

THE STRAITS TIMES

Print Article

[>> Back to the article](#)

May 22, 2008

CYCLONE NARGIS AFTERMATH

Tugging on the world's conscience

By Hannah Ruth Chia

AFTER years of blissful ignorance, the world finally woke up to the situation in Myanmar last year, when its people, led by the country's monks, took to the streets to protest against the military junta that has ruled with an iron fist for more than 40 years.

The junta responded swiftly, and the rebellion was crushed. Even the monks, so revered in Myanmar society, were not spared. The world then forgot about Myanmar - until Cyclone Nargis struck with such force on May 3.

The catastrophe that has hit Myanmar and its aftermath were no different from any other such disasters. Countries pledged aid and made plans to send relief workers.

However, even with some 100,000 people dead and an estimated two million in desperate need of help, the country's ruling junta, led by 75-year-old Senior General Than Shwe, decided to reject visa applications for disaster experts and aid workers.

Flights bringing food and medical supplies were turned away because there were reporters and aid workers on board. Food cargo from the World Food Programme was impounded.

Aid workers who were in the country before the cyclone struck are working hard to distribute aid, but a lack of manpower and logistical problems mean that relief has reached only a quarter of those who need it.

Up until Monday, the junta was insisting that it wanted only cash and aid, not personnel. Visas are still pending for dozens of aid workers waiting in Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur. While more aid and aid workers are finally being allowed in, their numbers are not large enough to cope with a calamity of this scale.

In the meantime, the junta went ahead with a referendum for a new Constitution on May 10, although it did delay the vote in areas affected by the cyclone.

Military trucks, which could have been used to deliver aid, were instead seen driving through the streets urging people to vote in favour of the new Constitution.

The estimated half a million soldiers in the Myanmar military who were rapidly deployed during last year's protests are sparse on the ground. Instead, civilians and monks are helping with most of the humanitarian efforts.

Perhaps the junta, holed up in its remote capital of Naypyidaw, has not fully grasped the scale of the crisis.

The more likely explanation is that it is more concerned with cementing its power. Its rejection of foreign disaster experts and aid workers is merely a manifestation of its xenophobia.

Asean, of which Myanmar is a member, had, until recently, remained largely silent on the junta's rejection of

outside help. Individual governments expressed concern, and the Thai government was fashioned into an intermediary between the military junta and the international community.

Individual states such as Singapore and Thailand sent aid, which was accepted by the junta.

Although Myanmar allowed a team of disaster experts from Asean into the country to assess the damage last week, millions of lives remain at risk.

The last time Asean members were faced with a natural disaster of this scale was the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004. The governments of the affected countries, including Indonesia, readily admitted that they needed help and opened their doors to external aid.

Singapore called for a regional summit to discuss long-term infrastructure development in the devastated areas. The summit produced real results.

Even as more accounts of the abuse of international aid came out of Myanmar, Asean foreign ministers met in Singapore earlier this week to 'discuss the humanitarian situation in Myanmar and consider how best to assist Myanmar in its relief and recovery efforts'. Myanmar's Foreign Minister, Mr Nyan Win, was at the meeting.

Some progress was made, with Myanmar agreeing to allow international aid into the country through Asean. It was also announced that Asean medical teams would be allowed into the country immediately.

While this is a positive step, the responsibility to channel international aid into Myanmar falls upon just nine countries, some of which are not rich or developed enough for the enormous task.

The capacity of Asean to provide urgent medical aid and recovery in order to avoid a looming health catastrophe is questionable.

Additionally, the military junta in Myanmar would remain in control of the distribution of aid.

With some 2-1/2 million people still in urgent need of help, it remains to be seen if the aid will reach all of them.

The international community remains divided over how best to handle the crisis.

The United States and some members of the European Union - including the Britain, France, Germany and Denmark - have not ruled out 'humanitarian intervention'.

But this could exacerbate the situation and make life worse for those who accept the aid. It could also lead to some form of military crackdown or cause the junta to close the borders completely.

Asean remains opposed to forced delivery of aid, largely due to its principle of non-intervention in the affairs of its member states.

But if the situation in Myanmar does not improve despite Asean's efforts - and if Asean is seen to be unwilling to act more forcefully - it could find itself being undermined by extra-regional powers, should those powers decide to go ahead with forced intervention, regardless of the grouping's position on the matter.

The world should remember the international doctrine of the 'Responsibility to Protect', or R2P, which all member states of the United Nations reached consensus on in 2005.

One of the two basic principles of the R2P is: 'Where a population is suffering serious harm, as a result of internal war, insurgency, repression or state failure, and the state in question is unwilling or unable to halt or avert it, the principle of non-intervention yields to the international responsibility to protect.'

We must recognise that even as limited progress is being made, and the disaster moves away from the front pages of newspapers - where the Myanmar tragedy has already been displaced by the Chinese earthquake - more people are at risk from disease and starvation in Myanmar.

The situation is such that it may be more prudent to act now and ask the theoretical questions later.

The writer is a research analyst with the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University.
