

Burma aid conference: Demands and ultimatums, but little money for the cyclone victims

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The only commodities in plentiful supply at the UN-sponsored donors conference in Rangoon last Sunday were self-interest, cynicism and hypocrisy. While the gathering had been called to elicit aid for the estimated 2.4 million cyclone victims in Burma, the US and European powers exploited the opportunity to repeat their demands for the Burmese junta to open its doors to foreign aid efforts. Very little money was forthcoming.

Prior to the conference, the Burmese regime appealed for \$10.7 billion to assist in the reconstruction of areas devastated by the cyclone. As well as immediate relief supplies, farmers and fishermen in the Irrawaddy delta are in urgent need of assistance to restore their livelihoods. The UN's Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) has warned of longer term hardship if a new crop is not planted in the next few weeks in what is known as the country's "rice bowl". Burma's Prime Minister Thein Sein told the conference that temporary shelters, rice seeds, fertilisers and fishing boats were needed as soon as possible.

The response to the appeal was pitiful. International media reports put the new donations at between \$50 million and \$150 million, but even this is doubtful. IRIN, the news agency of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, did not report a total. But it did note that "many donors at the meeting simply outlined the assistance they had already given, and pledged more if conditions on the ground improved".

The UN's own "flash appeal" for \$201 million in emergency aid for the cyclone victims has received just \$57 million or 28 percent of the total. According to the UN's Financial Tracking system, another \$42 million has been pledged, but the promises are not binding and, as in previous disasters, may not materialise. It was not clear if the new aid promises would go to the UN fund.

The main purpose of the conference was to use offers of aid as a means of whipping the Burmese junta into line. As one Western aid official told IRIN: "The ball was put by speaker after speaker in the court of the government. It was 'if you do the right thing, we will stand by you. Implicitly, if you don't there is nothing we can do'."

The Bush administration, which has been berating the junta for "failing to help its people", has promised just \$20.5 million in aid. US envoy Scot Marciel told the media in Rangoon that Washington was prepared to offer much more. "However, in order to do so, the government must allow international disaster

assistance experts to conduct a thorough assessment of the situation," he added.

American allies chimed in with similar qualifications. According to the Irrawaddy.org web site, Britain, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden all urged the regime to grant unrestricted access by relief workers to the Irrawaddy delta. In offering an additional \$27 million, European Commission representative Bernard Srajner emphasised the need for "unimpeded access" to the affected areas. Australia has pledged \$25 million but again only with "an international assessment of needs" and "unobstructed access".

France was even more emphatic. On the day of the conference, Paris directed its naval vessel, *Mistral*, which has been hovering in international waters near the Burmese coast, to unload its aid supplies at Phuket in Thailand. A ministry statement declared that it was "particularly shocked that the Myanmar authorities did not accept that 1,000 tonnes of humanitarian aid could not be directly unloaded and distributed."

French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner then justified his country's refusal to increase assistance by declaring: "We have aid that was very expensive that is just off [Burma]. Now they ask us for more, when we haven't been able to deliver what's already there." In other words, if the junta is not prepared to accept aid on French terms, then further assistance will not be forthcoming. Kouchner has been in the forefront of calls for the convening an emergency session of the UN Security Council to directly intervene in Burma—with or without official permission—including by military means.

A political campaign

In the three weeks since Cyclone Nargis ravaged the Irrawaddy delta, there has been an unrelenting campaign by Western governments criticising the failure of the Burmese generals to provide sufficient aid and demanding the country be opened up to aid officials and foreign militaries. The refusal of the same countries to provide more than token amounts of aid at Sunday's conference demonstrates that the tragedy is being cynically

exploited as a political lever against the junta. While accusing the Burmese generals of playing politics with the victims, the US and its allies are doing exactly the same.

The demand for “unimpeded access” is never ending. Calls for aid workers and officials to be allowed to enter Burma were followed by demands for unfettered access to the Irrawaddy delta. Denunciations of the regime for failing to allow US military aircraft to land at Rangoon airport was followed by demands for French, British and US warships to be given access to the affected areas. One can confidently predict that if the French naval ship had been allowed into Burmese waters Kouchner would have quickly found a new pretext for condemning the junta.

There is no doubt that the Burmese generals are just as inept in their relief efforts and callous in their disregard for the cyclone survivors as, for instance, the governments of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and Thailand were in response to the catastrophe created by the 2004 tsunami. But the incessant demands to “open up” to foreign aid are not driven by concern for the hundreds of thousands of survivors but by ambitions to undermine, destabilise and ultimately oust the junta. The campaign is a continuation of the economic sanctions imposed by the US and European powers to compel the regime to hand power to the so-called democratic opposition led by Aung San Suu Kyi.

These aims colour every aspect of international media coverage, which is focussed almost entirely on junta’s inadequate relief efforts. Even the estimates of the number of people receiving aid vary wildly. One widely reported figure is that just 23 percent of the estimated 2.4 million survivors have received any aid. The *Wall Street Journal* gave another UN figure of 42 percent getting “some kind of emergency assistance”. Kathleen Cravero, UN Development Program director, put the figure at 50 percent of affected people receiving “significant aid”.

An interesting insight into the relief operations was provided by Paul Strachan, a British businessman who has been assisting NGOs in Burma. Writing in last weekend’s *Scotsman*, he appealed for an end to the confrontation with the junta and pointed out that money, not food and relief supplies, was most needed.

“Contrary to press reports, a good deal of aid is getting through to the affected areas... Most necessities are available here—there is a ready supply of freight from China, India and Thailand—and yet the cyclone survivors are being given bottles of mineral water flown from the UK when local companies are offering excellent products. Supplies can be sources here easily and far more cheaply than flying them in. This is mainland south-east Asia—Burma is surrounded by mass-producing, low cost, tiger economies. This is not ‘darkest Africa’.... There is no need to fly food in, just money, which is lighter, to buy essentials,” Strachan wrote.

Money, however, was exactly what was not on offer at Sunday’s conference.

None of this is to deny that a huge tragedy is taking place in Burma for which the junta bears responsibility. But the very last consideration of the US and European powers is the plight of the victims. The catastrophe is simply useful political tool in ongoing efforts to replace the junta with a regime more sympathetic to Western economic and strategic interests. Washington, in particular, regards the Burmese generals as too closely aligned to

China, a growing rival to the US. Demands that Burma “opens up” to aid echo the ongoing calls to allow foreign investors into the country to exploit its cheap labour and resources, including oil and gas.

There is more than a whiff of colonial arrogance in the international efforts to pressure Burma into line. In a comment entitled “Save us from the rescuers” in the *Los Angeles Times* on May 18, writer David Rieff pointed to the rapidity with which demands for military intervention in Burma had surfaced. “Aid is one thing. But aid at the point of a gun is taking the humanitarian enterprise to a place it should never go. And the fact that calls for humanitarian war were ringing out within days of Cyclone Nargis is emblematic of how the interventionist impulse, now matter how well-intended, is extremely dangerous,” he stated.

After recalling that “the motivations of 19th century European colonialism were also presented by supporters as being grounded in humanitarian concern,” Rieff wrote: “Lastly, it is critically important to pay attention to just who is talking about military intervention on humanitarian grounds. Well, among others, it’s the foreign ministers of the two great 19th century colonial empires. And where exactly do they want to intervene—sorry, where do they want to live up to their responsibility to protect? Mostly in the very countries they used to rule.”

As if on cue, French writer and philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy wrote a diatribe in Saturday’s *Australian*, which concluded that perhaps French colonialism had not been so bad after all. Entitled “Put Burma’s murderous dictators in the dock”, the article was more a string of expletives than an argument. According to Levy, the junta was variously crazy, criminally insane, racist, xenophobic, paranoid, monomaniacal, autistic, mafia-like, stingy and grotesque.

After exhausting his list of adjectives, Levy declared: “Faced with this spectacle, this machine of death, hate and madness, one hesitates between sorrow, pity, a desire to see these assassins brought before an international criminal tribunal and, finally, the days when France created and imposed upon the world the right and the duty to intervene.”

That the virtues of French colonial rule, which gave the world such horrors as the wars in Indo-China and Algeria, can be conjured up without the slightest embarrassment is perhaps the clearest indication of what lies behind Kouchner’s campaign to intervene in Burma.



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