protected other sacred assets so

that we can maintain the temple. We feel it’s very fortunate,”

Doryun told The Associated Press over the phone.

Doryun also said about 20 monks and other workers live at the temple, but none were injured.

The Korea Heritage Service said the temple’s two other lower-level cultural assets, including a stone pagoda, were also found intact.

What to know about Myanmar’s civil war, which is complicating earthquake relief efforts

By Grant Peck
The Associated Press

BANGKOK — The Southeast Asian nation of Myanmar has been plagued by wars and natural disasters since it became independent from Britain in 1948, when it was still called Burma.

Relief efforts from the devastating 7.7 magnitude earthquake on March 28 will be especially complicated with the country embroiled in civil war, which began after the army seized power from the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi in February 2021.

The main resistance movement against military rule issued a statement saying it unilaterally initiated a two-week ceasefire that began March 30 in areas of the country affected by the quake.

The military government, even before the earthquake, employed massive repression and state violence, and heavily restricted much-needed aid to the more than 3 million people displaced by war.

The army’s ability to facilitate or block food and other assistance has been described as a way of weaponizing aid. Critics of the military government have called repeatedly for outside assistance to be delivered directly to areas under control of the resistance.

Who are the protagonists in Myanmar’s armed conflict?

The military, which has directly or indirectly ruled Myanmar most of the time since independence, seized power from Suu Kyi’s government as it was about to begin a second five-year term. She and leaders of her National League for Democracy party were jailed, and security forces put down pro-democracy demonstrations with deadly force, leading to the growth of armed resistance, and the army in turn escalating its violence.

Despite a huge disadvantage in weaponry and manpower, pro-democracy fighters allied with ethnic minority groups seeking greater autonomy have successfully battled back, and analysts believe they control a much greater share of territory.

The resistance is coordinated by the self-styled National Unity Government (NUG), whose claim to legitimacy is that it was formed by elected lawmakers. The NUG, which operates underground, has an armed wing called the People’s Defense Force (PDF).

The PDF is largely a conglomeration of locally formed defense groups, poorly armed but usually with the advantage of fighting on home ground. Their ethnic allies are much more experienced and have even managed in some cases to manufacture their own weapons.

What exactly has the resistance proposed?

The National Unity Government late last month

announced that the PDF would implement the two-week pause in offensive military operations in the earthquake-affected areas, while retaining the right to self-defense.

It said it would collaborate with the U.N. and international nongovernmental organizations “to ensure security, transportation, and the establishment of temporary rescue and medical camps” in the areas it controls. It also offered to provide healthcare professionals loyal to its resistance movement to work with international humanitarian organizations to deliver emergency rescue and medical services in areas under the military’s control, if provided with safety guarantees.

What is the significance of the resistance’s announcement?

The PDF fighters rarely mount large-scale offensives, sticking mainly to defense and ambush-style attacks, so its ceasefire would be largely symbolic. By taking the moral high ground, it gives its supporters a stronger argument to push for the unrestricted distribution of aid.

Although the military government has made the rare gesture of soliciting foreign emergency aid, its critics are skeptical that it will deploy it fairly and effectively.

The military’s record is discouraging. For instance, it initially refused to allow in foreign rescue teams or many emergency supplies after Cyclone Nargis in 2008, which resulted in well over 100,000 deaths, and tens of thousands more left unaccounted for. Even after it agreed to accept foreign help, it was with severe restrictions.

When Cyclone Mocha ripped into the coast in May 2023, the military’s relief efforts were again tardy, and as in 2008, private relief missions were discouraged, as was reporting. Property damage was heavy and while 145 deaths were officially acknowledged, independent accounts put the total at more than 400.

There are examples in other countries when the effort to rebuild after natural disasters have played a part in helping to restore peace to areas torn by conflict, most notably in Indonesia’s Aceh province after it was devastated by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.



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