

# UN Aid Has Yet to Reach Burma

Wednesday 7 May 2008, by [CHO Violet](#), [Lalit K Jha](#) (Date first published: 6 May 2008).

Burma's neighbors, including Thailand and India, have begun sending aid to the country in the wake of a devastating cyclone that struck on Saturday, but the United Nations has so far been unable to respond with the massive aid that it has vowed to provide.

One reason for the delay is that UN relief workers, who will assess the extent of the damage inflicted by Cyclone Nargis, are still waiting for Burma's military regime, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), to issue them with visas to enter the country.

The UN started preparations on Monday to send the promised aid as soon as possible and said it plans to immediately begin airlifting relief material and life-saving drugs to the region.

The decision was taken following a meeting between UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's chief of staff, Vijay Nambiar, and Burma's UN ambassador, Kyaw Tint Swe, on Monday afternoon.

During the meeting, the Burmese ambassador confirmed that his government had requested assistance to meet the needs of the cyclone's victims, a spokesperson for the secretary general said.

Given the gravity of the situation in Burma, the ambassador emphasized the need to immediately receive relief supplies, the spokesperson added.

During the meeting, Nambiar and Kyaw Tint Swe discussed the possibility of an urgent grant allocation by the UN's Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), as well as communications and coordination support to facilitate the delivery of assistance.

The CERF is used to fund sudden onset, rapidly deteriorating and under-funded humanitarian emergencies and natural disasters.

*"I am ready to allocate a significant amount from the CERF as the most urgent needs become clear,"* said UN Undersecretary-General John Holmes on Tuesday.

As an immediate measure, it is likely that UN planes already in other countries in the region, such as Nepal and Timor, could be used to airlift relief material. Other UN agencies and humanitarian relief agencies in the region have also been alerted for this purpose.

Meanwhile, aid from neighboring countries is beginning to flow into Burma. A military plane carrying supplies from Bangkok arrived today, and the India government has sent two navy ships loaded with rice, medicine, tents and other essentials for the cyclone's victims. A spokesperson for the International Red Cross, which has already begun providing assistance from within the country, said more was on the way from Malaysia.

Other countries, including the US, the UK, Norway, France, Canada, the Netherlands, Sweden, Germany and Japan, are also lining up to offer aid to Burma.

*"We can say that the international relief effort is gearing up quickly and it is now a question of working on the logistics and getting the channels of distribution,"* said Richard Horsey,

spokesperson for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

*"The Myanmar [Burma] government authorities have called for international assistance, but the question is the practicalities," he said.*

Moving goods and vehicles will be the main challenge, he said, because floods have caused extensive damage to roads from Rangoon to remote areas of the Irrawaddy Delta that were hardest hit.

As some of the staunchest critics of Burma's military regime step forward with offers of aid, the secretary general of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), Surin Pitsuwan, appealed to member states of the regional grouping on Tuesday to offer "generous" aid to Burma.

The Asean Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC), a group which is often critical of Asean's stance on Burma, released a statement urging leaders in the region to ensure that the country's military leaders cooperate fully with international aid agencies.

*"When disasters hit, there cannot be any tolerance or patience for political maneuvering. The United Nations and Asean must act immediately without fear or favor and carry out their humanitarian obligation to the people of Burma,"* said AIPMC President Kraisak Choonhavan, who also called on Asean dialogue partners China, Japan and South Korea to offer aid to Burma.

On Tuesday, the Burmese regime's closest international ally, China, pledged to provide US\$ 1 million in cash and relief supplies to Burma. As criticism of the junta's handling of the disaster mounts, Chinese President Hu Jintao said that he anticipated the speedy restoration of "normal life under the leadership of the SPDC."

Meanwhile, talking to reporters at the UN headquarters in New York, the secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, said he was alarmed by the news of devastation caused by Cyclone Nargis.

*"I am very saddened that the people of Myanmar have been struck by this cyclone. The UN will do whatever it can do to provide urgent humanitarian assistance,"* he said.

Because of the lack of communications and information, he said, the UN is not quite sure what would be the total extent of damages and casualties.

Nargis struck Burma late Friday around the mouth of the Irrawaddy River, southwest of Rangoon, before hitting the country's biggest city.

---

**P.S.**

From the Irrawaddy Online.

[http://www.irrawaddy.org/print\\_article.php?art\\_id=11796](http://www.irrawaddy.org/print_article.php?art_id=11796)