

Don't Depoliticize Burma's Cry for Help

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WHEN Cyclone Nargis struck Burma's Irrawaddy delta—a heavily populated and largely agricultural area that feeds much of this impoverished country—it was immediately obvious that a massive response would be required to avert a major humanitarian crisis.

But a month later, and after some of the most high-powered intercession from regional and world leaders that has ever been seen in the aftermath of a natural disaster, Burma's military leaders continued to insist they have the situation under control.

For the regime, the crisis passed almost as soon as it happened: The dead were already dead, and the dying might as well be.

Time to move on to more important things—like ratifying a constitution designed to make the generals as politically secure from the threat of genuine democracy as they were from Cyclone Nargis in their fortress-like capital of Naypyidaw.

The regime's insistence on going through with the constitutional referendum on May 10, at a time when all of its energies should have been devoted to saving lives, mystified foreign observers. Surely, they thought, the regime could set politics aside for a week to deal with a disaster that had devastated the lives of a large swathe of the country's population.

Two weeks later, when United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon was in Naypyidaw to plead for international access to the cyclone-ravaged delta, he was still in "no politics" mode: *"Issues of assistance and aid in Myanmar [Burma] should not be politicized,"* he said before his first meeting with the regime's leader, Snr-Gen Than Shwe. *"Our focus now is on saving lives."*

What Ban Ki-moon and other world leaders failed to realize is that for the generals who rule Burma, politics always comes first. Where the world saw a humanitarian issue, the junta saw a political opportunity. And politics in military-ruled Burma must be understood in the crudest possible terms—as a ruthless pursuit of power and privilege.

Alas, despite the regime's expectation that the world's eagerness to deliver aid to the delta might translate into a major payoff, the international response to Cyclone Nargis had little to offer the generals except prestige. Than Shwe had the honor of meeting the UN chief in person (after weeks of refusing to speak with him by phone), and was invited to host a gathering of international donors eager to pledge millions of dollars to the relief mission. But that wasn't enough: Than Shwe wanted billions, no strings attached.

Unsurprisingly, Than Shwe's promise to Ban Ki-moon that he would grant foreign aid workers unhindered access to the delta did not result in the sort of large-scale relief effort that the donors had in mind. When the donors offered just \$150 million (far short of the \$11 billion the regime said it needed) it was not just an insult to the generals' dignity—it was a guarantee that thousands more cyclone survivors would die waiting for aid.

Of course, the regime's concessions to the international community were more than just part of a cash grab. With French, British and American naval vessels waiting just off Burma's coast for a

green light to begin bringing aid supplies directly to those most in need, the generals saw a menace more ominous than any cyclone.

"It would only take half an hour for the French boats and French helicopters to reach the disaster area," said French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner. For a paranoid, xenophobic regime, this promise of almost immediate assistance sounded more like a threat than an offer of help.

With Kouchner and others invoking the UN's principle of *"responsibility to protect"* (or "R2P") as a possible way of ending the standoff over access to the delta, the generals probably realized that they were better off relaxing their resistance to foreign aid workers, lest they risk inviting a more aggressive international response.

Unfortunately for the people of the Irrawaddy delta, R2P is a new and as yet untried idea, one that challenges traditional notions of sovereignty. It also imposes an unwelcome burden on governments that prefer not to regard humanitarian intervention as a "responsibility." As such, it is unlikely to be put into practice anytime soon.

In the meantime, the Burmese regime will continue to "cooperate" with the international community on its own terms, using friendly foreign governments, such as those of fellow members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), as intermediaries. Despite its longstanding failure to exert any positive influence on the regime, Asean has been entrusted with coordinating international relief efforts through an ad hoc "Asean Emergency Rapid Assessment Team," which had still not gone into the delta more than a month after the cyclone.

It is a sad fact that the international community, in its efforts to depoliticize the humanitarian crisis still unfolding in Burma, may end up ensuring the ruling regime's political survival while doing little or nothing to save lives.

It is time for the world to admit that politics is a matter of life and death in Burma. Otherwise, every attempt to deal with the regime effectively will end up dead in the water, like those who perished in Cyclone Nargis.

P.S.

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