

A Tale of Two Devastated Countries

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China, hit by a massive earthquake, does what Burma doesn't - go to the aid of its suffering people

Nothing underscores the criminal nature of the Burmese junta more than the contrast between its neglect of its people and China's immediate reaction to the massive earthquake that devastated large parts of Sichuan province on Monday, killing as many as 10,000 people.

Within three hours of the quake, which measured 7.9 on the Richter scale, Premier Wen Jiabao was on his way to the area to direct rescue work. President Hu Jintao had ordered an all-out effort on the part of the army and other government organizations in the area at once to search for survivors and aid the injured. On Monday evening, Hu urged governments at all levels to make rescue and relief the top priority.

Few earthquakes are as powerful as the one that struck Sichuan. Quakes of a magnitude of 8.0 are almost unheard of. This one was centered in Wenchuan, population 111,800, in a steeply mountainous area 150-odd kilometers northwest of Chengdu. that is home to the Wolong Nature Reserve, China's leading research and breeding base of the endangered giant pandas.

Landslides have buried roads and disrupted infrastructure. Road and rail links into the area have been severed and airports are closed. Nonetheless, the authorities appear to be doing a professional job. They have announced that their primary aim is to rescue people, and calls have been made asking for international aid. The United States and other countries have offered technical expertise and aid.

Certainly, China has reason to show some alacrity to provide assistance to its citizens. The government in Beijing is under continuing pressure, particularly in the runup to the Olympic Games scheduled to start in July, over its handling of recent riots in Tibet. It is also under considerable pressure over its decision to provide wholehearted relief to the Burmese junta without any criticism of the regime. The midsection of the country earlier this year also suffered from some of the worst snowstorms in decades, straining the capability of its relief operations.

China's efforts to provide relief for earthquake victims aside, the Boxing Day tsunami of 2006 also provides a marked contrast to the paralysis in Burma. The tsunami killed more than 230,000 people and left 1.7 million homeless in 14 countries, Indonesia and Sri Lanka were the hardest hit. Schools, hospitals, and government offices were destroyed. Indonesia's Aceh province took the brunt of the disaster. Yet by allowing in aid agencies and cooperating with them, Indonesia by and large staved off starvation. The Indonesian government ultimately created a Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency that largely put the stricken area back on its feet. The international community committed some US\$7 billion to reconstruction in Indonesia, and private companies and donor agencies provided technical experts and managers to put the province back together, according to a study by the consulting firm McKinsey.

By contrast, Burma has simply denied itself that kind of assistance after Cyclone Nargis devastated

the Irrawaddy River Delta on May 2. Its lack of action of action could kill as many as a million people, according to warnings by Oxfam and other relief organizations alarmed that the lack of fresh water and relief supplies, as well as the lack of action in cleaning up the dead, almost inevitably will lead to epidemics of cholera, malaria, dengue and typhus. Today, witnesses say the banks of streams are lined with the bodies of the bloated dead and that the smell of death is pervasive across the delta.

Although aid flights finally began to arrive in Burma over the weekend, a full week after the disaster, the delays in flights and visas for relief workers and the confiscation of emergency supplies have multiplied the misery for millions. The junta followed up its inaction with two remarkable actions – the first to hold a rigged constitutional referendum while the country was still in the initial stages of digging itself out of the disaster and to dragoon its citizens into a yes vote by intimidation, and second, according to The Observer, continue to export rice to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka even as it tried to curb the influx of international donations.

According to relief organizations, Burma will need as much as 500,000 tonnes of rice and perhaps as much as 2 million tonnes to meet subsistence levels for most of its population in the wake of Cyclone Nargis, which wiped out 65 percent of the rice-growing capability of the Irrawaddy Delta. The country had expected to export 600,000 tonnes in 2008. According to several estimates, Burma, once the biggest rice-exporting nation in Asia, will be forced to import to make up shortages for years to come.

Satellite imagery showed that a 16-meter storm surge pushed salt water 40km inland in the delta. According to the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines, it can take up to a year to leach out the salt, depending on the kind of soil, the amount of rainfall and whether farmers plant salt-resistant varieties of rice. The storm, unimpeded because protective mangrove forests had been destroyed for prawn farming and additional rice paddies, destroyed everything in its path, as well as drowning as many as 100,000 people.

Nonetheless, according to The Observer, sacks of rice destined for Bangladesh were being loaded on to a ship at the Thilawa container port at the mouth of the Rangoon River at the end of last week, even though the rice-bowl region had been literally destroyed by the deadly storm. The paper quoted the regime as saying it planned to meet all of its contractual commitments.

Other than pure callousness on the part of an isolated dictatorship that removed itself from Rangoon and installed itself in Naypyidaw, part of the refusal to allow foreign help appears to stem from a very real fear that, given the massive uprising of hundreds of thousands of people last September and October over trebled fuel prices, allowing in Westerners for aid would threaten the generals' grip on power. Anger over the crackdown, in which at least 31 people were shot according to United Nations estimates, remains very high.

The crackdown was greeted with universal condemnation, particularly from the United States. Not surprisingly, the junta is unlikely to believe the arrival of help from the West is going to be without strings. Aid is coming in from the Chinese as well as India and Thailand – much of it re-labeled as coming from the junta itself. The US, while offering a relatively small amount of money in aid, also said it had three warships in the region that could be redeployed – hardly something that would have filled the junta with confidence.

By contrast, China, a country riven by fault zones, appears to be learning to cope with its disasters. Over the past decade, such calamities as flooding on the Yangtze River and other tragedies have brought officials from the very top of the government to the disaster areas to direct operations, as Wen Jiabao turned up for the current quake. The government earmarked 200 million yuan (US\$28.6

million) for disaster relief, almost immediately increasing that amount to 860 million yuan, 700 million yuan of it for Sichuan, according to state-owned media. It is a marked contrast to a 1976 earthquake in Tangshan that killed more than 240,000 people. At that time, China, as Burma has today, refused help, partly because it was unwilling to allow an influx of foreign workers.

P.S.

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