

Life after Nargis June 2009

Wednesday 3 June 2009, by [ZEITLYN Joseph](#) (Date first published: June 2009).

As the monsoon approaches a year after Burma's cyclone catastrophe, the victims are still without support. Now, more suffering looms.

It has now been a bit over a year since Burma's worst natural disaster on record, Cyclone Nargis, struck the Irrawaddy delta. Yet since that day, 2 May, the repercussions of the cyclone have gone far beyond the meteorological and disaster-related. Indeed, the subsequent year has seen the emergence of debates that go to the core of the lives of all Burmese – and to the heart of governance and society in the country.

Nargis is said to have taken the lives of at least 148,000 people. As of early May 2009, the area is still short of 500,000 homes, 200,000 people are without safe drinking water, and half of the Irrawaddy fishing fleet is said to remain sunk. Aung, a 25-year-old thatcher from Lubutta township in Ayerwaddy division, lost some 30 relatives during the cyclone, along with his home and livelihood. Yet the only aid he and his wife have received over the past year has been two cups of rice, around ten days after the storm hit.

Aung's is only one story among thousands of similar ones. The first month after Nargis hit was a controversial time, as the junta outrageously blocked foreign-aid workers (and foreign militaries) from offering assistance. According to many, the generals feared a Western sea-borne invasion. "They are scared of something like Iraq. Or Rambo!" suggests Mahn Mahn, chairman of an exile Burmese NGO, the Emergency Assistance Team (EAT), based in Mae Sot, Thailand. The regime finally did relent, however, and, after reassurance from neighbouring countries, a number of agencies were allowed in to work. The junta, however, remained thoroughly in the driver's seat, deciding where and when assistance would be delivered.

Aung left his home in the delta in August 2008, and now tries to survive in Mae Sot. He and his wife went through at least eight checkpoints before they reached the frontier. At each their documents were checked and, when it emerged that they were from the cyclone-affected area, they were detained. Their only way to progress was to pay hefty bribes to the soldiers, who were apparently under specific orders not to allow people from the region to leave – evidently to prevent news from the cyclone-ravaged delta from filtering out.

In conversation, Aung's frustrations continue to bubble to the surface. Painfully aware of the influx of foreign aid, he saw rice being hoarded by his village head man, and saw the sacks leaving before any distribution had been done. He speaks of money being allocated for the construction of houses, but only a fraction was received by the affected. Aung also says that in the days after the storm, he was forced by Burmese military personnel to work for free.

Military imprecision

Cynicism surrounds the response from many quarters to Nargis due to deep suspicions about the military junta and its scant humanitarian faculties. While foreign aid was forthcoming, many were questioning why the international community should foot the bill. One such sceptic has been Sean

Turnell of Burma Economic Watch (BEW), a Sydney-based watchdog. Why, he asks, should Burma's substantial foreign reserves – an estimated USD 3-4 billion – be “exempted from being deployed in ways that could best serve the Burmese people?”

Indeed, cyclone or no, there is a clear crisis of funding priorities among the ruling generals. It almost seems as though Burma is a country where people are expected to die of preventable deaths, with the government spending an average of USD 0.70 per person every year on health care – certainly insufficient to mitigate the aftermath of a Category 4 cyclone. Yet while Burma spends the second lowest amount per GDP on health care of any country, its military is allotted some 40 percent of Burmese finances. The country has a healthy trade surplus as a result of bountiful geography and geology; but according to BEW, this is being stashed away as a nest egg for the junta members and their families. According to Elaine Pearson of Human Rights Watch, “The military rulers are notorious for stuffing their pockets instead of devoting government resources to the welfare of its people. Donors should insist that the Burmese government use some of its own resources to help finance cyclone reconstruction efforts.” As yet, that has not happened. As a consequence, with the monsoon fast approaching, fears are growing. Tens of thousands lack adequate shelter, and even more are at risk of waterborne diseases.

According to Transparency International's most recent analysis, Burma is second only to Somalia – a country that has lacked a functioning government for more than a decade and a half – as the most corrupt country in the world. The Burmese junta rakes in around USD 150 million a month from gas exports alone, exporting the vast majority of the country's natural wealth and agricultural bounty while NGOs and humanitarian workers are left to pick up the pieces after catastrophes such as Nargis. Groups such as EAT and others have also suggested that, several days before the cyclone hit, the Indian government warned the Burmese junta about the impending storm. The junta ignored the warning, engaging in no preparation whatsoever. Since then, however, overt state control has been a main theme of the response from the junta. BEW, among others, has underlined the centrality of the top-down nature of Nargis aid distribution, with everything going solely through the junta.

It is interesting to note another example of incompetence by a military government following a natural disaster. Cyclone Bhola, which hit then-East Pakistan in 1970, took between 300,000 and 500,000 lives in what was at that time a military-ruled country. The Pakistani government's inept response to the deadly cyclone triggered outrage that is seen to have added fuel to the War of Liberation the following year. Almost exactly 20 years later, one of the strongest cyclones ever recorded – far more powerful than Nargis – took well under half that number when it smashed into Chittagong in April 1991. The difference between 1970 East Pakistan and 1991 Bangladesh was that the civilian government immediately allowed in international assistance. The transparent and accountable relief effort is credited with saving as many as 200,000 lives.

Cyclone and constitution

Similar to what often takes place following disasters, the response from individuals in the aftermath of Nargis was touching, as many joined the relief efforts. But unlike elsewhere, their goodwill was often matched by arrest and imprisonment. Min Thein Tun, for instance, was arrested and recently sentenced to 17 years in prison. His ‘crime’ was coordinating relief efforts with money he had collected from charitable donations while working as a migrant labourer in Malaysia. Likewise, the famous satirist Zarganar was jailed after giving interviews to foreign journalists and, likewise, for organising relief efforts. He is now serving a 45-year prison term, a veritable death sentence.

Ironically, Nargis hit Burma just a week before the junta was due to take a first step on its ‘road map’ to democracy. Despite widespread calls to halt the process temporarily, the pre-planned

'referendum' for a new constitution resolutely went forward, regardless of the fact that millions had just been dramatically affected. In the confusion that followed the storm, Aung for one recalls that he had little news about – and gave little thought to – the referendum. After a week or so, however, he was told by some fire-fighters that the "village head had done a head count, compiling a list of people who had survived. This list was then submitted to the local authorities, who registered all of the names as 'yes' votes." The constitution had been written by a select group of hand-picked cronies of the junta. "The cynicism with which the regime held the referendum and manipulated the results was on a par with the cynicism and coercion by which the draft was prepared," says the well-known constitutional-law scholar Yash Ghai. Needless to say, the constitution draft passed with a mandate of over 90 percent of the vote.

Today, Mahn Mahn compares Burma's predicament to an illness. "You can't just give someone an aspirin and it goes away," he says. "You need to cure the root cause of the illness." In this metaphor, that root cause is clearly the junta-dominated political landscape, while the aspirin is the foreign-aid monies that keep getting blindly thrown at a deeply corrupt military government. Cyclone Nargis has again exposed the junta's methods of survival to the world; and as the international community tries to help pick up the pieces, it becomes increasingly clear that the absence of pluralism has proven uniquely capable of precipitating tragedy.

A year after Burma's worst natural disaster, it has only become more obvious that wounds cannot be stitched with guns, and that the junta is simply incapable of any form of accountable, people-oriented governance. Yet as the debate focuses on their culpability in the post-Nargis reconstruction, the ever-dogmatic Burmese generals continue to embed themselves in the stained sands of this bountiful delta.

P.S.

From Himal Southasia.

http://www.himalmag.com/Life-after-Nargis_nw2941.html