

A reply to supporters of “humanitarian” intervention into Burma

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The *World Socialist Web Site* has received a number of emails critical of our article “Why the propaganda campaign for international intervention in Burma?”. In one way or another, they all object to our refusal to support the campaign in the international media demanding that the Burmese junta open up the country to foreign aid officials and humanitarian assistance from foreign militaries. (The letters, for and against, can be found [here](#).)

The more abusive emails accuse the WSWS of supporting the Burmese regime, even though our opposition to the junta is made explicit in every WSWS article dealing with the recent catastrophe. The central theme of the criticisms, however, is that politics must be set aside in the face of this enormous tragedy and aid must be delivered to survivors by whatever means available, regardless of the agendas involved.

Typically, LW declares: “While many of the global hypocrisies, political issues and inadequacies may be true, there comes a point in a crisis where this is irrelevant. It is sheer bloody mindedness not to accept US and other international aid and promptly. There is NO excuse. No philosophy. No politics. It’s simply inexcusable. Therefore the whole context of your article is utterly offensive and stupid. This is an issue of sheer human desperation.”

LW’s outburst expresses a common, even understandable, sentiment. The human suffering in Burma is certainly heart rending. An immense tragedy is unfolding before our eyes that has already claimed tens of thousands of lives. Many more are without food, clean water, medicine, or shelter and are at risk of an agonising death from disease or hunger. Surely, basic human decency must come before politics and the basics of life supplied to the many victims as quickly as possible.

From the outset, however, very definite politics have been involved. If the US and its allies were simply motivated by humanitarian concern, they could have provided money or material assistance through a means acceptable to the Burmese government. But the offers of aid have inevitably come with strings attached. International assistance has been tied to demands that foreign officials, aid experts and military personnel have “unimpeded access” to Burma and the cyclone-hit areas. Under the guise of assessing, monitoring and supervising, the major powers are effectively insisting that they control the aid operation.

The US and European governments barely disguise their long-held ambitions for regime change in Burma. The first diplomatic, aid and investment sanctions were imposed after the junta’s brutal crackdown on opposition strikes and protests in 1988 and have been steadily tightened ever since. Their objective has been to force the Burmese military to relinquish power to Aung San Suu Kyi and her opposition National League for Democracy (NLD)—that is, to a regime more sympathetic to Western economic and strategic interests. Now these same powers, supported by an extraordinary campaign in the international media, have cynically seized on the catastrophe facing the Burmese people as a useful political lever to further undermine the regime.

Our critics should stop for a moment and consider why the very

governments shedding crocodile tears over Burma’s cyclone victims are the same ones that regularly ignore the myriad tragedies taking place every day around the world. One does not hear expressions of outrage or urgent calls for action to assist the estimated 100 million people in Asia, Africa and Latin America whose lives are being threatened by skyrocketing food prices. Or to help the half a billion people who contract malaria every year and the million, many of them children, who annually die from this readily preventable disease.

What, after all, was the initial reaction of world leaders to the 2004 tsunami? For several days US President George Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair refused to break their vacations to even make a statement on a disaster that claimed more than 300,000 lives. It was only after a wave of sympathy from people around the world, and collections totaling millions of dollars, that prompted the various world leaders to step in. Nevertheless, they immediately set about exploiting the catastrophe for their own purposes. As US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared, the disaster was a “wonderful opportunity” for the US to show heart, and it “paid great dividends for us”. Under the guise of humanitarian concern, Washington forged closer military and strategic ties in Asia, especially with the Indonesian and Sri Lankan militaries.

In contrast to its condemnations of the Burmese junta, the international media was, for the most part, silent on the incompetence and callous indifference towards the survivors displayed by the Sri Lankan, Indian, Indonesian and Thai governments. No one suggested that Aceh should be invaded as the Indonesian government prevaricated on allowing foreign troops into the disaster zone, or that the Indian government be toppled for refusing to allow international aid officials to manage its grossly inadequate relief operation.

Political calculations determine whether one humanitarian catastrophe, rather than another, will be put under the international spotlight. In 1999, the world’s population was told that the NATO war against Yugoslavia was being waged to protect hundreds of thousands of Kosovan refugees from the Serbia military and militia groups. In fact, as the WSWS explained at the time, the real aims of the US and its allies were to establish a base of operations in the Balkans to prosecute their broader ambitions in energy-rich Central Asia. Nearly a decade later, Kosovo has been transformed into a virtual NATO protectorate, harboring major military bases, while the population, “ethnically cleansed” of Serbs and other minorities, remains mired in economic backwardness.

In the same year, an extraordinary campaign was mounted to justify an Australian military intervention into East Timor in the name of protecting the population from pro-Indonesian thugs. The motivation, however, was never concern for the East Timorese. Rather, in the midst of the upheaval surrounding the ousting of Indonesian dictator Suharto in 1998, Canberra was determined to defend its economic and strategic interests in East Timor—particularly its grip on the oil and gas reserves in the Timor Gap—against its rivals. Since 1999, Australia has bullied the newly “independent” government in Dili over the division of energy reserves,

and in 2006, Australian soldiers were once again deployed to the tiny half island to preside over the ouster of Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri and the installation of a government more favorable to Canberra. Like in Kosovo, the vast majority of the East Timorese population continues to live in deep poverty.

Washington's interest in Burma centres on that country's close ties with China—regarded in Washington as a rising strategic and economic rival. The Bush administration's campaign against the junta is part of a far broader scheme to establish allies and bases in a broad sweep around China's borders, from Japan and South Korea in the northeast, to Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics in the west. At the same time, the major powers are seeking to open up Burma as another source of cheap labour and resources, including oil and gas.

Before rushing to join the "humanitarian" bandwagon demanding international aid for Burma, our critics should consider more carefully exactly what they are supporting. Like those who encouraged and applauded the interventions in the Balkans and East Timor, they will bear political responsibility for the outcome.

Another critic, LE, takes a slightly different tack. He equates our refusal to join the current media campaign with support for the Burmese junta, saying: "Your coverage seems incapable of taking a view of Burma that doesn't fall into the Manichean trap of assuming that the enemy of my enemy is my friend, and that no pressure on or condemnation of the junta is possible without colluding with US military aims." He tries to draw a distinction between non-military and military aid, accuses the WWS of blurring the difference and then proposes by way of a question: "Can they [the junta] not be pressured to open their borders to NGOs or to forms of nonmilitary aid?"

The question is: pressured by whom and by what means? The campaign being led by France draws no distinction between military and non-military intervention. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner was the first to suggest that the UN Security Council invoke its "responsibility to protect" power to force the junta to accept humanitarian aid or face a unilateral response by the major powers if it refused. And to back the threat, France, Britain and the US stationed warships in waters off the coast of Burma. The Bush administration floated the idea of air drops into the Irrawaddy delta with or without the permission of the regime.

According to LE, by opposing the machinations of the US and its allies, the WWS is guilty of supporting the Burmese regime. This is the same hoary argument used for decades to smear opponents of imperialism and its predatory actions. On the basis of the same position, anyone who opposed the Australian intervention in Timor in 1999 was accused of supporting the violence perpetrated by pro-Indonesian militias. Those who opposed NATO's war on Yugoslavia were backers of the Milosevic regime. As for the invasion of Iraq, anyone opposing the Bush administration's criminal war had to be a dupe of Saddam Hussein.

Such characterisations are based on the assumption that the working class can never take an independent political stance. While our critics point to the immense distress facing hundreds of thousands of Burmese cyclone survivors, they cannot conceive of the development of working people in Burma as an independent social force capable of intervening to fight for their own class interests. Poverty-stricken workers and farmers in economically backward countries are routinely treated as passive objects worthy of sympathy, but not as political actors in their own right.

Also dismissed as "unreal" is the intervention of the international working class—the only social force capable of genuinely liberating the Burmese people. Their poverty and oppression have been caused, in the final analysis, not just by the current junta, but by more than a century of colonial domination and then imperialist exploitation by the very European and American powers seeking now to get back in.

The WWS is unambiguously in favour of abolishing the Burmese junta, but we are not indifferent to how that takes place and to what

replaces it. The alternative favoured by the US and its allies—the installation of Suu Kyi and her NLD—would not be a step forward for workers and the rural poor. The NLD represents a layer of the Burmese bourgeoisie which, in the name of "democracy", is seeking to open up Burma to foreign capital. Far from resolving the economic and social crisis facing the Burmese people, the transformation of the country into a new cheap labour platform would inevitably deepen the social gulf between rich and poor.

The NLD has been extremely reluctant to mobilise young people, workers and farmers against the junta, acting as a political brake every time such a movement has erupted. In 1988, amid extensive strikes and protests that brought the junta to its knees, Suu Kyi threw the generals a lifeline by accepting a deal to shut down the uprising in return for elections two years later. Having regained control of the situation, the junta ignored the election result and detained the NLD leadership.

Last September, tens of thousands of Burmese poured onto the streets to vent their opposition to the junta, its removal of price subsidies and its anti-democratic methods. But the NLD worked to prevent any repeat of the extensive strike movement of 1988. The NLD's demands were couched as timid appeals to the Burmese military for limited reforms. While exploiting the protests to pressure the junta, the NLD is as terrified as the generals of any insurrectionary movement that would threaten capitalist rule.

Today, the NLD is appealing, not to the Burmese masses, but to the "international community" to intervene on its behalf. A statement issued on May 10 declared: "We, the National League for Democracy, which is mandated by the people, once again appeal to the international community, including the United Nations, to make use of all available means immediately to send experts and humanitarian assistance and start undertaking relief and rescue missions in Burma." The NLD is clearly hoping that the use of "all available means"—including foreign military forces—will create a more favourable climate for its own bid for power.

This would not be the first time an opposition party has exploited the plight of ordinary people to appeal to the "international community" to help hoist it to power. In 1999, the East Timorese leadership of Xanana Gusmao and Jose Ramos Horta insisted its Falantil fighters remain in their cantonments while pro-Indonesian militia rampaged against independence supporters, then used the violent attacks to appeal for foreign military intervention, international aid and backing for their own political ambitions.

There is no simple or quick solution to the present tragedy in Burma. It will not be solved either by the junta or the major powers. It can only be addressed through the intervention of an independent political movement of the international working class, aimed at the overthrow of imperialism and the transformation of society to meet human need, not corporate profit. Any intervention by the major powers will only set the stage for new and more terrible disasters.

Another letter writer, TR declared: "So you think that your comments about the brutality of the Burmese government will inoculate you against the obvious fact that you are simply shilling for socialism. Your concern with having Western nations send aid to Burma is that it would mean capitalists are once again rescuing the disaster of a socialist experiment gone wrong. And your concern is that capitalism will gain a foothold in Burma when you would rather have the people of Burma starve to death than to let that happen." TR continued with an anti-communist diatribe against socialists in general and Karl Marx in particular.

In the first place, Burma is not a "socialist experiment gone wrong". It is one of the few remaining examples of a highly regulated and protected form of capitalism that was not uncommon in the 1950s and 1960s in so-called Third World countries. The Burmese junta, which was established in 1962, never had anything to do with socialism. Like many other nationalist leaders of the time, General Ne Win felt compelled to dress up

his policies as the “Burmese Way to Socialism” in order to appeal to the masses. At the same time, he ruthlessly suppressed any opposition from the working class, various ethnic minorities and the factions of the Stalinist Communist Party of Burma.

As for “shilling for socialism”, the WSWS can hardly be accused of hiding its political orientation. We openly advocate the struggle for international socialism in every part of the world. While cyclones, earthquakes and tsunamis are natural occurrences, the devastation they wreak is the result of a social order that puts profits and privilege before the interests of the vast majority of the world’s population. The very backwardness of Burma’s economy is a direct product of the capitalist profit system and its need to maintain a huge reserve army of cheap labour to push down the wages and conditions of workers around the globe.

Those who believe there is some easier alternative to the struggle for world socialism should make a serious study of the history of the twentieth century. It is littered with the disasters created by political parties, programs and leaderships that sacrificed the political independence of the working class to political expediency and accommodated to the powers-that-be. The political lessons of this history, embodied in the struggle of the international Trotskyist movement against all forms of opportunism, must form the basis for the regeneration of genuine socialism. It is precisely to this movement that young people, students and all working people concerned about the disaster in Burma should turn.



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