

# Six Weeks after Cyclone Nargis

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A review by the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma

## Questions Remain

Global attention has been shifting away from cyclone devastation in Burma to other topical issues even though many problems remain unresolved for the cyclone victims in the country.

The waning interest in Burma can be attributed to ASEAN-UN teams entering cyclone-affected areas to assess the situation and their findings expected to be released in July, and also because of the promise by the Burmese military chief Than Shwe to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon "to allow all international aid workers to operate freely and without hindrance" in Burma. Another factor that may have eased international concerns is also because of reports by different international agencies about helicopter trips being made to cyclone hit areas, assistance they have rendered, or health care programs they have carried out in the cyclone-devastated areas.

Progress being made today is self-evident as compared to the three weeks after Cyclone Nargis when the Burmese generals accused of being "criminally negligent" did not allow any foreigner or international agency to undertake relief work.

But, questions remain as to whether that pace of progress is quick enough to help the country avert food shortages and economic problems in the foreseeable future and whether concerns about the second wave of human disaster should be laid to rest. These questions are legitimate because the already impoverished people of Burma are not in a position to take another round of beating either from nature or from the failings of the Burmese generals who until now have been trying to bypass the relief phase and proceed with reconstruction.

Despite the foolhardy insistence of the Burmese generals about the relief phase being over, complaints and appeals about relief from the delta region particularly about the lack of medical care and shelters in remote villages are still being heard today. As far as food in concern, the adaptability of the cyclone victims has enabled them to survive off the land so far. But thousands of farmers are also unable to replant rice because they lack farming equipment and seed grains. These complaints are from cyclone victims and local private donors who are appealing for assistance. Local donors, volunteers, and religious institutions were the first groups to be in the field helping cyclone victims since the early days following the cyclone and their assessment of the region has rarely proven to be wrong. Besides, the Food and Agriculture Organization has also estimated that "roughly half a million metric tons of paddy" will be lost this season if replanting does not begin soon.

## Monitoring Relief Aid

With regard to health assistance, a high-ranking official in the Health Department who asked not to be identified said, "When an international agency says it has cared for hundreds of people, it sometimes means that hundreds of ampoules of vaccine or medicines have been given to a government clinic or hospital for distribution or treatment. It does not mean the medicines have already reached the people."

If there is any truth in that statement and given the junta's poor record of accountability, international agencies need to be less trusting of the regime to do the distribution and be closely monitoring where relief supplies are going.

## Actions That Hamper Relief Efforts

With eagerness to proceed to the reconstruction phase, the military regime has been closing down relief camps and forcing out cyclone victims from places of refuge and sending them back to their barren villages. As a result, foreign doctors who are in the country to help cyclone victims are left with no or little relief camps to work in. They are asked to leave the Irrawaddy Division.

Asian doctors from Thailand, the Philippines, India, and Japan, who were allowed into the country, are told that Burma has enough doctors to deal with the situation now and are asked to leave because relief camps have been closed down.

Meanwhile, the Burmese generals have also issued new relief guidelines for international agencies. UN agencies and other aid groups are now required to formally request permission before they can travel for aid distribution. This requirement, together with numerous roadblocks set up on the routes to the cyclone-hit Irrawaddy Division and interruption by local officials, are delaying emergency relief efforts and keeping skilled international experts from undertaking effective relief work in the devastated delta areas.

Despite the public commitment by Senior General Than Shwe to improve access to all, police and soldiers manning roadblocks are ordered particularly to look out for "foreigners" traveling to the Delta areas. Local private donors who are on their way to Irrawaddy are regularly asked if there are any "foreigners" accompanying them.

## Rewarding Cronies

Although Cyclone Nargis has been a disaster on a national scale for most people, it is a boon for the cronies of the junta.

Several days after the cyclone, the junta's Prime Minister Thein Sein assigned several ministers to take charge of relief and rehabilitation in different regions and chose several companies and businessmen close to the junta -- including Tay Za, a pet of junta's

strongman Than Shwe; Aung Thet Mann, son of junta's No 3 Thura Shwe Mann; and Tun Myint Naing, alias Steven Law, son of 1970s drug lord and militia leader Lo Hsing-han -- to provide "relief and reconstruction" services.

The junta and its cronies stand to profit from reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts if the international community is willing to come up the billions of dollars that the generals are seeking for reconstruction of the disaster areas.

## Truth & Propaganda

The junta's Minister for National Planning and Economic Development U Soe Tha told the ASEAN-UN International Pledging Conference on Humanitarian Assistance to Burma that the government had used over Kyat 70 billion "for relief works and rehabilitation tasks".

Given the steady revenue from daily natural gas sales and a comfortable balance of payment surplus of around \$3 billion, the Burmese generals should, in fact, be doing a lot more for the people instead of relying on foreign help.

Unfortunately, news about the military junta initiating a massive relief aid effort or extending effective help to the people in trouble has never been reported in any of the independent Burmese language radio stations, which have broadcast scores of interviews with cyclone victims and private local donors in the six weeks since the cyclone.

The state-run media also recently reported about land reclamation initiatives undertaken in one of the worst cyclone-hit areas Labutta Township. The junta claims to have distributed over 441 million kyats of loans to farmers, provided rice seed grains and fertilizer, and sent some 600 buffaloes and 238 powered tillers for plowing.

But the reality on the ground is that many of the farmers are not seeing any of this claimed assistance. Instead of leasing or helping farmers, the Mechanized Agriculture Department is selling power tillers to the farmers in Labutta, Pyapon, and Bogale. The poor villagers are required to put up an advance of 200,000 to 500,000 kyats (depending on the machines, the cost of which ranges from around 1.1 to 2.2 million kyats) if they want to buy the machines. Some of the power tillers being sold to farmers by the junta were actually donated by the Netherlands for the cyclone victims, according to a relief worker.

Besides, even farmers who can afford to buy power tillers are finding it difficult to operate in full capacity. Three or four gallons of diesel oil are needed to work an acre of farmland but farmers are only allowed to buy one gallon a day at 3,000 to 4,000 kyats.

Farmers particularly in remote villages do not even have the basic farming implements or seed grains to replant rice. Local private donors are reporting that the villagers do not even have hoes or knives to work with.

## Transparency Issues

While the state-run media outlets are making exaggerated claims about the junta's relief and reconstruction efforts, the Burmese generals are cracking down on outspoken critics of the regime's lackadaisical approach to cyclone relief.

The first victim of the crackdown was Ko Thura, who is nationally known as Comedian Zarganar.

Following Zarganar's arrest earlier this month, the junta ordered a crackdown on people who are providing "video footage of relief work to foreign news agencies".

Since then, Journalist Zaw Thet Htwe and several others, including several members of the 88 Generation Students, two translators accompanying foreigners, and others, were taken into custody. All of these detainees were actively involved in helping the cyclone victims.

Zarganar and Zaw Thet Htwe were part of a group of 400 volunteers who have been successfully distributing aid and both of them have been known to have given interviews to foreign news agencies. Zarganar has been already imprisoned several times for his anti-junta jokes and political activism, the latest of which is for providing food and other necessities to protesting Buddhist monks in September 2007.

Zaw Thet Htwe was given a death sentence for reporting forced labor practices to the International Labor Organization but released after two years in prison under intense pressure from the ILO.

The crackdown on outspoken critics may be the military regime's way of preventing information from leaking to the foreign media.

## Recommendations

One common problem becomes obvious from the issues discussed above. The Burmese regime is reluctant to extend its full cooperation to world nations, international agencies, and INGOs in the relief and rehabilitation efforts. It has instead been obstructing these efforts wherever possible at the expense of cyclone victims.

- International agencies also seem to be adopting a "better-than-nothing" attitude, happy with what little concessions they could get from the Burmese generals. The existing state of affairs should only be allowed to continue if international relief agencies are very confident and certain that it will lead to a **TIMELY RECOVERY** of the delta areas and restore normalcy to the lives of the cyclone victims. If not, they should stop adopting these concessive approaches when dealing the Burmese generals and take collective measures to immediately correct the situation. The generals must be reminded of "Responsibility to Protect" Doctrine.

- Relief phase as acknowledged by many international agencies is not over and reconstruction must not supersede relief efforts. Accountability, transparency, and good governance should be an integral part of all efforts -- relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction, when the time comes.
- Under the cover of Cyclone Nargis, the Burmese junta has been furthering its political ambitions and eliminating democracy elements like passing its draft constitution and extending the house arrest of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and cracking down and on democracy activists. Human rights principles must guide international relief agencies and INGOs in their relief and rehabilitation efforts. No relief and rehabilitation initiative should be undertaken at the expense of human rights.
- Cyclone Nargis alone should not be the reason for international financial institutions to resume grants and loans to the Burmese regime. The assistance rendered should not extend beyond technical expertise as offered by ADB and the World Bank.

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