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BURMA: CAPITALIZING ON THE GAINS

In the past year, humanitarian assistance to Burma has been primarily focused on victims of Cyclone Nargis, which struck the Irrawaddy delta on May 2, 2008. Though the initial delivery of assistance was hampered by government obstruction, the aid programs that have since developed in the delta have benefited from an ease of operations unseen in other parts of the country. Relief work in the delta is progressing smoothly, but attempts to expand access to the rest of the country are struggling. Nonetheless, to capitalize on the existing gains, the U.S. should provide significant funding for programs throughout the country.

OPERATIONS INSIDE THE DELTA

Since June 2008, international aid organizations have expanded their operations to an unprecedented level inside Burma in order to respond to emergency needs created by the cyclone. Because of the small number of agencies working in the country prior to the storm, many that did not have emergency experience have modified their operations to provide relief. These changes, combined with the self-reliance of delta residents, have been largely successful in meeting the immediate needs of cyclone victims.

Agricultural production has revived, temporary housing has met the shelter needs of most residents, and income generation programs are beginning to address the economic needs of cyclone victims. In addition, the number of international NGOs in the country has doubled from 40 to almost 80, greatly increasing the capacity to support longer-term stabilization activities. Similarly, there has been a tremendous growth in the formation of local NGOs providing humanitarian assistance in the delta region.

Despite the impressive results of this first phase of recovery activities, NGOs and delta residents still identify three priorities for the near future. First, the availability of clean

water continues to be a challenge. Because many reservoirs were salinated due to the storm surge, they were not able to collect sufficient rainwater during the last rainy season. As a result, many organizations are considering trucking water into communities to ensure adequate supply. Agencies are

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❑ The United States should join other donor nations in making a significant appropriation for humanitarian aid in Burma. It should allocate \$30 million for FY10, with plans to increase its contribution to \$45 million in FY11 and \$60 million in FY12.
- ❑ The United Nations should strengthen its support for the Burma Country team by hiring a Senior Humanitarian Advisor to work with the RC/HC and ensure that teams in Bangkok and New York are providing adequate guidance and support.
- ❑ ASEAN should look to apply the Tri-Partite Core Group model for use in the discussion of other issues of concern with Burma, such as the Rohingya.

working furiously to ensure that as many reservoirs as possible are cleaned before the upcoming rainy season begins in May. Second, many families are now living in temporary shelters that are only expected to be habitable through this year's rainy season. Again, agencies are rushing to complete as much permanent housing as possible before the rainy season halts construction. Finally, restoring productive livelihoods to delta residents is the key to the sustainability of recovery operations.

One of the largest challenges to livelihood work in the delta is the impact of the global financial crisis on local markets. Since recovery work began, the markets for rice, pulses, and fishery products have dropped 30% - 40%, making it more difficult for delta residents to earn the income needed to re-establish their lives. Access to credit has shrunk, especially as farmers and fishermen who took loans for last season's crops in anticipation of pre-slump prices cannot repay those loans based on current prices for their products. With savings – whether in cash, livestock, or goods – wiped out during the cyclone, many delta families cannot access credit for the upcoming year. Continued livelihoods assistance from the international community will be needed to ensure that delta residents can fully recover from the effects of Cyclone Nargis.

Funding for international operations in the delta is further complicating the ability of organizations to adequately respond to needs in the region. Much of the funding for the emergency phase of delta relief is winding up as the one-year anniversary of the storm approaches. Many agencies are now in a process of consolidating their work to the townships and villages in most need and shutting down offices in less affected areas as a response to the constrained funding environment. While many agencies are looking to the newly established Livelihoods and Food Security (LIFT) Trust Fund – a pooled fund being established by the European Community, Britain, and Australia – to continue funding livelihood programs in the delta, these funds may not begin to flow until June or July, leaving a gap in funding. Donors should examine the need for bridge funding to ensure that agencies are not left without funding between the time their emergency relief grants run out and the LIFT funds are available.

Finally, many delta residents and implementing agencies at the field level report a concern over the psychological impacts of Cyclone Nargis on delta residents as the rainy season approaches. While long-term plans for work in the delta incorporate disaster risk reduction into their work – such as building storm-resistant shelters, elevating roads, and reinforcing bridges – much of this work has yet to be

completed. As a result, there is a fear that without adequate communications in the delta to inform people about impending storms the approach of even a small storm with strong winds could send delta residents fleeing to the few regional towns in search of safety. Refugees International could not identify any contingency plans for temporary shelter, feeding, and schooling in the event of this type of migration. Similarly, plans to prepare the government for such a possibility or to manage orderly returns to villages do not seem to be in place. Operational agencies and the UN should prepare contingency plans immediately for the possibility of substantial migrations this rainy season and in the future until risk reduction programs are completed.

ACCESS NEEDED OUTSIDE THE DELTA

Though Cyclone Nargis forced many international NGOs to temporarily relocate staff and resources from other parts of Burma to the delta in order to mount an effective disaster response, most agencies have quickly refocused on serving needs throughout the country. In addition to returning to other areas with crises brewing, new NGOs are looking strategically at how to expand their presence outside the delta, a potential gain from the access granted to them in cyclone areas.

Northern Rakhine State, home of the Rohingya Muslim minority (see “Rohingya: Burma's Forgotten Minority,” Dec. 18, 2008), continues to be the area of greatest concern. Deteriorating living standards, news of increased forced relocations, continued restrictions on all aspects of normal life, and the expulsion of Rohingya refugees from asylum countries in the region have focused the attention of the international aid community there.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has recently announced that \$3 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund will be made available for operations in Northern Rakhine State, and the UN Country Team is also coordinating a donor mission to the region, planned for this spring. Despite the growing attention, there is a need for strong, consistent engagement with the Government of Burma on increasing access to this region and relaxing government restrictions on the Rohingya population. Given the recent attention to Rohingya boat people throughout Southeast Asia, ASEAN should look at ways to facilitate this conversation, possibly using the success of the Tripartite Core Group as a model.

In addition to the needs in Northern Rakhine State, NGO actors cite a number of other areas in need of immediate attention. An ongoing food crisis due to bamboo die-offs in

Chin State, particularly in the southern part, continues to require an expanded international response. Similarly, drought in the country's central dry zone – running through Magwe, Mandalay, and Bago Divisions – requires additional resources. In the southeast, areas with high levels of internal displacement due to conflict continue to be off-limits to agencies based in the country. Other areas of increased attention include the Wa and Kokant regions of Shan State, where agencies are attempting to increase resources for alternative agriculture projects for former opium poppy farmers. These initiatives, along with innovative projects in other regions, should be supported by the international community.

While funding for delta operations could face challenges in the upcoming months, humanitarian work throughout the rest of Burma is seeing a growth in funding sources. Britain, the European Commission, and Australia lead the donor community in Burma, and all continue to increase their budgets significantly. Additionally, newer donors such as Norway, Sweden, and Denmark are helping to support operations throughout the country. The establishment of the LIFT fund is an additional boost to funding for countrywide projects, and is currently drawing the attention of additional non-traditional donors. Plans to set up a new Education Trust Fund will further expand the pool of resources available for humanitarian work throughout the country.

The one glaring exception to the growing consensus on the need for increases in humanitarian aid to Burma, especially given its prominent role in funding cyclone relief operations, is the United States. Though a \$15 million contribution is currently in process for 2009 delta operations, U.S. funding for countrywide programs is still an insignificant part of international funding.

Despite the renewed focus and increased funding for countrywide operations, international NGOs are keenly aware that the upcoming year could pose potential complications given proposed national elections in March 2010. Agencies have not reported any restrictions on their work in anticipation of the elections, but all indicated that this could change. Special attention was placed on areas where ceasefire groups or ethnic minority groups may boycott elections, such as Mon State and the Wa region of Shan State. However, agencies indicated that operating constraints in these areas could be expected not only from the government, but from ethnic-based boycott groups looking to exert greater control over their territory. Donor governments and the UN need to ensure that planning is developed to maintain clear boundaries that minimize the impact of political concerns on humanitarian operations.

The UN should take the primary lead in resisting government restrictions on aid agencies' operations in the run up to the 2010 elections. Indeed, it is already playing an important role in drawing attention to humanitarian needs outside the delta and discussing the expansion of aid activities nationwide with the government. The UN Country Team is increasingly composed of new leaders, however, and collectively they are still learning how to operate effectively within the complex political dynamics of Burma.

It is surprising, therefore, that senior UN officials in New York have backed away from plans to maintain high-level in-country support for strategic guidance and back-up on humanitarian matters. As a result, the UN as a whole has weakened its ability to face the challenges of the upcoming year. The Secretary-General and the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs should revive plans to provide a Senior Humanitarian Advisor to the Yangon-based Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator, and they should re-evaluate staffing at the Bangkok and New York levels to ensure that the Burma Country Team receives robust support.

RECOGNIZING ASEAN'S LEADERSHIP ROLE

“Adhering to the principles of democracy, the rule of law and good governance, respect for and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms...and to place the well-being, livelihood and welfare of the peoples at the centre of the ASEAN community building process.”

- Preamble to the charter of the Association of South East Asian Nations

In the immediate aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, ASEAN was thrust into a new leadership role, serving as a broker between the Burmese government and the international community. Its response has exceeded expectations, and the subsequent development and implementation of the Tri-Partite Core Group (TCG), the mechanism established to work on logistics and develop policies governing the humanitarian response program in the Irrawaddy delta, have been an unquestionable success. The TCG continues to play a vital role in ensuring access to cyclone affected areas, obtaining visas for international staff, and resolving disputes or obstacles that emerge. This model should be replicated as a way towards resolving other challenges inside Burma.

The original mandate of the TCG was for one year, and was set to expire in May 2009. In a positive sign, it was recently renewed for an additional year at the February 2009 ASEAN summit in Thailand. The extension of the TCG for the delta will allow ASEAN to maintain high-level contact

with the Burmese government, and provide it with the opportunity to deepen its capacity for international diplomacy through the Secretariat.

Though the renewal of the TCG is a positive development, the inability of the international community to leverage access outside of the delta is a setback. ASEAN should evaluate how best to propose such an extension to the Burmese government during a year that will be fraught with political sensitivities. In the meantime, it should evaluate its experience with the TCG to determine the best form for a proposed expansion. More broadly, the international community should recognize the unique role that Burma's neighbors have in negotiating greater humanitarian access, and should support ASEAN's increasing efforts to convince the Burmese government to allow desperately needed humanitarian activities to take place throughout the country.

ASEAN's new charter includes a multitude of human rights provisions and responsibilities. With its inclusion of Burma, ASEAN will be challenged to find creative ways to ensure that Burma lives up to its commitments under the charter. This should happen through the internal dialogue mechanisms of the regional alliance, as well as through bilateral engagement on the part of Burma's neighbors and regional partners. Indonesia, as the largest country in the region, as well as Thailand and Malaysia, as Burma's immediate neighbors, have a responsibility to engage with the Burmese government to encourage greater adherence to the ASEAN charter.

While ASEAN is learning to adapt to the new mandates in its charter, it has been thrust into the spotlight recently with the coverage of the Rohingya boat crisis. This scandal has demonstrated that humanitarian emergencies inside Burma are fundamentally regional issues. ASEAN members can no longer disregard the internal affairs of Burma, as they have severe and identifiable ramifications for all ASEAN countries, specifically in terms of arrival of refugees.

ASEAN must look to develop and implement a comprehensive regional response to the Rohingya crisis. This response must look simultaneously at conditions inside Northern

Rakhine State, as well as protection and assistance conditions in host countries, so that the policies implemented are in accordance with international humanitarian law and do not result in undesirable pull factors. Much like the formation of the TCG, the management of the Rohingya issue will set a precedent for how the Association plans to engage its most difficult member.

MOVING FORWARD

The past year has demonstrated the ability of the humanitarian community to work effectively in the constrained Burmese operating environment. They have responded effectively to the Cyclone Nargis disaster, retooled their programs to meet the most pressing needs, successfully trained thousands of new Burmese staff in humanitarian operations, and negotiated with the Burmese government for increased opportunities to operate freely. These accomplishments have been supported by a renewed commitment to fund these activities by the international community.

International NGOs are now poised to begin the difficult work of translating their experience in the delta into improved operations throughout the country. Despite the challenges of upcoming elections, these agencies have shown that they are up to the task, and donor nations have demonstrated their commitment to supporting that vision.

Burma is still a country in a state of slow-motion collapse. The global financial crisis has only served to underline the dysfunction of the country's economic system, and the laundry list of impending regional crises highlights the vulnerability of the Burmese people. Though Burma continues to present serious challenges to the independence and integrity of humanitarian agencies, the need is clearer than ever, and the ability to operate accountably and transparently has been adequately demonstrated. If donor governments, ASEAN, and international agencies can present a united front on the imperative of meeting humanitarian need, they may allow actors inside the country to capitalize on the gains of the past year.

Congressional Advocate Jake Kurtzer assessed the humanitarian situation inside Burma in February 2009.