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BURMA - news round-up #33 MAY 2008

Inside Burma

Cyclone Nargis

The category 3 Cyclone Nargis struck Burma on 2 May 2008. The cyclone first hit the Irrawaddy Delta region, approximately 250km southwest of Rangoon at around 16:00 and then moved on to the city later the same night. The cyclone has caused widespread devastation in the Irrawaddy Delta region and the former capital and largest city in the country, Rangoon.

Of the 2.4 million affected by Cyclone Nargis, it is estimated that 1.4 million are located in the most severely affected townships of the delta region. The last official figures for dead and missing are from 16 May 2008. 77,738 are reported dead and 55,917 missing.

(Source: Cyclone Nargis UN OCHA Situation Reports particularly No 22 from 27 May 2008 <http://tinyurl.com/5crx8g>)

Despite the scale of the catastrophe and the lack of government capacity to adequately respond to the needs of the population, the Burmese military rejected and restricted international aid for almost the entire month. The military insisted it was able to cope with the crisis alone, saying it was "not ready" to receive foreign search and rescue teams and international media. On 19th May, 17 days after the cyclone hit, the military regime declared three days of official mourning for the cyclone victims. At the same time UN estimates were suggesting only 25% of the people in desperate need were able to access aid due the restrictions placed by the Burmese military. The military has announced that it has moved from the relief phase to the rehabilitation phase. Reports are coming out from survivors in the Irrawaddy delta saying that the junta is forcing some victims return to their flooded, collapsed homes and forcing others to work on reconstruction projects. Even some Burmese nationals who are working as volunteers donating food and supplies to survivors are being stopped.

(Date: 9 May 2008. Source: Agence France Presse <http://tinyurl.com/57o7n2> & 20 May 2008 <http://tinyurl.com/6edjuz> .
Date: 28 May 2008. Source: Associated Press <http://tinyurl.com/6oj5vd>)

Referendum/ Constitution

Despite the humanitarian tragedy caused by Cyclone Nargis, the military regime went ahead with its referendum on a constitution on 10 May in all areas not affected by the cyclone and on 24 May in townships around the Irrawaddy Delta region. State Media announced on 29 May that the new constitution has been "confirmed and enacted" following the referendum.

The announcement said 92.48 percent of voters had endorsed the charter, and that voter turnout was 91.12 percent. The statement also alleged that "27,288,827 (of) eligible voters around the country cast 'Yes' votes." The constitution has been widely condemned as a sham constitution designed by the military to entrench its rule over the country. The referendum itself, which lacked credibility has been widely criticized by the international community. The day before the referendum took place (9 May), 'Seven Alliances', a coalition of organizations representing Burmese ethnic and democracy groups in exile, called on the military regime "to suspend the referendum nationwide and allow all international aid into the country immediately."

(<http://euro-burma.eu/doc/7AlliancesPR-9May.pdf> & 29 May 2008. Source: Agence France-Presse <http://tinyurl.com/5br6xj>)

On 27 May, the military regime extended the house arrest of the pro- democracy leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

UN-ASEAN backed Cyclone Nargis Donor Conference

The UN and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) co-sponsored on Sunday 25 May an international pledging conference held in Rangoon. (Date: 27 May 2008. Source: UN News Centre <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=26801&Cr=myanmar&Cr1=>)

The conference was attended by representatives from around 44 countries, UN agencies, ministers from ASEAN, the Red Cross movement and at least five non-governmental organizations. The United Nations said that the conference raised 60 per cent of the funding appealed for, with a total of \$233 million either having been contributed or pledged to the overall relief effort following Cyclone Nargis. Some countries are said to be awaiting more information on access and accountability before committing further resources.

ASEAN has set up a "core working group" of nine members, with three from ASEAN, three from the UN and three from the Myanmar government, This working group will take the lead in coordinating humanitarian aid from now on. (Date: 25 May 2008. Source: Deutsche Presse Agentur <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/SKAR-7EYGVVA?OpenDocument>)

Prior to the conference, at an emergency ASEAN meeting in Singapore on 19th May, Burma had agreed to allow medical teams from ASEAN nations into the country. ASEAN announced it would establish a coordinated response and sent an "Emergency Rapid Assessment Team" to Burma (Date: 19 May 2008. Source: ASEAN Secretariat <http://www.aseansec.org/21556.htm>).

Returning from a trip to both Burma and China, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said he was encouraged by his recent discussions with Burma's generals. During his meetings, he managed to gain increased access for international aid workers to the Irrawaddy delta area and an agreement to open up land, sea and air routes for relief supplies. "I hope and I believe that this marks a new spirit of cooperation and partnership between Myanmar [Burma] and the international community as a whole," he told reporters in New York. "Prompt and full implementation will be the key. I will be fully, continuously and personally engaged." (Date: 28 May 2008. Source: UN News Agency: <http://tinyurl.com/62ls56>)

On the contrary, the Burmese military junta has spoken out in anger against the international community, saying that international donors are providing too little aid towards the response. (Date: 30 May 2008. Source: Associated Press <http://tinyurl.com/5z2xrg>)

UN

Leading UN officials have called for the release of Burma's pro-democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi after the extension of her house arrest by the military junta. The United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said he 'regretted' the extension of her detainment, while High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, voiced her "profound disappointment," and called on the military regime to unconditionally release Ms. Suu Kyi. (Date: 28 May 2008. Source: UN News Centre <http://tinyurl.com/6dwnyp> & <http://tinyurl.com/638u4h>)

On 7 May 2008, France asked members of the UN Security Council to invoke the "responsibility to protect" clause as the basis of the Council's action and pushed for a resolution on the delivery of humanitarian aid. This was backed by the USA and the UK, but rejected by other members of the Security Council. (Date: 13 May 2008. Source: International Herald Tribune <http://www.ihf.com/articles/2008/05/13/opinion/edaalder.php>)

Naval ships from France, the UK and the USA were also sent to the shores of Burma filled with aid to be delivered to the cyclone victims. These countries were considering militarized humanitarian action, but may now abandon their mission or get naval ships to deliver their cargo via neighbouring countries. (Date: 27 May 2008. Source: Agence France Presse: <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/storypage.aspx?StoryId=119710> & date: 30 May 2007. Source: Jane's Information Group: <http://tinyurl.com/6372vi>)

Before Cyclone Nargis hit Burma, the UN Security Council issued a statement urging the Burmese military "to establish the conditions and create an atmosphere conducive to an inclusive and credible process" in its constitutional referendum. (Date: 2 May 2008. Source: UN News Centre <http://tinyurl.com/6phrm3>)

EU

On 29 May, the EU Presidency issued a statement strongly 'deploring' the extension of Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest and the recent detention of political activists who were demanding her release. (29 May 2008. Source: Slovenian EU Presidency Press Release http://www.eu2008.si/en/News_and_Documents/CFSP_Statements/May/0529MZZ_ASSK.html)

Earlier in the month, on 13 May, the European Council met to discuss the EU's humanitarian response to the cyclone in Burma and the China earthquake, where leaders reaffirmed their support for getting impartial aid to those who need it most. Louis Michel, Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid was sent to Burma to meet with the Burmese military regime. (Date: 13 May 2008. Source: Slovenian EU Presidency Press Release <http://tinyurl.com/68nhsz>)