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# BURMA: BUILDING UPON SUCCESS

Three months after Cyclone Nargis, the world has an outdated image of the situation inside Burma. Although aid agencies delivered assistance within days after the storm and continue to do so, the story of a recalcitrant government that rejects aid from the generous nations of the world has not been updated. Aid agencies today report an unprecedented level of access and mobility in the Ayeyarwady Delta, which is a tribute to the successful fight by the United Nations, the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) and the United States for humanitarian access. But the gains in delivering relief supplies, gathering information about needs and supporting local communities are at risk without continued commitment to food security, livelihood and early recovery activities.

## The Ground Truth

For two weeks, Refugees International interviewed the staff of over forty humanitarian organizations inside Burma. All report access to any requested part of the delta, including ethnic minority areas, and the ability to send international staff to train, implement and monitor programs without obstruction. Since June, over 1,000 visas have been granted to international aid workers. Similarly, agencies report the ability to resolve problems with the government, and praise the Tripartite Core Group (TCG) – the cyclone response structure comprised of working levels of the Burmese government, ASEAN and the United Nations – as an effective mechanism for resolving disputes. The TCG has ably removed obstacles related to visas, Foreign Exchange Certificates and the importation of food, among others.

Agencies also praised the Post-Nargis Joint Assessment (PONJA), the first comprehensive, independent assessment of humanitarian need. For a country that has not conducted a national census in over 20 years, the information that it contains represents a major leap forward. PONJA is to be updated regularly to report on aid operations and their effectiveness, and ASEAN will establish six offices in the delta to better monitor and evaluate aid activities.

Burmese community based organizations were first responders that are now working to increase their capacity to provide effective aid. Local organizations with international support are providing training and funding to ensure that Burmese humanitarian groups can better assess and organize community assistance, improve their organizational structures and coordinate activities with each other and with international agencies. The work of local organizations is vital for the success of humanitarian operations in Burma as these groups

## Policy Recommendations

- ❑ The U.S. government and the European Commission should immediately commit funds to continue humanitarian cyclone relief past the emergency stage and into 2009 for food security, early recovery and livelihoods programs. They should allocate these funds based on revised assessments of need and the ability to effectively implement such programs.
- ❑ The U.S., Europe and ASEAN should publicly acknowledge the progress that has been made in access to cyclone-ravaged parts of Burma since the end of May.
- ❑ International donors should ensure vigorous support for livelihood recovery operations, and particularly for capacity building initiatives that strengthen local Burmese organizations.

promote self-reliance and reduce vulnerabilities. Support for groups that provide capacity building and training services to these organizations is as important as the provision of direct relief.

Improved information sharing and coordination between the UN and international and local NGOs, coupled with easier international access to the delta and donor support, have reduced suffering, saved lives and improved the overall humanitarian response to the affected population. While a large majority of cyclone victims have received some sort of assistance, and most are receiving regular food aid, the process of transitioning from relief to self-sufficiency will require international help well through 2009 and perhaps beyond. The international community must continue funding humanitarian assistance and begin livelihood and other early recovery activities that will allow the gradual phasing-out of emergency aid. (See Key Facts on Post-Cyclone Nargis Humanitarian Needs.)

### **The Political Struggle over International Aid**

The demands of the relief effort have emboldened some Ministers within the Government of Burma to facilitate international cooperation, a story ignored by international reports that focus on the government's obstructionism. Their success has created a new set of operational rules that are unique to the delta, including increased mobility for international staff; operations approved quickly through "letters of agreement;" the use of community organizing strategies; and improved communication between the international community and the government through the TCG. This new standard for humanitarian operations inside the cyclone affected areas should be commended by international organizations and donor governments and its application to the rest of the country should be advocated for by all actors.

Nonetheless, hardline isolationists are still determined to prevent further international involvement in Burmese affairs. This obstructionism has raised hurdles for relief operations, such as the failed attempt to impose strict guidelines on international agencies in June. More seriously, this conservative faction is attempting to exert its influence over on-going operations outside the delta, and is meddling with the annual memoranda of understanding (MOUs) of a number of long-standing operational agencies. With little clear direction being given from the senior leadership, multiple government officials appear to be implementing competing pro- and anti-engagement policies simultaneously in hopes that their actions will curry favor with top officials.

The sooner that the U.S. and other donor countries reaffirm their commitment to early recovery operations at least through 2009, the better the chance that the new openness in the delta will take hold. Ministers who have risked their political capital to support international involvement must be encouraged by donor commitments to more than a short-term infusion of humanitarian assistance. Without these

commitments, isolationists may argue that humanitarian operations were more about scoring political points against the regime rather than aiding Burma.

### **Funding is Key**

Gaps and delays in funding will hamper relief activities and could cause ruptures in the supply of essential goods. The U.S. Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) has led an exemplary operation to provide cyclone relief, granting almost \$50 million to international NGOs and UN agencies. OFDA programs are scheduled to transition to the U.S. Agency for International Development in January 2009. Refugees International is concerned that to date no funding has been requested or identified by the Bush Administration or authorized by Congress to continue the needed relief programs in FY 2009.

Similarly in April 2009, the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) will hand over responsibility for future aid to the European Commission (EC). Currently the EC plans €6 million for cyclone operations, substantially below current ECHO funding levels. The British government has provided £45 million through March 2009, but has not determined funding past that date. Australia has announced \$55 million for its 2008/2009 cyclone programs.

### **Ripple Effect?**

Humanitarian agencies have largely maintained their operations throughout the country while responding to the cyclone. Though many agencies temporarily pulled staff from regional offices throughout the country to work in the delta, few programs halted their nationwide operations to respond to Nargis.

Many humanitarian activists in Burma hope that the assessment, monitoring and access breakthroughs that characterize the delta operations will eventually lead to a revision of overall Burmese policy on humanitarian activities. Currently, the restrictions placed on agencies in other parts of the country remain unchanged (see "Key Facts on the Operating Environment for International Agencies," March 2008). Many actors also hope for benefits from increased contact with Burmese officials, and one agency has indeed reported expanded access in another part of the country as a direct result of relationships built during cyclone operations.

It is too soon to tell if there will be a national transformation on humanitarian access. To encourage this transition, international agencies and donor governments must continue to demonstrate their willingness to engage in the delta and lend support to those Burmese officials who are pushing for a greater international role. Without this vital support – both financial and political – the international community may risk squandering the largest humanitarian opening inside Burma in the past twenty years.

*Dawn Calabria and Megan Fowler assessed the cyclone response effort in Burma in August 2008.*

# BURMA:

## KEY FACTS ON POST-CYCLONE NARGIS HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

Cyclone Nargis hit Burma's Ayeyarwady Division on May 2 and 3, and has affected over 2.4 million people, roughly one-third of the population of the delta region. While as many as 800,000 people may have been displaced because of the cyclone, the vast majority have since returned to their home villages, both voluntarily and under governmental forced return policies. On return, they are finding the widespread destruction of their homes and infrastructure, salinized water supplies, destroyed food stocks, and the loss of livestock, fishing boats, and other necessities. Rebuilding communities affected by Cyclone Nargis will take years, and will require a solid commitment from the international community.

- ❑ More than half of all households in the affected region reported the loss of all food stocks during the cyclone, indicating that they will likely be dependent on humanitarian food deliveries until local farmers produce a complete harvest. It is estimated that 924,000 people will require food aid.
- ❑ Half of the summer rice crop was destroyed by Cyclone Nargis. Though efforts to replant in time for the fall harvest have been vigorous, it is estimated that only 25% of villages had enough existing seed stock to plant. Production losses due to the cyclone range from 40-70% of pre-Nargis levels. Assistance with agricultural inputs is expected to be needed for at least the next two harvests.
- ❑ Fifty percent of water buffalo and 25% of cattle died in the worst-affected regions of the delta. Small livestock such as chickens, pigs, ducks, and sheep had much higher mortality rates. The lack of livestock not only affects food security, but also deprives farmers of the animals necessary to plow their fields.
- ❑ The cyclone destroyed over 130,000 boats, depriving communities not only of the means to fish, but also of their transportation and communication systems.
- ❑ The storm destroyed 450,000 houses, while a further 350,000 sustained some type of damage. Though 80% of delta residents have temporarily rebuilt homes, the availability of construction materials such as thatch and bamboo will necessitate the use of temporary housing for many through 2009.
- ❑ Sixty-three percent of residents in the affected parts of the delta have inadequate access to clean water, due largely to the salinization of ponds and other water sources. This has led to a shift towards rainwater collection as the primary water source for most families.
- ❑ Cyclone Nargis destroyed close to 75% of all health facilities in the delta. The biggest impact was on primary health facilities in rural areas.
- ❑ Only 60% of the affected population now has access to latrines or other sanitary facilities.
- ❑ The storm destroyed 50-60% of schools, both monastic and public. This has a disproportionate impact on poor children, whose enrollment rate in primary school is only 80%, and whose enrollment in middle school is only 10%.

*Source: Post-Nargis Joint Assessment.*