

Death toll in Burma rises, as major powers press to intervene

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The full scale of the disaster caused by Cyclone Nargis in Burma is emerging as assessment and aid teams, local and international, move into devastated villages and towns of the Irrawaddy delta. While the official death toll still stands at nearly 23,000 and another 41,000 missing, far higher estimates are being issued by aid officials and organisations.

World Vision adviser Kyi Minn told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) yesterday that the number of dead might be 80,000 or more. "We don't have direct communication... because there are no phone lines and transportation is very limited because the roads are still blocked and some areas are flooded and you can't go, so we have to rely on the information that's brought by the eyewitnesses there," he said.

Minn put the number of missing at 60,000, most of whom could be presumed dead. Eyewitness reports indicated that the situation in the affected areas was serious. "They found a lot of dead bodies there and the sanitation is quite bad."

The US charge d'affaires in Rangoon, Shari Villarosa, yesterday indicated that the figure could be even higher. Based on data from an international non-government organisation, she said: "The information we are receiving indicates over 100,000 deaths." Villarosa said that about 95 percent of buildings in the delta region had been destroyed, most of the damage being done when huge storm surges whipped up by the cyclone swamped the low lying areas.

Various aid organisations point to the appalling conditions now confronting many of the survivors in the delta region, who have little in the way of shelter, food, clean water or medicines. UN aid official Richard Horsey said: "Basically the entire lower delta region is under water. Teams are talking about bodies floating around in the water." He described the situation as "a major, major disaster".

An Agence France Press article described the scenes in the delta town of Labutta, the local centre for more than 50 surrounding villages where 90,000 people lived. "Survivors have trekked through floodwaters from their washed-out villages into the town, only to discover precious few supplies to help them cope with the tragedy. Residents are sharing meagre supplies of wild rice with new arrivals, even though most food supplies in the town have also been destroyed," the news

agency stated.

Describing the desperate survivors, one man said: "The people have no emotion left on their faces. They have never seen anything like this before. They have lost their families, they have nowhere to stay, and they have nothing to eat. They don't know what the future will bring." Another said: "There is no drinking water. They are drinking coconut milk, and then they are eating coconuts to survive." However, even coconuts were in short supply.

Skyrocketing prices for food and other essentials are producing protests. World Food Program spokesman Paul Risley told the media yesterday: "Three of the [UN] assessment teams reported very serious civil unrest around the few stores that were open. When there was food and water for sale, large crowds were unable to obtain any, and prices are much higher."

World Vision adviser Minn told CNN that the former capital of Rangoon, which was badly hit by the cyclone, was almost back to normal. The roads were cleared and electricity and clean water was available. Local Red Cross workers have been handing out supplies of drinking water, plastic sheeting, clothing and mosquito nets. However, Reuters reported that rising prices and queues were provoking anger. "People are angry not at the shopkeepers, but at the government," one man told the news agency.

The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) reported that authorities at Burma's notorious Insein Prison brutally suppressed a riot during the cyclone. More than 1,500 prisoners were locked in a hall as high winds were battering the prison buildings. "Even though prisoners requested prison guards to open the doors and move them to safety, the authorities ignored their request. Some prisoners set fire to the prison hall and a riot ensued," the AAPP stated. The guards opened fire, killing 36 prisoners and injuring another 70.

Larry Jagan, a former BBC editor based in Thailand, told the ABC's "Lateline" program on Tuesday that "the death toll could mount to something like 250,000 people." Without minimising the extent of the tragedy unfolding inside Burma, such estimates need to be treated with caution amid an unmistakable media campaign to vilify the Burmese junta in order to justify international intervention. During the interview, Jagan's preoccupation was not primarily for the fate of the

cyclone victims, but whether the disaster would put “the last nail in the coffin of the military regime”.

The *World Socialist Web Site* holds no brief for the Burmese junta, which has time and again demonstrated its willingness to use force to crush any political opposition. In the midst of the current disaster, the generals are above all preoccupied with preserving their own privileged position of power.

At the same time, however, no credibility should be given to the expressions of concern from the US and other major powers, which are intent on exploiting the tragedy to further their own interests in Burma and the broader region. The Bush administration, which has been pressing the junta to allow unrestricted access to international aid organisations and entry for the US military, is seeking to undermine the Burmese regime because of its close ties with America’s rival, China.

In a sinister move yesterday, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner suggested that the UN should consider invoking its “responsibility to protect” to deliver aid directly to Burma with or without the approval of the junta. Pointing to the presence of the French, British and Indian warships near Burma, Kouchner declared: “It would only take half an hour for the French boats and French helicopters to reach the disaster area and I imagine it’s the same story for our British friends. We are putting constant pressure on the Burmese authorities but we haven’t yet got the go-ahead.”

Kouchner’s suggestion of overriding Burma’s national authority is particularly provocative, given that the “responsibility to protect” resolution adopted by the UN Security Council in 2006 refers to “genocide, war, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity”, not natural disasters. The resolution has a long history stretching back to the NATO intervention in the Balkans, in which the US and its European allies exploited the humanitarian disaster in Kosovo to justify the bombardment of Serbian cities and a prolonged occupation of the Yugoslav province.

The US already has the USS Essex, and three other navy vessels in nearby waters. The USS Essex is an amphibious assault ship with 1,800 marines aboard. The Pentagon has also moved six cargo helicopters to a military base in Thailand, waiting permission to go into Burma. At this stage, there is no sign that the Bush administration intends to support Kouchner’s suggestion. UN under-secretary general for humanitarian affairs, John Holmes, dismissed the proposal, saying: “I’m not sure that invading Myanmar [Burma] would be a very sensible option.”

Kouchner’s remarks point to the real political motives behind the growing international media campaign to condemn the Burmese junta for “failing to help its people”. If the regime were an ally of Washington, as the Indonesian government was in 2004 when a tsunami devastated the province of Aceh, its incompetence and callous indifference to the suffering of millions would have been all but swept under the carpet. Instead, all of the obvious weaknesses of the Burmese relief

effort are magnified and, in some cases, invented.

The failure to issue timely warnings of the cyclone has been heavily criticised, including by Laura Bush, the wife of the US president. However, according to Dieter Schiessl, director of the World Meteorological Organisation’s disaster risk reduction unit, Burmese authorities began issuing warnings six days before the cyclone hit. The information, which was based on data from the international body, accurately predicted the cyclone’s movements and wind speeds. “The storm surge was the major cause of the disaster,” Schiessl explained.

To predict the likelihood of such surges, specialised radar is required, which Burma does not have. Just as none of the major powers had offered to build a tsunami warning system for the Indian Ocean prior to the 2004 disaster, only now is the World Meteorological Organisation proposing to construct a suitable radar system—if the funds can be found. The Bush administration, which has offered a pitiful \$3 million in aid to Burma, has certainly not offered to pay the bill.

In an extraordinary outburst, ABC correspondent Peter Lloyd lashed out yesterday at the junta’s failure to have forklifts at Rangoon airport to offload aid from a Thai military aircraft. “It’s at that very elementary level that infrastructure in Burma because of years of disgraceful behaviour by the regime has left this country bankrupt of the kind of infrastructure it needs to respond to a crisis on this level,” he proclaimed.

The junta is undoubtedly guilty of many crimes, including the failure to adequately provide for the elementary needs of the Burmese people. But it is the height of hypocrisy to single out of Burma for condemnation when the similar issues could be raised of the Bush administration, for instance, over its appalling mishandling of the Hurricane Katrina disaster. Moreover, in the case of Burma, the US and its European allies have maintained an economic blockade, which has certainly contributed to the country’s continuing economic backwardness.

The current push for an international intervention into Burma is motivated by the same political agendas that lie behind the blockade—to oust the junta and replace it with a regime more sympathetic to US and European economic and strategic interests. The fate of the Burmese people is the last consideration in these political calculations.



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