Cyclone disaster worsens in Burma

Our correspondent
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The cyclone disaster in Burma is continuing to worsen. The official death toll announced yesterday stands at 28,458 dead and 33,416 missing, but unofficial estimates put the figure much higher. Up to 2 million people have been left homeless and struggling to survive without access to food, clean water, shelter and medicine.

The UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has issued a new assessment that between 1.2 million and 1.9 million people need urgent assistance. “Given the gravity of the situation including the lack of food and water, some partners have reported fears for security, and violent behaviour in the most severely affected areas,” it stated. The UN body estimated that the number of deaths “could range from 63,290 to 101,682 and 220,000 people are reported to be missing.”

The low-lying Irrawaddy delta, which was battered by Cyclone Nargis on May 3, is crisscrossed by waterways and rivers. Roads and communications into the area have been damaged or completely cut. Access to many places is limited to boat or helicopter. A Red Cross cargo ship carrying supplies for more than 1,000 survivors sank on Sunday after hitting a submerged tree trunk. The crew members were able to climb to safety.

Limited aid supplies are reaching some areas. The International Red Cross estimated on Friday that through their combined efforts, relief agencies and the Burmese government had distributed aid to 220,000 people. Many more, however, are desperately in need of supplies. According to Plan International, some 150,000 are living in 117 temporary camps in Labutta, a town that was devastated by the cyclone. Another 56,000 are in refugee camps in or near three other major towns, including Bogalay.

Oxfam regional director Sarah Ireland warned of a massive catastrophe if the Burmese junta did not open its doors to international aid. She said it was critical to get clean water and sanitation to survivors in the next few days. “[I]t’s a perfect storm if you will of factors such as lack of water, sanitation, predicted heavy rain over the next week, lack of food as well as an outbreak of disease such as cholera that could all combine to endanger [the] lives of up to 1.5 million,” Ireland explained.

Poonam Khetrapal Singh, deputy director of the World Heath Organisation’s Southeast Asia office, told the Associated Press, that the priorities were “safe water, sanitation and safe food”. Andrew Kirkwood, head of Save the Children in Rangoon, said: “There’s a big risk of disease—dysentery, malaria and severe malnutrition. The whole area is under salt water and drinking water cannot be purified by using tablets. Many people are getting sick.” According to one estimate, 20 percent of children in the devastated areas are suffering from diarrhea.

International aid has begun to reach Burma. The International Red Cross stated last Friday that three planes carrying some 14 tonnes of shelter material had arrived in Burma and were cleared without delay. “Aid is getting through in increased amounts,” the aid organisation stated. Another seven flights with another 20 tonnes of shelter material, jerry cans and 2,000 mosquito nets were to arrive by today.

A UN flight from Italy carrying 30 tonnes of water purification equipment and other supplies was due to land in Rangoon yesterday. The UNHRC said that two truckloads of tents and plastic sheeting had been sent into Burma from northern Thailand on Saturday. The Burmese junta has authorised a US military flight to ferry cargo to the country and it is due to arrive today. A World Food Program (WRP) shipment of 38 tonnes of dry biscuits, which was impounded at the Rangoon airport, has been released and WFP aid has resumed.

Burmese authorities are, however, continuing to delay the issuing of visas to international personnel and have rejected the involvement of the US military in aid operations inside the country. Intense pressure is being imposed on the junta by the Bush administration and its European allies, backed by the international media and the UN, to open its doors to aid officials and to foreign militaries.

The junta has demonstrated its callous indifference and

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anti-democratic methods on many previous occasions. Its aid is undoubtedly limited and its control over aid operations is motivated above all by its determination to cling onto power. That does not, however, explain what can only be described as a propaganda campaign to vilify the Burmese generals and demand that they bow to international demands to open up their borders.

Like the Asian countries hit by the 2004 Asian tsunami, Burma is an economically backward country which lacks much basic infrastructure. Prior to the cyclone, the majority of the population lived on less than $US1 a day. According to the World Health Organisation, Burma had the world's worst health system in 2000, apart from war-ravaged Sierra Leone. These difficulties have been compounded by economic sanctions imposed by the US and European countries against the regime.

The sanctions, like the current barrage of propaganda over international aid, are aimed at politically undermining the junta, not at assisting the Burmese people. The US administration's hostility to the junta is primarily because of its close ties with Beijing, which Washington regards as a rising economic and strategic rival. The toppling of the regime and installation of a government sympathetic to the US is part of broader plans to forge closer relations with countries that lie on China's borders.

The White House has offered only $3.5 million to date in financial aid and is demanding the direct involvement of US and other international officials in directing operations. The Burmese junta is insisting that aid be either financial or goods, and that it is capable of running relief operations. At this point, one cannot tell from the highly-coloured media coverage of the catastrophe to what extent the military is even engaged in aid work.

The political agenda behind the condemnations of the junta became apparent last week when French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner suggested the convening of the UN Security Council to invoke its "responsibility to protect" powers to intervene in Burma, with or without the regime's permission. Kouchner referred to the fact that French and British warships were already in the region and could be used. The US Navy also sent four vessels, including a destroyer, to nearby waters.

While US Defence Secretary Robert Gates last week ruled out such action, several comments and editorials over the weekend pushed the idea of what is tantamount to a military invasion of Burma. One of the most direct was published in *Time* magazine under the headline "Is it time to invade Burma?" After denouncing the Burmese regime, its inability to relieve widespread suffering and refusal allow in aid workers, the article declared: "That's why it's time to consider a more serious option: invading Burma."

The article noted that USAID director Andrew Natsios had floated the idea of the US military making aid drops over Burma regardless of the junta's attitude. It raised the suggestion of retired General William Nash who called on the US to press China to use its influence with Burma and also suggested working with the Indonesian military to ferry in supplies. China, India, Indonesia and Thailand all maintain relations with Burma and their aid has been accepted. Despite calls from US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, neither Beijing nor New Delhi has joined the international denunciations of Burma.

The *Time* article concluded: "And if that fails? 'It's important for the rulers to know the world has other options," [UN official Jan] Egeland says. 'If there were, say, the threat of a cholera epidemic that could claim hundreds of thousands of lives and the government was capable of preventing it, then maybe yes—you would intervene unilaterally'."

"But by then, it could be too late," the *Time* article continued. "The cold truth is that states rarely undertake military action unless their national interests are at stake; and the world has yet to reach a consensus about when, and under what circumstances, coercive interventions in the name of averting humanitarian disasters are permissible. As the response to the 2004 tsunami proved, the world's capacity for mercy is limitless. But we still haven't figured out when to give war a chance."

In all the "humanitarian" wars stretching back to the 1999 interventions in the Balkans and East Timor, the major powers exploited the plight of the local populations to justify military action to advance their own strategic and economic interests. Any military intervention by the "international community" in Burma will be for similar objectives and will do little or nothing to alleviate the plight of the Burmese masses.

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