

More threats of international intervention amid continuing Burmese cyclone disaster

Our correspondent
22 August 2008

UN General Secretary Ban Ki-moon is due to meet with Burmese leaders today in an effort to pressure them to accept more international aid for the hundreds of thousands of cyclone survivors who are still without adequate shelter, food, clean water and medicine nearly three weeks after the disaster struck.

Ban told the media in Bangkok yesterday that this was “a critical moment” and urged that “the issues of assistance and aid in Myanmar should not be politicised.” It is already evident, however, that the catastrophe has been transformed by the US and its European allies into a political tool in their longstanding campaign against the Burmese regime.

The politicisation of the disaster is clear from the media coverage. Reports in the international press provide highly coloured accounts of the difficulties facing survivors and the lack of aid, along with the continuing drumbeat that foreign aid, including US, British and French military personnel, must be immediately allowed into the country.

At the same time, the Burmese generals, intent on maintaining their power, ensure that their state media is dominated by images of them handing out aid and of neatly regimented tents in refugee camps. In another empty show of concern, the regime has announced a three-day period of mourning.

In this highly polarised situation, even the extent of the crisis remains unclear. Over the weekend, the junta revised its official figures up sharply—to 78,000 dead and nearly 56,000 missing. The number of injured also increased to nearly 20,000. Claims by the Burmese regime that the relief phase of the operation has been completed are simply not credible. The UN has estimated that between 1.6 million and 2.5 million survivors are in urgent need of relief supplies. That higher figure—2.5 million—is now endlessly cycled in the international media even though no one really knows just how many people are in need of aid.

The UN World Food Program (WFP) announced this week that it had managed to deliver food aid to 212,000 people of the 750,000 survivors that it estimates are in need. The UN and other aid groups are in the process of establishing five aid distribution hubs in some of the worst affected areas of the Irrawaddy delta, including Labutta and Bogale, which were largely levelled by the storm surge whipped up by the cyclone.

Under intense international pressure, the junta has eased its restrictions on foreign aid and aid workers. Prior to Ban’s visit today, the regime said that it would allow 10 UN helicopters to ferry aid into the cyclone-stricken areas of the country. According

to the Associated Press, some 40 US military C-130 cargo planes have now been permitted to land in Rangoon with relief supplies. Some foreign aid teams—30 Thai medical workers as well as medical teams from China and India—have been allowed to work directly in the Irrawaddy delta.

A meeting of Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) foreign ministers on Monday resolved to establish a task force to funnel aid into Burma. Singapore’s foreign minister George Yeo told reporters: “We will establish a mechanism so that aid from all over the world will flow into Myanmar [Burma].” Aid teams from ASEAN countries would be allowed unrestricted access, Yeo added, but those from other countries would require special permission to enter. “There will not be uncontrolled access,” he said.

It is clear that for many survivors the situation remains desperate. The WFP reported on May 21 that its field staff were “finding entire communities with every building destroyed and survivors living without any outside assistance. Food, drinking water and shelter remain immediate necessities.” The UN body had been able to send food to eight townships in and around Rangoon and seven townships in the Irrawaddy delta, including Bogale, Laputta, Pyapon, Kyaiklat, Maubin, Ngaputaw and Pathein.

Sein Kway Min told journalists from the British-based *Telegraph* that his house had been destroyed and that he and his pregnant wife Marlar Soe were living in a temporary shack on the roadside without sufficient food or water. “The government officials did come and take a look a few days after the cyclone, but they have not been back. What help we have got has not come from them, it has come from Burmese people driving out here and giving it to us themselves,” he said. He added that thousands of people were trapped in tiny islands and had not received any help as yet.

Private aid has been limited, however. The main concern of the Burmese generals has been to ensure that the disaster does not become a source of popular discontent and protests. Several reports indicate that the army has created a system of checkpoints and surveillance to attempt to block not only foreign journalists and aid workers, but also efforts by Burmese people from outside the affected areas to provide aid and assistance.

There are also warnings of a longer-term crisis if farmers are unable to plant a rice crop in the next three weeks. The Irrawaddy delta produces up to 60 percent of the country’s supplies. Concepcion Calpe, a senior economist with the UN Food and

Agriculture Organisation (FAO), estimated that 200,000 tonnes of rice from the dry season crop may have been damaged by the cyclone. Much of the region was inundated with salt water, seed has been ruined and many water buffaloes used for ploughing were killed in the cyclone.

This catastrophe, however, has been cynically seized upon particularly by the US, Britain and France to ramp up their political campaign against the Burmese junta. While hypocritically declaring that their only concern is to provide aid for the victims, all three governments have strongly hinted at unilateral intervention if their military personnel and equipment are not permitted to carry out aid operations inside the country. American, British and French naval vessels are currently stationed in international waters near Burma.

The most strident statements have emanated from French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, who on Monday renewed his clamour for the UN Security Council to intervene to force the Burmese regime to “open its doors for foreign aid.” If the UN failed to act, he wrote in a column in *Le Monde*, it would be guilty of cowardice. He warned the junta that it would be guilty “crimes against humanity” if it continued to restrict foreign aid and aid workers.

Kouchner previously advocated convening the UN Security Council to invoke its “responsibility to protect” power even though the clauses do not apply to natural disasters. On Monday, he indicated that he had indeed been wrong, but suggested that a 1988 UN resolution could be used instead to justify what would amount to a military invasion of Burma. The resolution states that ignoring victims of natural disasters constitutes a threat to human life and an offence to human dignity.

In a later radio interview, Kouchner contemptuously dismissed the UN-ASEAN aid conference planned for this weekend. “What we need to bring is hand-to-hand, heart-to-heart help, not donor conferences with all their bowing and scraping. In the meantime people are dying.”

Last weekend British Prime Minister Gordon Brown also accused the Burmese junta of turning a “natural disaster” into a “man-made catastrophe”. Threatening a unilateral military intervention, he told the BBC: “As far as air drops are concerned we rule nothing out, and the reason we rule nothing out, is that we want to get aid directly to the people.”

In comments to a US congressional hearing yesterday, Scot Marciel, the US envoy to ASEAN, welcomed ASEAN’s efforts but denounced the Burmese junta’s response as “appalling.” He insisted that the “door must be opened far wider and rapidly to prevent a second catastrophe”. At the same time, he expressed US dissatisfaction with this weekend’s aid conference declaring that without “a commitment by the regime to provide the necessary access, a pledging conference is unlikely to produce the result.”

By contrast, China, Russia and ASEAN countries have rejected using aid as a political lever against the Burmese regime. Singapore Foreign Minister Yeo explicitly ruled out the use of force to impose aid. “That will create unnecessary complication. It will only lead to more suffering for Myanmar’s people,” he told a press conference this week.

The Burmese regime estimates that \$10 billion in financial

assistance would be needed for reconstruction. A report by an emergency assessment team to ASEAN urged a “rapid mobilisation of funds, equipment and saline resistant seeds and the urgent resettlement of farmers will help ensure that there will be a harvest.” The report also estimated that 75 percent of schools in the Irrawaddy delta were either destroyed or damaged by the cyclone.

The financial aid offered to date by the US, France and Britain is tiny in comparison with these needs. Moreover, none of these powers has suggested any easing or lifting of the punitive economic sanctions that have been imposed on Burma as a means of levering out the junta. The World Bank ruled out offering any financial assistance to Burma citing its failure to meet obligations on previous debts.

American and European hostility to this weekend’s ASEAN sponsored aid conference and their insistence on “hand-to-hand, heart-to-heart help” highlights the political agenda behind their campaign. Despite the contention that their aid comes without conditions, the US, Britain, France and their allies are determined that any aid operation undermine, rather than bolster the Burmese junta, which is viewed as an obstacle to their economic and strategic interests.

The junta has flatly rejected any direct involvement of US, British and French military personnel in aid operations. The state-run *New Light of Myanmar* declared yesterday that the government would not accept US warships in the country’s ports as American aid came with “political strings attached.” The newspaper also suggested that Washington’s aim in invading the country was to grab its oil reserves.

While the comments were dismissed as “ridiculous propaganda” in the *Australian* newspaper, the US and its allies certainly have ulterior political motives. Washington’s hostility to the junta is not because of its repressive measures, but rather its ties with China, which is regarded by the US as a rising economic and strategic rival. Its thinly veiled objective has been to oust the junta and install a regime sympathetic to American interests.

Moreover, given the Bush administration’s criminal record in invading Iraq, it is hardly “ridiculous” that one of the motives behind the continuing campaign against the junta is to grab the country’s significant energy resources.



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