

Death toll hits 78,000 in Burma as pressure mounts for international intervention

By Deepal Jayasekera
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Two weeks have passed since Cyclone Nargis struck the Irrawaddy delta region of Burma. Yesterday, the state media sharply revised the official death toll upward to 78,000 dead and 55,917 missing. The number of injured has risen from 1,403 to 19,359. Previous estimates from the UN and International Red Cross put the number of dead at 100,000 or more.

Limited media reports from the stricken area continue to show scenes of devastation. Large numbers of survivors face a desperate situation without adequate food, drinking water, basic sanitary facilities and medicine. The UN estimates that between 1.6 million and 2.5 million survivors are in urgent need of relief supplies and only 500,000 people have some form of temporary shelter.

Aid agencies are reporting widespread cases of diarrhea, dysentery and skin infections among refugees crammed into monasteries, schools and other temporary shelter. However, World Health Organisation (WHO) official Maureen Birmingham told the media: “We don’t have an explosion of cholera.” While the danger of an epidemic certainly remains, the number of reported cases of the potentially deadly disease is no higher than usual for this time of year.

Tropical downpours yesterday compounded the misery and further hampered relief efforts. Much of the infrastructure in the low-lying delta was badly damaged or swept away by storm surges whipped up by the cyclone. Aid organisations have warned of widespread deaths from disease and starvation if greater supplies of aid as well as medical teams do not reach the survivors.

In the town of Laputta, tens of thousands of people from surrounding villages are crowded into 58 refugee camps. Julio Sosa Calo, head of mission in the town for the German relief group, Malteser International, told the media: “I’ve had long experience of emergencies and I’ve never seen anything like this. . . What we’re doing now is too little compared to the need.” One quarter of new patients in the local hospital have diarrhea, which can be fatal, particularly in children, if not treated properly.

The issue of aid has been deeply politicised, however,

amid a mounting international campaign to intervene directly in the country. The Burmese military is certainly guilty of callous indifference toward the plight of hundreds of thousands of cyclone victims. Its aid efforts have been limited, even given the obvious logistical problems. Like the 92.4 percent support for its bogus constitutional changes at the referendum last Saturday, the regime’s claims that the situation is in hand are simply not credible.

The junta’s overriding motive has been to ensure its political survival. The state media continues to feature footage of soldiers distributing relief supplies and senior officers handing aid to victims. The regime insists on full control over aid operations because it is deeply fearful at the potential for anger and frustration to erupt into widespread anti-government protests, as took place last September.

Reuters noted yesterday: “Two weeks after the storm, ordinary people in Myanmar were taking matters into their own hands, sending trucks into the delta with clothes, biscuits, dried noodles and rice provided by private companies and individuals.” Other reports indicate growing discontent among survivors over the lack of basic supplies and rumours that those in government-run camps have received limited food and been subject to forced labour.

At the same time, demands by the major powers that the junta open its doors to international aid workers and foreign militaries are driven by an agenda that has nothing to do with concern for the Burmese people. France, in particular, has been at the forefront of the campaign for a UN Security Council meeting to legitimise an international intervention—with or without the approval of the Burmese junta.

A heated exchange took place yesterday at the UN General Assembly between the French and Burmese ambassadors. After the Burmese envoy accused France of sending a warship to Burma, the French ambassador Jean-Maurice Ripert shot back that the junta’s refusal to accept aid “could lead to a true crime against humanity”. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner suggested last week that the UN Security Council should invoke its “responsibility to

protect” power to allow a unilateral aid intervention.

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown told a press conference on Thursday that the US and Britain have backed the push for an emergency UN Security Council meeting. “We will stop at nothing in trying to pressure the regime into doing what any regime should have done long ago,” he said. In the US, 41 congressmen have written to President Bush calling on him to consider a humanitarian “intervention” in Burma and to “immediately and urgently” consult with France, Britain, Germany and Denmark over possible action.

To date, no UN Security Council meeting has been called. China has opposed such a move, declaring it would politicise the disaster. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has, however, announced the convening of a meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations on May 19 and a conference of donor countries on May 24-25 to discuss the emergency.

Ban told the UN General Assembly yesterday that the situation had reached a critical point. “Unless more aid gets into the country quickly we face the risk of an outbreak of infectious diseases that could dramatically worsen today’s crisis. I want to emphasise that this is not the time for politics.” UN undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs, John Holmes, has been dispatched to Burma to speak directly to the junta and deliver a third appeal from Ban for greater cooperation.

However, the issue of international aid is intimately bound up with politics. The targetting of the Burmese junta over cyclone relief is a continuation of the ongoing effort of the US and its allies to undermine and replace the regime with one more sympathetic to Western interests. As well as opening up the country to foreign investment, the US is particularly concerned at Burma’s close ties with China, which Washington regards as a rising economic and strategic rival.

A comment in the British-based *Times* on Monday entitled “A test of the UN’s moral authority” highlighted the push for what would be effectively a military invasion of Burma. Referring to the French foreign minister, it concluded: “Britain, Australia and the US should go where he leads and plan to move in directly, if all else fails. Better that than impotently counting rice sacks in Thai warehouses. If the generals get the message that ‘no’ will not be taken for an answer, they may decide to join what they can’t beat. And if not? Imposing aid is a messy business. Dying for lack of it is messier by far.”

Facing concerted pressure, the Burmese junta has eased restrictions on international aid, including from the US. Four US military C-130 cargo planes landed in Rangoon on Friday on top of 13 previous flights. US State Department

spokesman Sean McCormack noted that two of the shipments had been handed directly to non-government organisations for distribution. He indicated that a further four or five flights were scheduled each day for Saturday and Sunday.

While acknowledging that the junta had allowed aid flights, Pentagon press secretary Geoff Morrell made clear that the US was demanding more direct involvement. “Our government has been working with other governments in the region to try to persuade the Burmese military, the leadership of that nation, to put their pride aside and let our troops come in with the aid that their people so desperately need,” he said.

Stars and Stripes reported on May 16 that the Pentagon was preparing “plans for large-scale relief operations to aid cyclone-stricken Myanmar”. One US official told the military newspaper there may be “unrest or even widespread riots” in the cyclone-hit areas of Burma. “I think what we’re going to start seeing is people will rise up,” he said.

Clearly, a debate is underway in ruling circles in the US and Europe over whether to exploit the cyclone catastrophe to justify a military intervention to effect regime change in Burma. It would not be the first time that a humanitarian disaster has been used for such purposes. If it were to take place, the outcome for the Burmese people will be no more positive than it has been for the populations of East Timor or the Balkans following the interventions led by Australia and NATO in 1999.

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