

If Humanitarian Intervention Happens, Then What?

Saturday 17 May 2008, by [Wai Moe](#) (Date first published: 16 May 2008).

As calls for humanitarian intervention in Burma widen and gain momentum, analysts are asking, what would the country's armed forces do—fight or take off their uniforms?

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said in London on Thursday: "*We will stop at nothing in trying to pressure the regime into doing what any regime should have done long ago. And there should be nothing, nothing that stops that aid getting to the people of the country now.*"

Britain, France and the United States all have significant naval forces very near Burma's waters. Part of the US Seventh Fleet, headed by the USS Essex, is now in the Bay of Bengal or Andaman Sea; France has dispatched a 22,000-ton amphibious naval craft, Mistral, with 1,500 tons of rice and medical supplies; and a British Royal Navy frigate, the HMS Westminster is nearby.

The US vessels carry more than 20 helicopters, other aircraft, landing craft, humanitarian supplies and 11,000 troops ready for relief work in Burma.

"It would only take half an hour for the French boats and French helicopters to reach the disaster area, and I imagine it's the same story for our British friends," the French Foreign Minister, Bernard Kouchner, said in Paris. *"We are putting constant pressure on the Burmese authorities, but we haven't yet got the go-ahead."*

The pace of the relief effort has failed to make significant progress nearly two weeks after Cyclone Nargis struck the country, which is unprecedented in recent decades.

Up to 3.2 million people have been impacted by the storm, according to the John Hopkins School of Public Health.

What would be the Tatmadaw's [armed forces] position if Western nations implemented a humanitarian intervention?

A former major in the Tatmadaw who lives in Rangoon told The Irrawaddy the armed forces would not fight against a multi-national coalition force that entered to help the Burmese people.

"Who in the Tatmadaw could be loyal to the top generals who have failed to help millions of people, if there is intervention on humanitarian grounds?" he asked.

He said many soldiers and their families also face dire circumstances because of the mismanagement of the country by the military government. Soldiers obey orders from the generals not because of love or nationalism, but because of fear, he said.

Other analysts say the Tatmadaw has a history of patriotism and nationalism in the past,

particularly during the independence struggle in the 1940s and the battle against communists who occupied eastern Burma in the 1950s. But the current Tatmadaw is very different from earlier regimes, they say.

The nation also is well aware of its ranking among the world's poorest and most inefficient countries because of the 46-year rule of military governments.

Htay Aung, a researcher in warfare with the Network for Democracy and Development (NDD), said if there is a humanitarian intervention by the international community, the top generals might order troops to oppose the intervention.

"There is a small possibility that the Tatmadaw would fight back against a multi-national force because soldiers in the Tatmadaw follow orders, but it's just because of fear," he said.

The Tatmadaw's ability to oppose a foreign professional force is questionable, he said. *"In 1950s, the Tatmadaw was well-organized against the Kuomintang troops in Shan State of Burma. But foreign troops here for a humanitarian intervention are not like the Kuomintang occupation. Humanitarian intervention troops come to save people,"* he said.

A Burmese military analyst based on the Sino-Burmese border, Aung Kyaw Zaw, said the Tatmadaw would probably not fight against an international force.

"Today the Tatmadaw is not like the Tatmadaw during the independence struggle," he said. *"Burmese military officers are very corrupt, and they all are looking out for their own business interests."*

If the Tatmadaw battles against multi-national forces, he said, it would be for a very brief period. *"This time is not 1885 or the 1940s. Burma is suffering under the military rules."*

Win Min, an analyst in civil-military relations in Chiang Mai, Thailand, said many Tatmadaw officers also want change in the country and would not oppose foreign forces.

Talk of intervention and the possible consequences is a hot topic among Burmese bloggers domestically and abroad. Some bloggers have posted public notices warning that if there is an intervention by Western powers local people should not go near international aircraft, boats, tanks or troops.

P.S.

From Irrawaddy News magazine.

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