

### **Cyclone Nargis devastates Burma Regime turns natural disaster into man-made catastrophe**

On 2 May, Cyclone Nargis hit southwestern Burma with winds at speeds of 190km an hour and a 3 metre high tidal surge, devastating the low-lying Irrawaddy Delta region. While we will probably never know how many people were killed, at least 130,000 are feared dead or missing and more than one million people are believed to be homeless.

The regime failed to warn people that the cyclone was coming, leaving people completely unprepared when the cyclone hit. In the aftermath, the regime not only failed to mobilise their own forces to help victims, they blocked offers of assistance from the international community. Despite the urgent need for aid, the regime obstructed the work of humanitarian agencies, set up army checkpoints, refused to issue visas to aid workers, prevented aid from reaching survivors, and attempted to profit from aid deliveries. There were reports that donated food and shelter items were instead being sold.

Reports also emerged that in the aftermath of the cyclone 36 prisoners were killed and around 70 injured when soldiers and riot police opened fire on prisoners in Rangoon's Insein Prison. During the cyclone, the prison was damaged and many of the zinc roofs torn off. As a result of the destruction, prisoners who were trapped in their cells broke out into the yard to avoid being crushed. In the ensuing panic, soldiers and riot police were called in. They opened fire on the prisoners, killing 36 prisoners instantly and injuring 70 others. One source reported that one of the victims was a political prisoner and NLD member.

In response to the international outcry over its response to the crisis, the regime began to allow limited aid in. As the first shipments of aid arrived in Rangoon, the regime began seizing the shipments. On 9 May, the World Food Programme temporarily suspended flights after the SPDC seized two planeloads of food.

The regime also set up show camps to try and convince the outside world they were taking action. Cyclone survivors were brought to the camps in advance of visits by international visitors such as European Union officials or the UN Secretary General. As soon as the visitors left, survivors were forced back to their devastated villages.

A month after the devastating cyclone in Burma, an estimated 2.4 million people remained in urgent need of aid



because the regime denied aid workers free access to operate in the areas most severely affected by the cyclone. Even those who were getting aid were not receiving the full package of aid. Monks, NLD members and ordinary people intervened to deliver aid to cyclone survivors in Rangoon and the delta area. Many people in the delta region are ethnic Karen and this may also have been a factor in the regime blocking aid to many of the rural areas of the delta.

On 19 May the SPDC and ASEAN foreign ministers held a conference to discuss aid delivery. While they agreed a limited UN coordinated aid deal with Burma, it didn't include allowing in foreign experts from the west who have experience in dealing with crises on this scale, or foreign military with the capacity and logistical experience to deliver aid in the hard to reach delta region. The regime called for an astonishing \$11.7bn for reconstruction.

In mid-May, the regime awarded lucrative reconstruction contracts to close business allies, cronies who help keep the regime afloat. These business cronies were to help with reconstruction in their area, paid for, they hoped, by international aid. The generals could expect bribes and other benefits in exchange for these lucrative contacts. They included notorious tycoons such as Tay Za, a close friend of Than Shwe, and Steven Law, owner of Burma's biggest conglomerate, Asia World. The role of regime business cronies has raised concerns, with fears that the regime is using the cyclone as an opportunity to break down the international community's restrictions on dealing with them and their cronies. The Department for International Development (DFID) and Save the Children, for example, have been working with Serge Pun, a regime crony who is involved in a biofuel project that is impoverishing Burmese farmers, to channel humanitarian aid to cyclone victims.

As the regime continued to block international aid efforts, the National League for Democracy, Burma's monks and others in the democracy movement called for aid to be delivered with or without permission from the regime. France proposed that the Security Council (UNSC) invoke the responsibility to protect principle to authorise aid shipments to Burma. In 2006 the Security Council passed Resolution 1674, which stated that the Council could intervene in circumstances similar to that in Burma. The European Parliament passed a strongly worded resolution on 22 May calling for the European Union to press for Burma to be taken to the International Criminal Court for 'crimes against humanity' for blocking aid. The Resolution also stated that sovereignty cannot be allowed to override human rights. It called on the UK, which

held the presidency of the United Nations Security Council in May, to ensure Burma is put on the agenda of the Council, and that the Council invoke the principle of responsibility to protect. However, even discussion of Burma at the UNSC was blocked by China, Russia, Vietnam and South Africa.

In the absence of any action by the Security Council, there were calls for those governments with the capacity to do so to deliver aid unilaterally. France, the USA and UK all sent ships to the region with the capacity to deliver large scale emergency and medical assistance and save thousands of lives. Despite repeated efforts to secure agreement from the regime to deliver the aid and equipment, all requests were rejected.

International diplomatic efforts made little progress. The European Union Commissioner for Humanitarian Affairs, Lois Michel left Burma empty-handed after failing to convince Burma's military rulers to make any concessions during a three day visit. Thai Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej concluded his visit to Burma satisfied with the regime's response to the crisis, saying he was "impressed with their management."

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon eventually visited Burma, three weeks after the cyclone. Although Ban Ki-Moon claimed a breakthrough during his visit and that he had secured agreement from Burma's generals to give free access to aid workers, it soon became clear that the regime was not keeping its word and restrictions continued.

As always when under pressure, the Burmese regime has made small concessions designed to head off international action, but not enough to solve the problem. Unfortunately, it seems the international community has fallen for the same old delaying tactics again.

### **Regime's Referendum 'approved by 92.4% of vote'**

Despite national and international calls to delay voting, the regime went ahead with its constitutional referendum on 10 May. There was widespread dismay that the junta conducted an election in the midst of the devastation caused by Cyclone Nargis. Voting in the most severely affected delta region was postponed by two weeks. While tens of thousands of cyclone survivors were being denied aid by the regime and living without food, shelter or medicine, the regime was busy building polling stations and conducting a propaganda campaign.

On 15 May, the regime announced that the constitution had been approved by 92.4% of

voters and with a 99% turnout. The constitutional referendum, already widely dismissed as a sham process, was conducted amid accusations of massive cheating at the polling stations and reports of a very low turnout.

The National League for Democracy (NLD) condemned the result, saying the regime had manipulated the referendum and fraudulently secured “Yes” votes. NLD spokesperson U Nyan Win said voters had been forced into voting in favour of the constitution. He said there had been reports from all over the country that polling stations were manned and guarded by members of the government-backed militia the Union Solidarity and Development Association. “People who went to the polling stations were asked to vote “Yes”, and most of the time voters were personally guided by the people waiting there to tick their ballots,” he said.

Many voters in several Rangoon townships, Mandalay, Pegu, Sagaing and Magwe divisions told The Irrawaddy magazine that referendum officials had handed out ballot papers already filled in with a tick, indicating approval of the draft constitution.

A joint statement from the All Burma Monks Alliance, the 88 Generation Students and the All Burma Federation of Student Unions said, “Instead of putting all resources toward saving the lives of the victims, the military is concentrating on legalizing military rule in Burma forever through a sham constitutional referendum.” The NLD also condemned the regime’s decision to go ahead with the constitutional referendum on May 24 in the areas devastated by Cyclone Nargis, saying the regime should concentrate on humanitarian work among the survivors.

### **Aung San Suu Kyi's detention extended**



On 27 May Aung San Suu Kyi's detention was extended again. No formal announcement was made, but it was reported that the detention is for at least another six months. 18 members of the NLD

were arrested and detained after they marched toward Aung San Suu Kyi's home to call for her release.

The regime is once again breaking its own laws by extending her detention for a total of more than five years. The State Protection Law 1975, under which she is held, only allows the regime to detain her for a maximum of five years.

She has now spent over 12 of the last 18 years under house arrest. Her current period of house arrest began in 2003 following an attempt by the regime to assassinate her using their political militia, the Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA). The incident has become known as the Depayin Massacre, as at least one hundred of her supporters were beaten to death by pro-regime thugs.

Even though UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon was in Burma in the run-up to Aung San Suu Kyi's detention expiring, he did not call on Burma's generals to release her. In fact, he didn't even mention her name.

### **Prisoners tortured in Insein prison**

The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) also reported that during May six political prisoners in Insein prison were beaten, shackled and held in solitary confinement. Three of the six prisoners were members of the National League for Democracy – Thingangyun NLD chairman U Tin Mya, U Myint Htun from Shwepyithar and Ko Thant Zaw – while the others were Karen National Union members. “They were hooded and severely beaten before being pushed into the isolation cells where they were held in shackles,” the AAPP said. “We have heard that their health situation is concerning. They have to use unclean water for drinking and other purposes. They haven't been given the necessary treatment.”

### **Burma Protests at Total Oil AGM**



Burma campaigners questioned TOTAL's board of directors over the French company's moral and financial support to the Burmese regime through its gas projects in Burma at the company's Annual

General Meeting in Paris on 16 May. Total Oil is the lead partner in the Yadana gas field in Burma, which has earned billions of dollars for Burma's brutal dictators.

Activists from Info Birmanie, The Burma Campaign UK, and the Fédération Internationale des Droits de l'Homme (FIDH) questioned Total over how much Total's gas project earns the Burmese Junta. Last October the Chief Executive of Total, Christophe de Margerie, stated that the Yadana gas project earned the regime 350 million euros in 2006. However, during the AGM Total claimed it was only 125 million euros. When the board was asked to clarify their financial support to the junta, TOTAL's chairman Thierry Desmarest stated "I do not see what interest the total amount represents to you".

The NGOs also questioned TOTAL on how it was dealing with the human rights abuses committed by the Burmese army, which the company employs to protect its gas project. According to a report published last month by EarthRights International (ERI), the Burmese Army continues to commit numerous human rights violations against the region's populations.

### **Chevron questioned in US Congress over Burma investment**

Chevron's investment in Burma came under the scrutiny of US Congress in May when a top executive of the company was forced to defend its operations in Burma. Democratic Senator Charles Schumer questioned Chevron's vice-chairman Peter Robertson during a congressional hearing on Chevron's stake in the Yadana gas project.

"As we all watched the woefully inadequate response to the disaster by the repressive and violent military junta that runs the country, many have been shocked to learn that Chevron continues to operate in Burma," Schumer said. "American taxpayers should not have to subsidize Chevron's presence in Myanmar, which only helps to prop up a brutal, despotic regime. It's time to close the loophole that allows Chevron to operate free of sanctions in Myanmar," he said.

Congress has proposed legislation to end the millions of dollars in US tax breaks enjoyed by Chevron on revenues earned from Burma. The legislation would also mean that Chevron would be prevented from making any payments to the junta from its joint venture project.

### **Attacks on Ethnic Karen continue despite Cyclone**

Despite the devastating cyclone that struck Burma,

the regime continued its attacks against ethnic Karen villagers in Eastern Burma.

On May 10th, just a week after Cyclone Nargis struck, the Burmese Army attacked Mu Li Khi village burning 11 houses and looting food and supplies. The attack also took place on the day the regime held a referendum on a new constitution that enshrines military rule, but which the generals claim is part of a roadmap to democracy.



"This shows the true nature of the regime," said Zoya Phan, International Coordinator of Burma Campaign UK. "They continue their campaign of ethnic cleansing while at the same time blocking aid to those in the delta. For years they have been blocking aid into eastern Burma, but Ban Ki-Moon and governments have been silent about this. If aid restrictions had been challenged before, perhaps we would not have the problems we do now about getting aid into the delta. The principle of aid being delivered on the basis of need must be adhered to. The regime's restrictions on aid are unacceptable, wherever they are applied."

### **Burma's other humanitarian crisis**

The Thai-Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), which provides aid to refugees on the Thai Burma border, has issued an urgent appeal for more support. Out of the media spotlight, assistance programmes for refugees from Burma's humanitarian crisis in Eastern Burma are in danger of collapsing unless additional funding can be found.

Armed conflict in Eastern Burma has displaced over a million people during the past decade with over 140,000 people currently living in refugee camps in Thailand. Soaring global rice and oil prices during the past few months have left the aid programme US\$6.8 million under-funded for 2008. Unless additional funds are urgently secured, rations will have to be reduced to half the international minimum standard of 2,100 kcals per person per day from August.

"This would have a very destabilising effect on the camps and within a couple of months we could

expect to see significant increases in malnutrition," explained Jack Dunford from the TBBC. "The months ahead are fraught with uncertainty for Burma after Cyclone Nargis. Millions of Burmese have been affected. Huge numbers of people have been displaced. During these uncertain times, it is important to maintain stability in the border areas. Allowing assistance programmes to collapse at this point would only add to the human suffering," he said.

### **US extends financial sanctions**

On 1 May, the US extended its financial sanctions against Burma. Announcing the new sanctions, President Bush said "The regime has not acted on any of the measures called for by the United Nations Security Council and does not cooperate with Special Advisor Ibrahim Gambari." The new measures block all property and interests in property of designated individuals and regime officials.

### **Will Ferrel and Hollywood celebrities speak out for Burma**



Comedian Will Ferrel launched a month-long campaign of videos, featuring over 100 other celebrities, to highlight Burma's struggle for freedom and democracy. The campaign is organised by US Campaign for Burma and you can watch the videos at: [www.uscampaignforburma.org](http://www.uscampaignforburma.org)

### **Canadian Prime Minister meets Burma's exiled Prime Minister**

Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper met Burma's Prime Minister in exile Dr. Sein Win on 7 May. Dr. Sein Win asked the Canadian Prime Minister to coordinate the international relief effort for the ongoing disaster in Burma with like-minded countries. The two leaders also discussed the food crisis that the Burmese refugees are facing along the Thai-Burma border and Dr. Win sought Canada's help to alleviate the looming crisis on the border.

During Dr Sein Win's visit, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Maxime Bernier, presented the Certificate of Honorary Citizenship for Aung San Suu Kyi to Dr Sein Win during a ceremony on Parliament Hill.

### **Padoh Saw Ba Thein Sein, KNU Chairman, dies**

Padoh Saw Ba Thein Sein, Chairman of the Karen National Union (KNU), died on 22 May 2008. The death of Padoh Saw Ba Thein Sein is a great loss not only for his family and the Karen people, but also for the whole movement of ethnic nationalities, democracy and all freedom loving people in Burma.

Saw Ba Thin Sein, 82, joined the KNU in 1949, from the very beginning of the Karen resistance movement. He was a member of the KNU Central Committee and was appointed Education Minister in 1963. He became General Secretary in 1984 and was elected as Chairman in 2000 KNU's congress. He is survived by his wife, three daughters and one son.

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