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GLOBAL NEWS

Cyclone Aftermath May Help Member Charities Break Myanmar Stalemate

*Paul Lagasse
 May 2008*

As the death toll from Cyclone Nargis climbs above 22,000 dead with over 40,000 missing, Myanmar's secretive military government may be forced to allow wide-scale foreign aid into the country for the first time in decades. The devastating cyclone made landfall on May 2, savaging the marshy Irrawaddy delta with 105-135 mph winds and rains that caused flooding and landslides and trailing a 12-foot tidal wave that washed whole villages into the Bay of Bengal. Already battling chronic poverty and a crumbling public infrastructure, this disaster may prove to be one crisis too many for the notoriously isolated country to bear without outside help.



IRC

A medic examines a refugee at a camp in Thailand.

Prior to Cyclone Nargis, international protests and sanctions had not prevented Myanmar's rulers from cracking down on internal opposition. The most recent State Department assessment of worldwide human rights cited occurrences of "extrajudicial killings...disappearances, arbitrary and indefinite detentions, rape and torture."

Disregarding the results of a sweeping electoral defeat in 1990 by the opposition party of Aung San Suu Kyi—who later received a Nobel Peace Prize but who has been under house arrest almost continuously since 1989—the ruling junta has announced that it will hold a constitutional referendum in May 2008 and allow multiparty elections in 2010.

International observers have expressed skepticism, however, especially since Dr. Suu Kyi has been declared ineligible by a new law that arbitrarily bans candidates married to foreigners from holding office (her husband, British scholar Dr. Michael Aris, died nine years



ago).

Internally Displaced and Refugee Crisis

The military has been waging a civil war against ethnic Karen insurgents in eastern Myanmar for over 50 years—one of the world’s longest-running conflicts. The latest offensives have forced over 2,000 people to flee into the jungle. The army is also forcibly evicting tens of thousands from occupied areas and confiscating their land for development. The total number of internally displaced Karen is estimated at over 500,000.

In early April, news of the death of 57 refugees who were locked in a container truck as they were being smuggled out of Myanmar highlighted the country’s dire refugee situation. According to Global Impact member charity **International Rescue Committee**, between 2 and 3 million people have fled the country, most to Thailand—either to camps immediately across the border or to cities in search of menial labor, where they risk arrest and deportation.

Member Charities Lead International Aid

Prior to Cyclone Nargis, the “Saffron Revolution” of August and September 2007 galvanized international attention when thousands of Buddhist monks joined students and pro-democracy activists in demonstrations protesting rising fuel costs. Despite the outrage, it resulted in only a slight uptick in international aid because few charities and even fewer watchdog organizations were allowed inside the country. Many governments were and remain leery of supporting the country’s oppressive regime. The combination of tight internal controls and sweeping external sanctions has turned Myanmar into one of Asia’s poorest countries, which will make recovery from this latest natural disaster that much more difficult.

Member charity **U.S. Fund for UNICEF** believes that over 35 percent of children under five suffer from malnutrition, and in some places that number is nearer 50 percent. An estimated 20,000 adults die annually from HIV/AIDS. Families relocated to slums around Yangon (formerly Rangoon) and other large cities are at risk from poverty, crime, exploitation and disease. Poor sanitation and seasonal flooding contribute to high mortality rates made worse by chronic shortages of medicine and doctors.

Global Impact member charities have been active in the region for decades, helping to care for and resettle refugees. At-risk children and mothers receive medical care, food and water and counseling. Charities provide refugees with job retraining, education

Charities Working in and around Myanmar



IRC

A health examination center for refugees in Thailand.

Prior to the cyclone, international aid organizations were severely limited in working directly in Myanmar; nevertheless they have been overcoming tremendous obstacles to assist the people. Here is a sampling of Global Impact member charity programs providing aid to people inside and outside of Myanmar:

American Refugee Committee/Right to Play ARC Thailand has been assisting Karen refugees fleeing persecution in Myanmar since 1992, providing nutrition, disease prevention, sanitation, hygiene and HIV/AIDS education to over 30,000 refugees in the camps. Through its partnership with Right to Play, ARC provided sports, games and recreation opportunities for children living in the camps.

International Rescue Committee (IRC) IRC offered aid to the first wave of refugees from Myanmar in 1984 and has been doing so ever since. IRC provides comprehensive primary health care to refugees, installs and maintains water and sanitation services in refugee camps, builds and runs schools, trains local health care workers, provides funding and legal assistance and is active in monitoring and responding to gender-based violence. The IRC’s Bangkok office helps refugees apply for asylum in the United States.

and legal assistance to help them start new lives. Charities also lobby aggressively on behalf of refugees, internally displaced persons, imprisoned activists and others who struggle to survive from day to day.

Even so, it's a never-ending challenge for charities to help the people of Myanmar both inside and outside their beautiful but unhappy land. With your help, they can help more people overcome the combined tragedies of political oppression and natural disaster.

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United States.

U.S. Fund for UNICEF

UNICEF's Thailand-based program works to protect at-risk children and women by providing preventive health education to refugee children and young mothers, basic health services and access to clean water and sanitation facilities in refugee camps. Inside Myanmar, UNICEF works with a local non-governmental organization (NGO) to provide ceramic water purifiers to homes and schools to protect against waterborne diseases and contaminants that are common in surface water in rural Myanmar, especially during the rainy seasons.

World Relief

World Relief volunteers work with and befriend Karen refugees in the United States to help them adjust to their new lives. They meet refugees at the airport upon their arrival, host them and introduce them to their new local community, give them an introduction to American culture and language and help them fill out necessary paperwork for everything from driver's licenses to school enrollment.

World Vision

Since 2001, World Vision Myanmar has focused on the trafficking of women and children for labor and sexual exploitation, both inside and outside Myanmar, and provides educational materials to at-risk people, helps trafficked women and children return to and reintegrate into their communities, provides legal support and assistance to survivors and works to eradicate the root causes of and vulnerabilities to trafficking. World Vision Myanmar also runs urban centers that provide services and shelter to "street children" between the ages of 4 and 16 without homes or families, who are at risk from labor and sexual exploitation, illness and malnutrition and more.

Save the Children

Save the Children has worked in Myanmar since 1995. As one of the largest NGOs at work in Myanmar, the agency implements programs focused on early childhood care and development, child survival and child protection.

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