

Rangoon - the Day After

Monday 12 May 2008, by [NOVAK Adam](#) (Date first published: 12 April 2008).

Arriving in Rangoon from Bangkok is like going back in time 20 years. No skyscrapers, a lot less traffic, and most people wearing the traditional woven *longyi* (skirt) rather than western dress. Downtown Rangoon is a place of dirty, crumbling buildings from the British colonial era, with a few modern, Chinese-style hotels and some 1970s concrete office blocks.

I expected the fierce sun that bakes this country in April and May, before the monsoon fills the reservoirs and fishponds of the Irrawaddy delta, so fertile that the British called it the 'rice basket of Asia.' Millions of peasant farmers in the delta still grow on family plots almost of the rice, and almost half of the chicken and pigs that nourish - more or less - this country of 50m people, where most survive on less than 1 USD per day. But thick storm clouds covered the sky. 'Every year the rainy season comes earlier,' the taxi driver complained on the way from the airport. 'There is a big storm in the Bay of Bengal, but on the television they say it will not come here.'

The fancy hotels in Burma belong to members of the military junta, or their families, so I checked into a small family hotel in what the Burmese would call a quiet part of town. But beneath my window there was still a constant parade of door-to-door sellers of everything imaginable, and every morning a solemn bell announced the arrival of a parade of monks, silently collecting alms for themselves, for upkeep of the temples and for redistribution to the poor.

After 50 years of misrule and dictatorship - communist and 'planned' from 1962 to 1988, and since then a fascistic, free-market system, with a very similar bunch of generals in charge. Today, Burma stagnates in a self-sufficient, militaristic and xenophobic isolation. A kind of tropical version of Albania in the bad old days. The younger generation of Burmese are at least 10cm shorter than their Thai or Vietnamese counterparts, as a result of the poverty that this mismanagement perpetuates.

On 2 May - the day before cyclone Nargis hit - I bought an air ticket to travel to the north of the country. That evening, the airline called to say they had just decided to cancel the flight 'because of bad weather'. A few hours later, the city of four million was plunged into chaos as winds gusting up to 170km/hr ripped tiles and TV antenna from the roofs. Many older buildings, and one of the main hospitals, lost their roof completely. In the delta, the wind pushed up a 3.5m wave which destroyed entire villages, the intricate pattern of rice fields and irrigation canals which feeds the country, and the boats which are the only means of communication for the millions of people living in this swampy region. There was no wave in Rangoon, but the drainage and sewage system was pushed into reverse, flooding the streets with 30cm of dirty water.

Like everybody else, I suppose, I huddled inside, with no electricity or telephone, until the rain and wind subsided 10 hours later on Saturday afternoon. Then I waded out, to try to understand what had happened. The city was silent, with hundreds of trees, the largest surely planted during the British occupation, fallen across the streets. Thousands of people were walking in every direction, trying to reconnect with their family members, and to find some food and drinking water (people here buy food every day, because they can't afford refrigerators). There were moments of humour, with young people enjoying the sensation of swimming and sailing in the high street, and climbing on the fallen trees. But the humour gradually shifted to anxiety, and almost hysteria, as the extent of the damage became clear. People discovered that the little food available was twice or three times

as expensive as the day before. Then the radio announced that it would take at least one month to restore the electricity system. The next day was the same, except that the water system stopped working in large parts of the city. Huge lines formed to buy bottled water - which had also doubled in price. Luckily, the City of Rangoon was able to distribute free drinking water - two buckets per family - in many parts of town. Otherwise, I think people would have become very desperate and aggressive. One man told me that he had been to the river to collect water, but his car had been ambushed on the outskirts of town by a group of children with bamboo sticks; who had taken his water, but not his money...

As it was, the dominant Burmese characteristics of patient optimism, gentleness and tolerance remained in evidence. One woman walked - or waded - beside me for a while. She explained that she was a tour guide, but that, after the regime savagely repressed pro-democracy demonstrations last September, the number of tourists had almost completely collapsed. 'And where are all the soldiers now?' she asked. 'In any other country, they would be clearing the streets, distributing water, and helping the people. But this government only cares about the very rich.' Indeed, apart from a couple of Burmese red cross volunteers and the city water trucks, the first official reaction I saw was on the afternoon of the second day, when a couple of policemen began directing traffic at the main downtown crossroads (where the main September demonstrations took place) and some groups of soldiers began clearing the roads near government buildings.

While no-one was distributing aid to the people of Rangoon, as a foreigner I was repeatedly approached by people who wanted to know if I was alright. One woman pressed three packets of instant noodles into my hand - I am sure it was her own supper. A few streets further on, I stopped someone carrying bread and asked where I could find the bakery. 'No, no, take this, please!' and she pressed her purchase into my hands.

On day three, with still no sign of any government civil defence or aid, I asked a Burmese friend what was happening to the poorest people, who had lost everything during the cyclone. I was told that, whenever things are hopeless, Burmese know that they can always find water, something to eat, and a place to sleep in the thousands of temples and monasteries that cover the country. Indeed, in this totalitarian country, the sangha, or Buddhist community, is the only real institution or space outside the control of the state.

I asked a taxi driver to take me to a nearby monastery. He too complained that the army, which consumes about half the national budget, was doing nothing to help the people. 'And they still insist that we vote for them in their stupid referendum,' he shouted suddenly. Other Burmese had already explained to me that the regime was determined to impose a massive yes vote in the 10 May referendum to approve a new constitution that would legalise military control of society, ensure their immunity from prosecution, and give the army 25 percent of the seats in parliament. 'All the taxi drivers in Rangoon have been told where and when to vote,' he complained. 'They have given us the ballot papers, and told us to fill in our name and ID card numbers before voting day. I don't want to vote at all, but it's impossible. Whoever doesn't vote 'yes' will have nothing but trouble. Their family members too.'

The monastery was overflowing with refugees from the slums and villages around Rangoon, which had been flattened by the cyclone. 'Our wells are empty,' one monk told me. 'the water is very muddy, but what can we do? The people have nowhere else to go.'

I bought a copy of the local English newspaper. State media continued to insist that the number of victims was small (350 dead and 400 missing), but people on the street were gradually becoming aware of the much larger scale of the catastrophe. Some citizens and businesspeople began to bring donations of food, clothes and money directly to the monasteries. A Burmese friend and I decided

that I would buy a sack of rice and some vegetables and she would take it to whichever affected village she could reach by bus, and organise an emergency soup kitchen. As I headed back to the airport, I saw a line of cars, almost one kilometre long, waiting desperately at one of the handful of government petrol stations that still distributes subsidised fuel. As my plane took off towards Bangkok, we looped over the Irrawady delta, and I saw huge areas of ricefields had been turned into lakes or reclaimed by the sea.

At Bangkok airport I picked up a newspaper and read for the first time that the true number of victims was much higher, that 5,000 square km of farmland was underwater, that the regime was insisting that it alone distribute all aid, and that there would be no visas for foreign observers or non-government organisations. In Thailand, the sun was shining again.