A new Asian disaster: Cyclone kills tens of thousands in Burma

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Another huge tragedy has engulfed an impoverished Asian country. Tens of thousands are dead, many more are missing and hundreds of thousands are homeless after tropical cyclone Nargis lashed the western coastal areas of Burma on Saturday. Winds of up to 190 kilometres an hour and a storm surge of water up to 4 metres levelled houses and other buildings, severed transport links and communication, and left millions without clean water, food, shelter and medicine.

The official death toll is rising rapidly and reached 22,000 last night. Another 41,000 are listed as missing. The full extent of the disaster is yet to be revealed as rescue teams and aid workers make their way into the devastated areas. The Burmese military junta is maintaining a tight control over news filtering out from the country and is reluctant to allow international aid teams into the affected regions.

The most damaged area is the low-lying Irrawaddy delta—home to an estimated 6 million people. The former capital of Rangoon, with a population of 6.5 million, was also badly hit. A UN satellite image showed storm damage concentrated over a 30,000 square kilometre area along the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Martaban coastlines—a region that is less than 5 percent of Burma's landmass but where nearly a quarter of the country's 57 million people reside.

The delta is crisscrossed with rivers and canals making transport and communications difficult. Many areas are accessible only by boat or helicopter. The worst affected will have been the poor, whose flimsy homes constructed out of bamboo and roofed with thatch or tin sheeting will have been immediately swept away.

According to Burmese officials, 10,000 people have died in the town of Bogalay alone. The coastal towns of Haing Gyi Island, Pathein, Myaungmya, Laputta, Mawlamyinegyun, Kyaiklat and Phyarpon have also been devastated. The regime has declared a state of emergency in five states hit by the cyclone.

World Vision, the first aid organisation to enter the country, told Agence France Presse that its teams saw "horrific scenes on the ground below". World Vision adviser Kyi Minn said: "They saw the dead bodies from the helicopters, so it's quite overwhelming... The impact of the disaster could be worse than the [December 2004 Asian] tsunami because it is compounded by the limited availability of resources on top of the transport constraints."

UN aid spokesman Paul Risely told the media: "Our fear is that many in the rural population have been cut off. In some villages, 90 percent of shelter was destroyed or damaged... The biggest problem will be to reach the affected areas. There will be a huge logistical problem... The big concern is waterborne diseases. So it is crucial to get safe water in. Then mosquito nets, cooking kits and clothing in the next few days. Food is not an emergency priority. Water and shelter are." Up to one million people may be homeless.

The Associated Press reported chaotic scenes in Rangoon. "Residents lined up to buy candles, which have doubled in price since the storm hit. Most homes were without water, forcing families to stand in long lines for drinking water and bathe in the city's lakes. Most telephone landlines appeared to be restored by late Monday, but mobile phones and Internet connections were down."

Prices of food and construction materials in Rangoon are reportedly skyrocketting. Electricity remained cut off in half of the city. Long queues had formed at petrol stations. Late yesterday, the UN's World Food Program said that it had begun distributing aid to victims of the disaster in and near the capital, but most coastal regions were out of reach due to flooding and road damage.

The Bush administration has seized on the disaster to blame the Burmese junta for "failing to look after its people". The international media has joined the campaign, criticising the military for the lack of adequate warning and preparation, the chaotic and limited character of its relief operation, and the slowness in allowing aid teams into the country. Various commentators are speculating as to whether popular anger will erupt and bring down the junta. The primary concern is not for the Burmese people, but for the various political agendas of the major powers.

There is no doubt that the Burmese military, which has ruled the country with an iron fist for decades, bears significant responsibility for the extent of the disaster. Its prime concern is to maintain its privileged position at the expense of the bulk of the population, which is mired in poverty. The country's per capita income is just $US1,250; life expectancy is 61 years;

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malnutrition affects 32 percent of children under 5 and infant mortality is 75 for 1000.

The Indian meteorological agency warned Burmese authorities 48 hours before the cyclone struck of its severity and expected path. Burmese state television issued a statement claiming that timely weather reports had been issued via TV and radio, but the warnings may not have reached many victims who had no access to television and face frequent electricity blackouts. According to the BBC, the UN disaster reduction agency stated that the scale of the devastation suggested there was not a proper early warning system.

Journalists inside Burma have reported on the limited character of the army's relief effort and comments from angry residents who contrasted the speed and efficiency that marked the military's crackdown on anti-government protesters last September. The regime is also under fire for proceeding with this Saturday's referendum on a new constitution—a bogus attempt to give the regime a democratic façade.

A grocery store owner in Rangoon told the Associated Press: "The government misled people. They could have warned us about the severity of the coming cyclone so we could be better prepared." A retired civil servant exclaimed: "Where are the soldiers and police? They were very quick and aggressive when there were protests in the streets last year."

The very fact that the junta has begun to accept international aid is a sign that it is nervous about the public reaction. Foreign Minister Major General Nyan Win told foreign diplomats on Monday: "We will welcome help. Our people are in difficulty." Relief Minister Major General Maung Maung Swe has requested urgently needed roofing materials, medicine, water purifying tablets and mosquito nets. At the same time, however, the military continues to restrict the movement of foreign aid workers and has rejected aid, from the US in particular, that has political conditions attached.

Much of the international criticism of the Burmese junta, however, reeks of hypocrisy and cynicism. The Bush administration's castigation of the regime is determined by US strategic interests in the region, in particular its efforts to undermine Chinese influence in the country and install a government, led by opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, more sympathetic to Washington. The concern for the Burmese people stands in marked contrast to the failure of the White House to provide assistance to the victims of Hurricane Katrina. (See "Bush administration moves to exploit Burma cyclone disaster").

Media comparisons with the devastating 2004 tsunami, which claimed at least 220,000 lives in a dozen countries, including Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and Thailand, have been one-sided and political motivated. A collective amnesia pervades the coverage: no one wants to recall how Bush and other world leaders ignored the tragedy for days, or the pitiful amounts of aid that were offered. Nor has anyone bothered to point to the conditions of poverty and distress that many of the victims still face.

A BBC article last December marking the third anniversary of the disaster pointed out that 10,000 people in India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands remain homeless and survive on limited monthly rations. In Sri Lanka, thousands are in a similar situation in refugee camps. In Indonesia's Aceh province, 20,000 houses remain to be completed in the rebuilding program. Even where people have been re-housed, many are without a livelihood and access to proper services. More than three years later, a promised tsunami warning system for Indian Ocean is yet to be fully tested and operational.

Several commentators have berated the Burmese junta for placing restrictions on international aid, while hailing the Indonesian government's response in 2004 as a model of responsibility. Again the writers have conveniently ignored the fact that Jakarta was just as reluctant to allow aid workers and foreign military forces into Aceh, where the military was conducting a vicious war of repression against separatist guerrillas. Far from displaying any concern for the tsunami victims, the Indonesian military seized the opportunity to press ahead with offensive operations.

There is no doubt that the Burmese regime is guilty of callous indifference to the plight of cyclone victims, just as the governments of Sri Lanka, Indonesia and India were in December 2004. That is doubly true, however, for the US and other major powers, which for all their professions of humanitarian concern, provide miniscule amounts of aid relative to their GDPs and ruthlessly exploit natural disasters in Asia and other backward regions of the world for their own political ends. It is enough to note that to date the US has offered just $3 million in assistance and the European Union 3 million euros.

The purpose of such highly-publicised aid operations is not to end the suffering of the poor, but to patch them up and put them back into the same desperate situation as before.

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