

Why Is Burma Junta Afraid of Letting Foreign Aid Workers?

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In the eyes of Burma's military rulers, everyone is a potential enemy. Even foreign aid workers.

As the international community waits to deliver desperately needed aid to Burma's cyclone survivors, it is getting a lesson in the mind-set of the country's military rulers: reclusive, xenophobic generals who despise the Western world.

Six days after Cyclone Nargis slammed into Burma's western coast, killing more than 22,000 people, the impoverished country's needs remain enormous. After initially pleading for urgent help, the junta now seems in no rush to welcome it.

"The military regime is extraordinarily xenophobic. They are afraid of everything," said Sean Turnell, a Burma expert at Australia's Macquarie University.

Among the junta's fears are internal uprisings, a US invasion, globalization and its capacity to dilute traditional Burmese culture. In the aftermath of Saturday's cyclone, the junta appears to be afraid of losing face with its people.

"If they can't handle the situation and they let Westerners come in with helicopters, this will demonstrate to their own people the shortcomings of the military," Turnell said. *"They are more concerned with control and maintaining an omniscience in front of their people than saving lives."*

Burma's Foreign Ministry indicated Friday that it wants relief supplies but not foreign aid workers in the country, saying in a statement carried in state media that the government was delivering emergency aid *"with its own labor to the affected areas."*

After days of stalling, the junta gave clearance Thursday for the first major international airlifts carrying aid to cyclone survivors. But it was not allowing US military planes to fly in critical relief and continued to withhold visas for several UN teams seeking entry, said Richard Horsey, a UN spokesman in neighboring Thailand.

A foreign military's presence in Burma would mark a major concession for the junta.

"They're afraid that if foreign soldiers come in they are the spearhead to overthrow the government," said Josef Silverstein, a retired Rutgers University professor who studied Burma for more than a half century. From the junta's perspective: *"Aid workers could be carrying weapons to give to the people, they could give them ideas of how to overthrow the government."*

Aid agencies say efforts to rush relief supplies to large-scale disasters are often slowed by red tape.

But Burma's foot dragging has a deeper, historical context.

The junta has long mistrusted the Western world stemming from more than a century of British colonial rule that ended in 1948. A parliamentary democracy survived until the ruthless dictator Gen Ne Win seized power in a 1962 coup. During his 26-year rule, Ne Win's regime curtailed human rights and political opposition and closed the country off to outsiders, earning Burma, as it was then known, the nickname the "Hermit Kingdom."

Tourists were, for the most part, not allowed in for years until the 1970s when visitors were given strict, seven-day visas.

These days, tourists get one-month visas but journalists are welcome only during carefully scripted occasions, such as the annual celebration of Armed Forces Day to commemorate the military's might.

Over the years, ruling juntas have imposed a variety of laws designed to keep Burmese culture strong and block the influence of the outside world: It is illegal for locals to hold foreign currency and to host foreigners in their homes overnight. Foreign diplomats are required to seek government permission to travel outside Rangoon, the commercial capital.

One of the junta's main foes is the United States, which has imposed economic sanctions against the generals and is a strident critic of Burma's human rights record. Washington is a regular target of contempt in Burma's state-controlled media.

US invasions of Iraq in 1991 and in 2003 reportedly spread panic among the junta and high hopes among the people.

Some analysts believe that the junta's abrupt decision in 2005 to relocate the country's capital from Rangoon to the remote city of Naypyidaw, which it carved out of dense jungle, was driven by fears of a US invasion.

On Monday, first lady Laura Bush described the junta as "very inept" on several fronts and accused leaders of failing to give citizens some lifesaving warnings about the cyclone. President George W. Bush said Tuesday that his message to military rulers was: "Let the United States come help you."

The language is not helpful, said Monique Skidmore, a Burma expert at Australian National University.

"It's actually making it a lot more difficult for the US agencies because Bush must be enraging the generals," said Skidmore. *"And that's not the thing to be doing if he wants to get aid there as quickly as possible."*

Awaiting a decision from Burma, the US stepped up preparations Thursday for a humanitarian mission in Burma, readying some navy ships and Air Force planes already in the region, said Eric John, the US ambassador to Thailand.

"We are in a long line of nations who are ready, willing and able to help," John said. *"But also, of course, in a long line of nations the Burmese don't trust."*

P.S.

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