

Human Right Watch Says Cyclone Relief More Important Than Referendum

Friday 9 May 2008, by [Saw Yan Naing](#) (Date first published: 9 May 2008).

The humanitarian watchdog organization Human Rights Watch (HRW) urged the Burmese regime on Friday to postpone Saturday's constitutional referendum and concentrate instead on allowing international aid to reach victims of Cyclone Nargis.

It was time to *"pull the plug on the referendum and open up to aid workers and their supplies,"* said Elaine Pearson, deputy Asia director of HRW, accusing the regime of *"blocking international aid efforts in part to keep foreigners out until the voting is over."*

The cyclone victims couldn't wait that long, she said. *"Those without clean water, food or medical care can't wait any longer for help. They need it now."*

The Burmese government has said the referendum will go ahead as planned, with the exception of some townships hit by the cyclone.

HRW urged the regime to open up the cyclone-devastated areas to a major international relief effort, by immediately granting visas to aid workers enabling them to distribute emergency supplies. Countries with the military means of rushing aid to the region by sea and air should be allowed access, HRW said.

The US has put several of its naval vessels, including a helicopter-carrier, at the disposal of the aid effort, but the regime has so far blocked US offers of help.

Aid workers from many other countries are waiting in Bangkok for the regime's permission to enter Burma. Emergency supplies are also piling up in the Thai capital, one week after the cyclone first hit Burma.

Pearson said China, India and Thailand, as "major trading partners and backers" of the Burmese government, had a "particular responsibility to insist that aid gets in."

She said: *"Failure to press Burma's generals publicly on international aid will make it clear their claims to be concerned about the Burmese people are meaningless."*

HRW said more than 2,000 square miles (5,000 square kilometers) of the Irrawaddy delta—Burma's main rice-growing region—were inundated by sea water when the cyclone hit the low-lying region. UN agencies say the flooding could have catastrophic effects on Burmese agriculture and rice production.

P.S.

From The Irrawaddy magazine. Friday, May 9, 2008.
http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=11878