

Six Months Later, Burma Still Suffers

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The victims of Cyclone Nargis continued to be whipsawed by a corrupt and uncaring government.

Six months after the devastating Cyclone Nargis smashed into Burma, more than a million people are still living in misery, wondering when things may return to normal. They are likely to be disappointed, particularly by a government that continues to skim off aid relief funds and to beggar its citizens by demanding repayment of loans for reconstruction instead of issuing grants.

There are still remote areas along the coastline where villages only receive intermittent food assistance, according to Burmese community workers in the area. Thousands of people are still living in makeshift shelters and there are growing concerns about fresh water throughout the cyclone-affected Irrawaddy Delta to the west of Burma's main commercial city, Rangoon.

Even worse, international human rights groups have reported an increase in forced labor, forced relocations and extensive land confiscation by the country's military authorities.

"Forced evictions have been the State, Peace and Development Council's key contribution to the relief, reconstruction, and rehabilitation effort throughout the last six months," Benjamin Zawacki, Amnesty International's Burma researcher, told Asia Sentinel. *"Amnesty raised these concerns in the immediate aftermath of the cyclone, and since then the SPDC's reconstruction plans have involved significant numbers of forced evictions and the relocation of many villagers,"* he added.

Nearly 100 community workers who tried to help with the disaster relief efforts languish in jail, including Zargana, a renowned comedian and outspoken critic of the regime.

Many children have returned to school, farmers are anxiously waiting to see how their harvest fare and more and more houses are being built every week, according to aid workers. But there is no escape from the fact that it will take years for the delta to return to anything like its former condition.

"All the severely affected townships have been reached," Bishow Parajuli, the head of the UN's Humanitarian Mission in Burma, said in an interview. *"However, there are still areas where more assistance is needed."*

The United Nations World Food Program estimates that it will have to continue to provide food assistance to nearly a million people well into next year, according to Chris Kaye, who is in charge of its operations in Burma. *"We are very confident that we are reaching all those presently in need of food assistance on a regular basis."*

But the situation varies from place to place throughout the area left devastated, according to Ashley Clements, the head of the international Non-Government Organization, World Vision, in Burma. *"We're at a turning point now - and attention has to be paid to the longer-term, especially providing safe havens for children and secure livelihoods for the people who were left with nothing by the*

cyclone," he said.

In the past few weeks, one in three Burmese villagers, interviewed by international aid researchers recently in some of the worst cyclone-affected areas, said they had been forced to reduce the number of meals they ate in a day in the past month because of lack of food. Up to 30 percent of children aged between 5 and 11 are not enrolled in school, while more than half of the children aged 12 to 17 were not attending school, according to their reports.

The most critical issue at present is the approaching rice harvest. While the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation confidently predicts a good, if not bumper harvest, the farmers are far less sanguine. *"We will have to wait for the next planting season,"* moaned an elderly villager in one of the cyclone-affected areas. *"We don't expect much from this one,"* he added.

Burmese community groups working in the Delta believe that over the whole Irrawaddy area — the rice bowl of Burma and once the rice bowl of Asia — will produce less than 60 percent of its usual output. And the yield will be significantly affected by the hastily prepared fields, many still not properly drained of saltwater.

For many villagers shelter and clean water remains a persistent worry. *"An acute shortage of drinking water is the biggest concern,"* a Burmese activist emailed after recently visiting his home in the Delta. Less than 40 percent of the ponds used by villagers to collect rain water for drinking, have cleansed of salt water, according to a Burmese community group working in the area. In three key cyclone-affected areas, fewer than two-thirds of people interviewed by a local aid organisation reported they had access to safe, clean drinking water.

Maybe as many as a million people are still living in makeshift or temporary shelter, Burmese aid workers say. International aid workers, including UN people, operating in Burma were unable to estimate how many victims are still in need of permanent accommodation.

"What is true is that every week, more and more people are able to leave their temporary shelter and move into newly built accommodation," reflected Bridget Gardner, the head of the International Federation of Red Crosses and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) in Rangoon.

"Step by step, people are rebuilding their homes, supported by the authorities, the UN and various other actors on the ground," said the UN Resident Coordinator, Bishow Parajuli. *"In the Laputta and Bogale areas alone, the UN still needs support to build shelters for up to 15,000 vulnerable people,"* he added.

But some scars may never heal. The psychological trauma suffered by adults and children has left an indelible mark on those who survived the cyclone. *"Farmers are reporting that their buffalo were traumatised and are still suffering six months later,"* said Ashley Clements. *"So you can only imagine the impact the ordeal is having in the children in particular,"* he said. According to the World Vision survey, more than 70 percent of children they have interviewed are afraid of wind and rain following last May's disaster.

"The relief stage is nearly over and long-term reconstruction about to start," Bridget Gardner said. *"There have been successes, weaknesses and lessons learnt for the future,"* she insisted.

But while the international aid workers are happy to support the Burmese government's view that things are moving in the right direction, and all that is needed is more financial support for the reconstruction effort, the reality is far less rosy. Already the international community has overpaid because of the Burmese government's insistence on maintaining its artificially fixed exchange rate.

"I estimate the UN lost at least \$5 million due to the initial enforcement of the Foreign Exchange Certificates – pocketed by the junta through the government-owned Myanmar Foreign Trade Bank," Sean Turnell, an expert on Burma's economy and financial system at Macquarie University in Australia.

What is worse is that the UN's solution – paying local contractors in foreign currency – will lead to far more misappropriation, overcharging and sheer corruption, Turnell said. The military government and its cronies will continue to skim off millions of dollars instead of it going to benefit the poor victims of the cyclone. It will also help shore up the government's budget and its foreign reserves.

International analysts believe that the aid effort is only going to worsen the long-term situation for the people of Burma. Indebtedness, already a serious problem before the cyclone hit, is soaring. Most rural and many urban households were bearing huge debt burdens before Cyclone Nargis. According to UN surveys, nearly one in every two households was indebted prior to the cyclone: 32 percent in urban areas and 55 percent in the countryside. This has worsened dramatically since the cyclone as much of the aid, especially to farmers – seeds, fertilisers, ploughs and draft animals — has been channelled through government agencies in the form of loans rather than grants.

In three of the worst-affected areas in the Irrawaddy Delta, nearly 40 percent of the local households had sold off some of their assets, and more than 40 percent had borrowed food or money for food within the past month.

Increasing indebtedness will be followed with more land confiscation, according to analysts familiar with the military regime's way of doing things. *"As few villagers can prove clear title to their land in the Delta, many returnees have already been forced to give up their plots to make way for agribusinesses and other interests,"* said Benjamin Zawacki.

"The government has also told people that they will forfeit their land if they do not make it produce, but then did not provide the necessary tools or equipment for them to do so. This cruel catch-22 scenario has resulted in forced evictions and extensive confiscation of land under the guise of 'the common good'.

This is going to lead to increased poverty, especially in the rural areas, as farmers will find it impossible to repay their debts. So six months on millions of villagers face a harrowing future with little prospect of things getting better any time soon. While the UN and international aid agencies talk about the increase in humanitarian space, the reality is that the military government's obsession with control will inevitably doom the reconstruction efforts and the Burmese people find themselves even worse off than ever.

"Although the effectiveness of the humanitarian effort — numbers of people reached, sums of money given, and so on – needs to be calculated, the human rights concerns have been largely ignored by international aid agencies," according to Amnesty's Benjamin Zawacki.

"While this may have been understandable during the immediate relief phase, it is totally unacceptable now. The UN and others' failure to acknowledge and address these concerns will only make Myanmar's recovery less sustainable in the long run," he warned.

P.S.

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