

Myanmar enacts new constitution: state TV

Agence France-Presse, 29 May 2008

Myanmar's new constitution has been "confirmed and enacted" following a referendum this month, state television said Thursday, reading a statement by junta leader Than Shwe.

"The nationwide referendum confirmed and enacted the constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar," the statement said.

The announcement said 92.48 percent of voters had endorsed the charter, and that voter turnout was 91.12 percent.

The statement said that "27,288,827 (of) eligible voters around the country cast 'Yes' votes."

Earlier, Myanmar had said the constitution would only take effect in two years, once a new parliament convenes following planned elections.

Myanmar ignored international calls to delay the referendum and ploughed ahead with the polls on May 10 and 24, despite the devastation wrought by Cyclone Nargis, which left more than 133,000 people dead or missing.

More than half of the 2.4 million people severely affected by the May 2/3 cyclone have still not yet been reached by international aid, yet the ruling junta claims nearly all of them cast a ballot.

The regime has said the constitution will pave the way for elections in two years, but democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi's supporters say the charter will only entrench military rule.

Aung San Suu Kyi, whose long-running house arrest was extended on Tuesday, will be barred from running for office under the new constitution, which reserves 25 percent of seats in parliament for the military.

The generals will also have broad powers to declare a state of emergency and seize direct control of the government.

Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party, which won 1990 elections but was never allowed to govern, had urged people to vote against the charter, saying the poll was held amid an atmosphere of intimidation.

Declaration by the Presidency on behalf of the EU on the extension of the house arrest of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi

29 May 2008

The EU strongly deplores the decision of the authorities of Burma/Myanmar to extend the house arrest of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the National League for Democracy. In clear breach of international norms, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate has now been under house arrest without charge for five years and has spent more than twelve of the last 18 years in detention.

The EU also condemns the detention of the group of political activists who were demanding the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and again urges the authorities of Burma/Myanmar to liberate all political prisoners and detainees. Only a genuine process of dialogue with all political stakeholders will help Burma/Myanmar achieve stability and prosperity.

The release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and other political detainees would have been an opportunity to begin a process of national reconciliation and genuine democratic transition, which Burma/Myanmar needs now more than ever.

The EU regrets that the authorities of Burma/Myanmar conducted the constitutional referendum on 10 and 24 May in an overall climate of intimidation and with results that lack credibility. In this regard, the European Union reaffirms its conclusions of 29 April 2008.

Myanmar's cyclone survivors bullied by military; forced to work, return to demolished homes

The Associated Press, May 28, 2008

PYAPON, Myanmar: The flimsy bamboo hut built near a road is all Aye Shwe has to keep his family of eight dry. They lost their home to the cyclone and fear they may soon be uprooted again by soldiers ordering them to leave.

Myanmar's reclusive government has opened up slightly to the world in the past week, allowing U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to meet with the country's ruling general and inviting 50 countries for a donors conference to raise money for victims of the May 2-3 storm that killed 78,000.

But survivors in the clobbered Irrawaddy delta say the junta and its soldiers are as iron-fisted as ever, making some victims return to their flooded, collapsed homes and forcing others to work. Even some Myanmar volunteers donating food and supplies to survivors are being stopped, and the government has started impounding cars.

"Where my house used to be is still filled with water up to my waist," said Aye Shwe, who was ordered by soldiers to leave the hut. "How can I build a new house there?"

In the nearby town of Bogalay, about 120 survivors were crammed into the Sankyaung monastery, filled with the sound of rattling coughs and wailing children.

They heat up food delivered by donors, mostly meals of rice and vegetables, about twice a day. But abbot Kawvida said no aid has been provided by the government.

Those stuck outside aren't as lucky. Bodies line the monastery walkway lying atop tarps and rattan mats. Plastic sheets strung from the roof provide limited shelter from the daily rains, but some able-bodied survivors are being forced to leave for work.

"Some of the survivors were sent to Ma-ubin last week to build roads now that reconstruction has started," said the monk, adding he has heard they are being paid about 1,000 kyats (US\$1) a day. "They have told me that they are being exploited by some generals."

Ma-ubin is a delta town northeast of Bogalay, which also was slammed by Cyclone Nargis. Some 1.5 million people remain homeless from the storm, facing hunger and disease. The government has blocked most foreign aid workers from accessing the delta, but the country's ruling general last week promised to allow in outside help.

Much of the relief effort has instead been carried out by ordinary Myanmar volunteers and the local staff of aid agencies, packing their vehicles with food, water and supplies. They hand out rations every day to hungry survivors begging along roads going into the delta, but several donors have reported being harassed by police or having their vehicles impounded.

"We didn't drop food on the road, and we didn't violate any traffic regulations," said Nyi Nyi Zaw who was stopped on his way back from dropping supplies at a delta town. "I cannot understand why we were herded into a compound and held there for several hours. This is absurd and very unpleasant."

Some have reported having their driving license and car registration taken by authorities and being told they will be charged with a traffic violation. In some cases, worried volunteers have abandoned plans to deliver their aid.

That means people like 93-year-old Khin Mya, whose only form of shelter is a flowered umbrella and a plastic bag, may have one less meal.

"I get very worried every evening because I have to find a place to sleep — maybe under a tree, or if I can share a hut with someone," she said. "I must come to the road to receive food from donors or else I will starve."

UN: Myanmar funding conference "success"

Xinhua, 28 May 2008

UNITED NATIONS: The top humanitarian official for the United Nations said Sunday's international pledging conference in Yangon was a success and that the world body has raised 60 percent of the funding it has appealed for helping Myanmar cope with the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis.

"There was a strong sense of unity and purpose and a clear determination to scale up the relief effort -- to reach all of those in need," Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes told reporters here on Tuesday.

The world body estimates that aid has reached about one million people, not including the Myanmar government's own emergency response. As many as 2.4 million people are thought to have been severely affected by the cyclone, which struck the Southeast Asian country on May 5.

Holmes said there had been some progress on access for international aid workers and better logistical arrangements were now in place, particularly after UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon met last Friday with Myanmar's Senior-General Than Shwe.

"A lot of people have received either nothing or not enough. That's why we need to step up the aid effort," said Holmes, who also serves as UN Emergency Relief Coordinator.

In Geneva, a spokesperson for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said that between 10 and 15 international flights are coming in every day to Yangon, Myanmar's largest city, and that air-bridge flights from the logistics hub at Bangkok's Don Muang Airport to Yangon are now fully operational.

In total, 169 international relief flights have arrived so far in Myanmar.

Elizabeth Byrs, the OCHA spokeswoman, expressed the hope that the UN World Food Program (WFP) would be able to start operating 10 helicopters in Myanmar as soon as possible, after the government gave the go-ahead to their deployment.

So far, WFP and its partners have delivered over 3,000 tons of food aid reaching some 460,000 people, Byrs said.

New storm deepens misery in cyclone-hit Myanmar

16 May 2008 - Reuters

Torrential tropical downpours lashed Myanmar's Irrawaddy delta on Friday, deepening the misery of an estimated 2.5 million destitute survivors of Cyclone Nargis and further hampering the military government's aid efforts.

In the storm-struck town of Kunyangon, around 100 km (60 miles) southwest of Yangon, thousands of men, women and children stood in mud and rain, their hands clasped together in supplication at the occasional passing aid vehicle.

Children mobbed any car that stopped, grimy hands reaching through a window in search of bits of bread or a t-shirt.

Despite such scenes and the latest storm, likely to turn already damaged roads to mud, the former Burma's ruling generals insist their relief operations are running smoothly.

However, they issued an edict in state-run newspapers on Friday saying legal action would be taken against anybody found hoarding or selling relief supplies, amid rumours of local military units expropriating trucks of food, blankets and water.

If emergency supplies do not get through in much greater quantities, foreign governments and aid groups say starvation and disease are very real threats.

Some cholera has been confirmed among survivors, but the number was in line with case levels in previous years, the World Health Organization (WHO) said.

"We don't have an explosion of cholera," Maureen Birmingham, acting WHO representative in Thailand, told reporters in Bangkok.

Diarrhoea, dysentery and skin infections have afflicted some cyclone refugees crammed into monasteries, schools and other temporary shelters after the devastating May 2 storm.

The WHO, which has sent health kits, bleach and chlorine tablets to treat dirty water, said the peak threat from disease was 10 days to one month after a natural disaster.

EU URGES OPENING UP TO AID

The European Union's top aid official, Louis Michel, met ministers in Yangon on Thursday and urged them to admit foreign aid workers and essential equipment to keep the death toll, which the Red Cross says could be as high as 128,000, from rising.

Myanmar state television raised its official death toll on Thursday to 43,328. Independent experts say the figures are probably far higher, with British officials saying the number of dead and missing may be 200,000.

Michel, like so many other envoys before, had made little headway so far.

"Relations between Myanmar and the international community are difficult," he told Reuters. "But that is not my problem. The time is not for political discussion. It's time to deliver aid to save lives."

Earlier, the reclusive generals, the latest face of 46 years of unbroken military rule, signalled they would not budge on their position of limiting foreign access to the delta, fearful to do so might loosen their vice-like grip on power.

"We have already finished our first phase of emergency relief. We are going onto the second phase, the rebuilding stage," state television quoted Prime Minister Thein Sein as telling his Thai counterpart this week.

Underlining where its main attentions lie, the junta announced an overwhelming vote in favour of an army-backed constitution in a referendum held on May 10 despite calls for a delay in the light of the disaster.

DRIBS AND DRABS

Two weeks after the storm tore through the heavily populated Irrawaddy delta rice bowl, food, medicine and temporary shelter have been sent in dribs and drabs to devastated communities.

In Kunyamongon, the junta has started distributing small amounts of emergency food.

But around the town, the countryside remains a mess of half-submerged trees, snapped electricity pylons or bamboo poles -- the skeletal remains of a house -- leaning at crazy angles.

Villagers say they are slowly burying the bloated corpses of friends and relatives that have littered the rice fields for the last two weeks. But the stench of death remains.

The United Nations says more than half a million people may now be in temporary settlements.

Frustrated by the speed of the official response, ordinary people were taking matters into their own hands, sending trucks and vans into the delta with clothes, biscuits, dried noodles, and rice provided by private companies and individuals.

"There are too many people. We just cannot give enough. How can the government act as if nothing happened?" said one volunteer, who declined to be named for fear of reprisals.

With almost total distrust of the government, private aid is being left in the care of Buddhist monasteries, to be distributed by the monkhood, who have immense moral authority.

Going through the roll-call of the needy is a grim task.

"We need to give aid to this family," said one monk pointing to a list in a temple in one village.

"No," another monk interjected. "They're all dead."

No breakthroughs in Myanmar aid crisis: EU envoy

AFP 16 May 2008

The European Union's aid chief said Friday he had made no breakthroughs on a trip to Myanmar aimed at pushing the ruling generals to open up to foreign assistance, two weeks after the cyclone tragedy.

Louis Michel said he had not yet won permission to visit the disaster zone in the country's southwest, and had only been told his requests for visas for more international experts would be considered.

"In a few days, if I have no concrete answer on all these questions, then I can put a judgement, but now I cannot," the EU Humanitarian Aid Commissioner told AFP in an interview.

The Irrawaddy Delta region in the southwest, which bore the brunt of the massive storm that hit on May 3, is largely off limits to foreigners including international staff for aid agencies operating in Myanmar.

"I requested to go into the delta but was not allowed to enter yesterday. I am still hoping to go today," Michel told AFP hours before he was due to wrap up a two-day trip.

Michel said he had only been taken to "a rather perfect, organised camp" outside the main city of Yangon, far from the flooded and devastated delta region where aid groups say many survivors have still not received help.

Heavy rains continued to pound the delta region on Friday, heaping misery on increasingly desperate people who are struggling to survive with little food, clean water or shelter.

An AFP reporter who managed to reach the delta region spoke to a man whose wife lived through the cyclone but perished two days later, cold, wet and hungry after spending nights clinging to an embankment in the drenching rain.

"She had no warm clothes to change into," said 57-year-old Ohn Kyi. "She survived the storm, but she could not recover from the cold."

The commissioner said he had pressed the regime for answers on why it was reluctant to issue visas for international aid workers -- a stance that has infuriated the United Nations and world leaders.

"They didn't answer the question, and they did not give any reason," he said.

Michel rejected the regime's stance that it can handle the aftermath of the cyclone itself, and that aid has reached most survivors.

"They only pretend that everything is under control. They are of course happy with the aid that we are bringing," he said, referring to the planeloads of supplies that have been arriving from around the world.

UN humanitarian chief John Holmes is also waiting for a visa to travel to Myanmar where he hopes to add to voices warning that without urgent assistance, up to 2.5 million survivors will fall prey to starvation and disease.

As the state media raised the official death toll to 43,318, with nearly 28,000 still missing, Myanmar's southeast Asian neighbours geared up for talks in Singapore on Monday aimed at convening a high-level donors meeting.

A UN source said the donor meeting would probably be at the ministerial level, and would likely take place in southeast Asia, probably Bangkok, with May 24 suggested as a possible date.

Despite intense lobbying, Myanmar's secretive junta -- which deeply mistrusts any outside influence -- has repeatedly refused to allow in experts that aid groups say are urgently needed to get assistance to the flooded delta.

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown warned in London late Thursday: "We will stop at nothing in trying to pressure the regime into doing what any regime should have done long ago.

"And there should be nothing, nothing that stops that aid getting to the people of the country now."

Cyclone Nargis hit overnight May 2, tearing through the rice-growing Irrawaddy Delta and wiping out entire villages with powerful winds and giant waves that turned much of the area into a disease-infested swamp.

The regime has insisted that the country can handle the crisis on its own, and that its people can rebuild the devastated region without help.

Despite the humanitarian emergency, it announced victory in a national referendum on a new constitution, held last Saturday with parts of the country still underwater and tens of thousands of people unaccounted for.

The government said the vote, the first here since 1990, was a step on the road to democracy, but critics say it will only tighten the military's grip on power.

Burma 'approves new constitution'
BBC 15 May 2008

The generals were criticised for holding the vote during a national crisis. A new constitution proposed by Burma's military rulers has been overwhelmingly approved in a referendum, according to the country's state-run media.

The junta said 92.4% voted "yes" in the ballot and reported a turnout of 99%.

The vote was held in two-thirds of the country, but was postponed for two weeks in areas hit by Cyclone Nargis.

Human Rights Watch labelled the result an "insult to the people of Burma", while an opposition group said the vote had been "full of cheating and fraud".

The junta pressed ahead with the referendum on 10 May despite the plight of tens of thousands of people left stricken by the devastating cyclone.

The worst-affected areas are still expected to vote on 24 May - but the threshold for approving the constitution has already been passed, rendering their votes meaningless.

Human Rights Watch was highly critical of the ballot.

"There is simply no way that 92%... would have voted 'yes' on a document that they know very little about and that most have never read," said David Mathieson, the body's Thailand-based spokesman.

The constitution enshrines the junta's hold on power and excludes the main opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, from holding office.

Under its terms, 25% of seats in both houses of parliament would be guaranteed for the military - making it impossible to alter the constitution without their backing.

Ms Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy, had campaigned for a "no" vote and denounced the results as a fraud.

"In some villages, authorities and polling station officials ticked the ballots themselves and did not let the voters do anything," said NLD spokesman Nyan Win.

Trying to help

Bangkok Post: 15 May 2008

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon says the Burmese government has still not done enough to let in foreign aid, and on the 13th day of the disaster called on world leaders to unite in a push for "radical change" to speed up critical help. Burmese junta leaders refuse to even speak to the UN chief.

The secretary-general said he wants to send the UN's top humanitarian official to try to persuade the country's military rulers to open up to foreign aid

"I'm considering sending under-secretary-general of OCHA (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) Mr John Holmes with the World Food Programme airplane with humanitarian assistance in very near days," Ban said.

An hour later, the OCHA confirmed the decision already had been taken.

The government has confirmed more than 38,000 deaths in the wake of the cyclone, with more than 27,000 people still missing. But UN officials fear the numbers could be far worse - projecting a possible death toll of more than 100,000.

Mr Ban told reporters Wednesday he is convening key leading donor countries for a discussion of what he called "concrete measures" to address the cyclone disaster in Burma. He said the meeting will include representatives of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which includes Burma.

The secretary-general said he has still not spoken to Burma's leader, General Than Shwe, despite repeated calls and letters. He reiterated his frustration with the military government's response to the crisis.

"Even though the Myanmar government has shown some sense of flexibility, at this time it's far, far too short. The magnitude of this situation requires much more mobilization of resources and aid workers," he said. "Myanmar" is the name the junta has given to Burma.

Earlier Wednesday, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown proposed that the UN hold an emergency summit on Burma and that the secretary-general visit the country.

The UN is now seeking \$200 million to provide aid to cyclone survivors - up from last week's appeal for \$187 million. Mr Holmes said donor nations have already sent or pledged \$150 million.

Food, water, sanitation equipment and medical supplies continue to arrive in increasingly large quantities, but Holmes said the biggest problem remains Burma's blocking of the entry of foreign aid workers.

"We urge the (Burmese) authorities a radical change in this area to allow international staff into the affected area to do the job that they are there to do," he said.

In a move Holmes called a "small sign of selective opening up," the Burmese government invited its immediate neighbors - Thailand, Bangladesh, India and China - to send in 160 humanitarian workers.

Holmes said such progress is still inadequate to meet the needs of the estimated 1.6 million to 2.5 million Burmese severely affected by Cyclone Nargis. (Compiled from Agencies)

COMMENTARY

Govt has blood on its hands, too SANITSUDA EKACHAI

We thought we had it bad. Our 2004 tsunami, however, pales in comparison with the cyclone disaster in Burma which has killed more than 100,000 people. And more are still dying due to lack of timely rescue and aid.

We are frustrated with our half-baked democracy. But however imperfect our system is, our open society enables aid to reach the victims of natural disasters quickly. And no matter how unhappy we are with top-down assistance, inadequate long-term support and the authorities' inability to solve land rights disputes between the tsunami victims and greedy landlords, at least the help was there at the crucial moment, saving survivors from severe injury, disease and hunger. This is not happening in Burma.

The whole world is pointing the finger at the heartless junta as murderers, for not letting aid and relief workers reach the survivors in time. But the Thai government must also share in this sin.

The junta's refusal to let their people receive timely help is just the latest in a long list of atrocities the people in Burma have had to suffer at the hands of the generals. During the past four decades of terror, the generals have not only reduced the once prosperous country to a dirt poor nation, they also have silenced dissent through violent means and plunged the country into lawlessness and paralysing fear. Ethnic groups, in particular, are targets of the state's monstrous conduct, and endless civil war has given the Burmese troops the green light to kill innocent people with impunity. Stories abound about rape, forced labour and human mine-detectors. Meanwhile, farmers must put up with routine extortion, death threats and blatant stealing of their land through forced resettlement. In Burma, people know they can be killed on the spot and nothing will happen. They know they might easily die from simple diseases because of a miserably poor public health system.

The world was shocked when tropical Cyclone Nargis swept through the Irrawaddy Delta, taking away some 100,000 souls with it. Who knows how many millions in Burma have died premature, violent deaths from the junta's misrule?

Our government allows the junta to continue killing its people because top politicians and businessmen do not want to lose big-time concessions to exploit Burma's timber, natural gas, gems and hydro-electric dams.

When the villagers fled wars to save their lives and sought refuge within our borders, we pushed them back to face death. When they cross the border to work here so they can send remittances to families back home, we use them as slave labour. We allow our police to routinely extort migrant workers and arrest them when they meet to celebrate their cultural traditions. We even prohibit them from using cell phones and from leaving their shelters.

When the tsunami struck our Andaman coast in 2004, the migrant workers from Burma were not treated as victims eligible for help and compensation, but as illegal workers who had to be immediately deported. Fearing arrest, they had to hide in the hills, torn by grief and sorrow from the loss of loved ones, but too fearful to seek medical help for their own injuries. Yet many still said they wanted to work in Thailand. Things were worse in Burma, they said. If we didn't believe them then, we must believe them now.

With the devastation of Burma's rice-growing areas and impending famine, we will soon see a huge influx of migrant workers crossing the border to find work.

We cannot stop this flow of migrants so long as we allow the junta to rule Burma with terror. We cannot help the Burmese people when they are struck by natural disasters so long as the atrocious junta remains in power. The only sustainable remedy for Burma is democracy - people's democracy.

When the Thai government helps the generals block the path of people power, it has blood on its hands for helping maintain the bloody path strewn with dead bodies of the Burmese.

Sanitsuda Ekachai is Assistant Editor

Response to Cyclone in Myanmar 'Unacceptably Slow' – BAN KI-MOON

UN News Centre - 12 May 2008

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today registered his "immense frustration" with the pace of relief efforts following the cyclone in Myanmar last week, and called on the Government to do everything it could to prevent the disaster from becoming even more serious.

"I want to register my deep concern – and immense frustration – at the unacceptably slow response to this grave humanitarian crisis," Mr. Ban said today, speaking at a press conference in New York. "Unless more aid gets into the country – very quickly – we face an outbreak of infectious diseases that could dwarf today's crisis," he added. "I therefore call, in the most strenuous terms, on the Government of Myanmar to put its people's lives first. It must do all that it can to prevent the disaster from becoming even more serious."

The Secretary-General said that the UN has been able to reach less than a third of the people at risk – about 270,000 people. He said that the UN World Food Programme (WFP) estimated that the amount of food allowed into the country so far was less than one-tenth of what is needed, while rice stocks within Myanmar were close to exhaustion.

Mr. Ban said he had tried repeatedly over the weekend and last week to telephone Myanmar's senior General Than Shwe, but had not been able to reach him, so he had delivered a second letter to him through diplomatic channels. The Secretary-General called on the Government to set up major logistics operations to deliver supplies to the most affected areas. He said that "this required the specialized expertise of the major international relief agencies. Myanmar cannot do it alone."

Speaking about his appeal for a speedier response, Mr. Ban said, "I emphasize that this is not about politics. It is about saving people's lives. There is absolutely no time to lose."

Speaking at the same press conference, the UN's top relief official said that reports from Myanmar indicate that people in the flooded Irrawaddy delta region, which was struck hardest by Cyclone Nargis, had now concentrated in towns and villages on higher ground.

Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and UN Emergency Relief Coordinator John Holmes said this would make it easier for agencies to deliver aid to large numbers of people, but that it also increased the risk of infectious disease.

Mr. Holmes said that an increasing number of flights delivering aid were now entering the country, and other relief had begun arriving by sea and land. He said that 34 new visas were now being granted for UN international relief workers, but he added that, while this was welcome, it was "clearly nothing like enough for the scale of the problem we're trying to deal with."

Myanmar cyclone victims getting low-quality supplies

Associated Press – 13 May 2008

YANGON, Myanmar - Many cyclone victims are getting spoiled or poor-quality food from Myanmar's junta instead of the enriched supplies being delivered by foreign governments and charities, victims and aid workers said Tuesday.

A longtime foreign resident of Myanmar's biggest city, Yangon, told The Associated Press in Bangkok by telephone that angry government officials complained to him about the military misappropriating aid.

He said the officials told him that high-energy biscuits rushed in on the World Food Program's first flights were sent to a military warehouse. They were exchanged for what the officials described as "tasteless and low-quality" biscuits produced by the Industry Ministry to be handed out to cyclone victims, he said.

The foreign resident, who spoke on condition of anonymity because identifying himself could jeopardize his safety, said it was not known if the high quality food was being sold on the black market or consumed by the military.

CARE Australia's country director in Myanmar, Brian Agland, said members of his local staff brought back some of the rotting rice being distributed in the devastated Irrawaddy River delta.

"I have a small sample in my pocket, and it's some of the poorest quality rice we've seen," he said. "It's affected by salt water and it's very old."

"Certainly, we are concerned that (poor quality rice) is being distributed," Agland said by telephone from Yangon. "The level of nutrition is very low."

Many survivors also said they were either not getting any aid or were being handed rotten, moldy rice.

'Second Catastrophe' Faces Myanmar Without More for AID

UN News Centre - 23 May 2008

Unless more access to the country is granted to allow aid more quickly, a second catastrophe could result, Elizabeth Byrs of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said in Geneva today.

Despite some progress, efforts to help the 1.5 million people impacted by Cyclone Nargis must be enhanced, she observed. Some 12 days after the cyclone struck Myanmar, the UN and its partners have reached 270,000 at-risk people, less than a third of those affected. Heavy rains have been forecast, further impeding aid efforts, Ms. Byrs noted. She called for an air and sea corridor to channel aid in large quantities as quickly as possible.

Ms. Byrs said, however, that there have been some encouraging signs, with the Government making some initial moves to ease restrictions.

Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes said yesterday that 34 new visas had been granted to UN personnel, but Ms. Byrs said today that this is not enough to respond to a disaster of this magnitude.

"Unless more aid gets into the country – very quickly – we face an outbreak of infectious diseases that could dwarf today's crisis," the Secretary-General stressed in a press conference at UN Headquarters in New York yesterday.

"I therefore call, in the most strenuous terms, on the Government of Myanmar to put its people's lives first. It must do all that it can to prevent the disaster from becoming even more serious."

Myanmar rejects US, UN pressure on aid

AFP - 13 May 2008

YANGON - Myanmar's military rulers on Tuesday rejected growing international pressure to accept aid workers, insisting against all the evidence that it could handle the emergency cyclone relief effort alone.

Even as US President George W. Bush and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon voiced their fury at the country's generals, and aid agencies again warned that time was running out, the regime remained defiant about letting in outsiders.

But many survivors said they had still not received aid from the government 11 days after the disaster, and that they could not understand why their leaders have snubbed offers of help that have poured in from around the world.

"The nation does not need skilled relief workers yet," Vice Admiral Soe Thein said in the New Light of Myanmar newspaper, a mouthpiece for the military which has ruled the nation with an iron grip for nearly half a century.

He said the needs of the people after the storm, "have been fulfilled to an extent".

Just hours after the United States sent its first aid plane into the country since the tragedy -- following days of negotiations -- Bush said the world should "be angry and condemn" the junta.

"Either they are isolated or callous," he said Monday. "There's no telling how many people have lost their lives as a result of the slow response."

Myanmar police block aid workers, food piles up

Associated Press - 13 May 2008

YANGON, Myanmar - Police barred foreign aid workers from reaching cyclone survivors in hard-hit areas Tuesday, while emergency food shipments backed up at the main airport for Myanmar's biggest city.

Checkpoints manned by armed police were set up Tuesday on roads leading to the Irrawaddy River delta and all international aid workers and journalists were turned back by officers who took down their names and passport numbers. Drivers were interrogated.

"No foreigners allowed," one policeman said after waving a car back.

Supplies piled up at Yangon's main airport, which does not have equipment to lift cargo off big Boeing 747s. It took 200 Burmese volunteers to unload by hand a plane carrying more than 60 tons of relief supplies, including school tents, said Dubai Cares, a United Arab Emirates aid group.

A report from a Tuesday meeting of the U.N. center overseeing logistics said the airport was a bottleneck in the aid effort. "Discharging operations at Yangon airport are hampered by limitations of handling equipment, fuel availability and worsening weather conditions," it said.

The report said Britain's Department for International Development had offered to send in machinery for unloading jumbo jets and other aircraft.

With rain falling on Yangon on Tuesday and downpours predicted later this week, aid officials also said there was not enough warehouse space to protect the supplies beginning to flow in after the regime agreed to accept foreign help.

Even the quicker pace is not enough, U.N. officials warned.

A longtime foreign resident of Yangon told The Associated Press that angry government officials were complaining that high-energy biscuits rushed in on the World Food Program's first flights were sent to a military warehouse.

Those supplies were exchanged for what the officials described as "tasteless and low-quality" biscuits produced by the Industry Ministry to be handed out to cyclone victims, the resident said, speaking on condition of anonymity because identifying himself could jeopardize his safety.

Monks help cyclone victims despite Military pressure

May 13, Associated Press

The saffron-robed monks who spearheaded an uprising last fall against Burma's military rulers are back on the front lines, this time providing food, shelter and spiritual solace to cyclone victims.

The military regime has moved to curb the Buddhist clerics' efforts, even as it fails to deliver adequate aid itself. Authorities have given some monasteries deadlines to clear out refugees, many of whom have no homes to return to, monks and survivors say.

"There is no aid. We haven't seen anyone from the government," said U Pinyatale, the 45-year-old abbot of the Kyi Bui Kha monastery, where almost depleted rice stocks and precious rainwater are shared with some 100 homeless villagers huddled within its battered compound.

Similar scenes are being repeated in other areas of the Irrawaddy delta and Rangoon, the country's largest city, where monasteries became safe havens after Cyclone Nargis struck on May 3—and the regime did little.

One of the monastery's senior monks said he tried to argue with military officials who ordered the more than 100 refugees to leave.

"I don't know where they will go. But that was the order," he said, asking for anonymity for fear of reprisals.

The government has not announced such an order, which appeared to be applied selectively. Other monasteries in Rangoon have been told to clear out cyclone victims in coming days, the monk said, but in the delta, refugees were being allowed to remain or told they could come to monasteries for supplies but not shelter.

"They don't want too many people gathering in small towns," said Hla Khay, a delta boat operator. The regime "is concerned about security. With lots of frustrated people together, there may be another uprising."

Larger monasteries were being closely watched by troops and plainclothes security men—"invisible spies," as one monk called them.

Newspapers have been ordered not to publish stories about monks aiding the people, and at least one monastery and one nunnery in Rangoon were prohibited from accepting any supplies from relief organizations.

"One of the best networks already in place in the country are the monks," said Gary Walker of PLAN, a British-based international children's group, speaking in Bangkok. "So we'll be exploring ways in which we can see whether the monks can start distributing supplies throughout the country."

At the Kyi Bui Kha monastery, located on the banks of the Pyapon River deep in the delta, U Pinyatale glanced anxiously at the remaining 10 bags of rice.

"At most, we have enough for the week. We will have to find a way to get more food," he said as monks and villagers worked together to try to dry the sodden rice, even as rain clouds gathered above the largely roofless monastery.

U Pinyatale said the sanctuary's two dozen monks and nuns were also trying to offer spiritual comfort to the traumatized villagers.

"We pray with them. We pray for the dead to go to the peaceful land of the dead and for the living to rebuild their lives," he said.

"When the cyclone came, all of us hid in the rice warehouse. I saw one person holding tightly onto a tree but he did not make it," the abbot added. "After the storm, there were dead bodies floating everywhere. Some people get nightmares. Some hear voices at night that their dead children are calling for help. Some haven't spoken since."

Extraordinary GAERC meets to discuss humanitarian situation in Burma/Myanmar

Press Release - Slovenian Presidency 13 May 2008

EU development ministers met today in an extraordinary General Affairs and External Relations Council meeting in order to assess the state of play regarding the humanitarian situation in Burma/Myanmar after the devastation caused by the cyclone Nargis, and review the response of the EU member states and the European Commission.

The Council, chaired by Slovenian State Secretary Andrej Šter, today repeated its expression of sympathy with the people of Burma/Myanmar, especially the families of the victims of the deadly cyclone.

The ministers stressed that the scope of the tragedy could increase without the co-operation of the authorities in Burma/Myanmar. They welcomed some limited improvement that has been made recently in this respect, but stressed that more needs to be done to ensure a free access to the affected area to the international humanitarian experts, including the expeditious delivery of visa and travel permits.

The Council also called on the Burma/Myanmar authorities to take urgent action to facilitate the flow of aid to people in desperate need who should benefit in full from the relief offered by the international community.

"What is important is to ensure - with the consent of the Burma/Myanmar authorities - that the aid reaches those who need it," said State Secretary Šter.

The EU ministers expressed their support to any initiative, including in the UN bodies, which would help to meet the humanitarian needs of the Burmese people.

State Secretary Šter said that today's debate on the EU humanitarian response focused on finding ways on how to channel the collected aid to those who need it the most. The Council

welcomed the contributions that the Commission, Member States and individual citizens have made to the relief efforts, and expressed EU's readiness to provide additional assistance to meet the massive needs of the people, especially children.

They recalled that the EU Humanitarian Aid is entirely neutral, impartial and independent, in accordance with the EU Consensus on Humanitarian Aid.

The ministers also welcomed the initiative of the Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid Louis Michel to travel to Burma/Myanmar for purely humanitarian purposes.

Military aid 'an option' in Burma

BBC News - 13 May 2008

Military action on humanitarian grounds is an option to get more aid to Burma's cyclone survivors, Britain's foreign secretary has told the BBC.

David Miliband said the "responsibility to protect" UN doctrine, drawn up to apply in cases like genocide, could apply to natural disasters.

"All instruments of the UN should be available," he told the BBC.

Earlier the United Nations said it had only been able to reach 270,000 of the 1.5m survivors of Cyclone Nargis.

It called for an air or sea "corridor" to be opened up to channel large amounts of aid to the region and warned of the risk of a second catastrophe" if a major operation did not begin.

Some European nations have called for the UN principle of "responsibility to protect" to be applied, which would allow aid deliveries without Burma's consent.

Asked about the issue for Tuesday BBC Radio 4 World Tonight programme, he said the problem with the protocol - drawn up to protect people against war crimes, genocide, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity - was that it was a "legal requirement".

But asked if it could apply in the event of a natural disaster, Mr Miliband told the BBC: "It certainly could and we have been absolutely clear in New York over the last 12 days that all instruments of the UN should be available."

However asked if aid convoys could be sent into Burma with military escorts, without the military regime's permission he said "you could try to" but pointed out there were 400,000 Burmese troops in uniform.

"No-one should think that there is an easy or quick answer to this," he said.

But he said "all options are being looked at" - pointing out that HMS Westminster had been sent to the area, alongside French and US military assets.

Both Conservative leader David Cameron and Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg have called for the dropping of aid directly into Burma if the ruling regime continues to block foreign relief workers.

The EU's foreign policy chief Javier Solana said the UN must use "all means necessary" to ensure aid got through to those who needed it most.

U.N. says 220,000 reported missing in Myanmar cyclone

Reuters - 11 May 2008

BANGKOK - The number of people reported missing in the Myanmar cyclone was about 220,000, the United Nations humanitarian agency said on Sunday, warning of environmental damage, violence and mass migration.

It said assessments of 55 townships in the Irrawaddy delta and other disaster areas found up to 102,000 people could have been killed in Cyclone Nargis, which struck flimsy dwellings with fierce winds and waves on the night of May 2.

"Based on these assessments, the U.N. estimates that 1,215,885 to 1,919,485 million people have been affected by the cyclone, the number of deaths could range from 63,290 to 101,682, and 220,000 people are reported to be missing," the report by the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said.

The cyclone had "likely resulted in acute environmental issues that could pose an immediate risk to human life and health", the U.N. report said.

It said migration and violence were also emerging as problems in the poor southeast Asian country, where a succession of military juntas have ruled with an iron grip for 46 years.

"Given the gravity of the situation including the lack of food and water, some partners have reported fears for security, and violent behaviour in the most severely afflicted areas," the report said.

"Some assessments have suggested that people are coping by migrating outwards from the most affected to less affected areas in search of the basic necessities."

The U.N. agency also said few visas have been issued for disaster relief workers to enter the country.

Tragedy of dead and survivors in Myanmar grows worse

Reuters - 11 May 2008

YANGON - Desperate survivors of Cyclone Nargis headed out of Myanmar's Irrawaddy delta in search of food, water and medicine, but aid workers said on Sunday that thousands will die if emergency supplies don't get through soon.

Buddhist temples and schools on the outskirts of the storm's trail of destruction are now makeshift refugee centers.

The U.N. humanitarian agency said in a new assessment that between 1.2 million and 1.9 million were struggling to survive in the aftermath of the storm that struck eight days ago.

"Given the gravity of the situation including the lack of food and water, some partners have reported fears for security, and violent behavior in the most severely afflicted areas," the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said.

It said "the number of deaths could range from 63,290 to 101,682, and 220,000 people are reported to be missing." It said "acute environmental issues" posed a threat to life and health.

"Unless there is a massive and fast infusion of aid, experts and supplies into the hardest-hit areas, there's going to be a tragedy on an unimaginable scale," said Greg Beck of the International Rescue Committee.

International agency Oxfam said 1.5 million people are at risk from disease unless a tsunami-like aid effort is mobilized.

"In the Boxing Day tsunami 250,000 people lost their lives in the first few hours, but we did not see an outbreak of disease because the host governments and the world mobilized a massive

aid effort to prevent it from happening," Oxfam's Regional Director for East Asia Sarah Ireland said in Bangkok.

"We have to do the same for the people of Myanmar."

The U.N. World Food Program said on Sunday it has begun moving aid to its field headquarters in Labutta using trucks provided by its partners in Myanmar, including the Myanmar Red Cross. The agency said its food shipments had been briefly impounded on Friday at Yangon airport.

France is set to deliver 1,500 tons of rice aid aboard the warship Mistral, which would arrive in Myanmar's waters in the middle of this week, the French foreign ministry said on Sunday.

France wants the aid on the Mistral to be distributed either by the ship's crew, or by the staff of NGOs already on the ground, or by U.N. teams, a foreign ministry source said.

French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner told French newspaper Le Figaro on Saturday that France would not consider entrusting aid to the Myanmar authorities.

Myanmar junta keeps rein on aid

International Herald Tribune - 11 May 2008

MA NGAY GYI, Myanmar: When one of Myanmar's best-known movie stars, Kyaw Dhyu, traveled through the Irrawaddy Delta to deliver aid to the victims of the May 3 cyclone, the military stopped him as he was handing out bags of rice.

"The officer told him, 'You cannot give directly to the people,' " said Tin Win, the chief of the stricken village of Dedaye. He was counting on the rice to feed 260 people who were taking refuge in a the town's Buddhist prayer hall.

The politics of food aid here - deciding who gets to deliver assistance to the homeless and hungry after the cyclone - is not confined to the dispute among Myanmar's military, Western governments and UN agencies.

Wealthy Burmese who want to donate rice or other aid have in several cases been told that everything must be channeled through the military.

That angers local government officials like Tin Win who are trying to rebuild the lives of villagers. He twitched with rage when he described the rice the military gave him. "They gave us four bags," Tin Win said. "The rice is rotten. Even the pigs and dogs wouldn't eat it."

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees delivered good rice to local military leaders last week, but they kept it for themselves, Tin Win asserted, and then distributed the water-logged, musty rice. "I'm very angry," he said, adding an expletive to describe the military.

That notion is being challenged by what might be called the artisanal relief efforts of the Myanmar elite.

Convoys of SUVs and other expensive cars ply the main north-south road into the delta delivering said.

On Sunday, entire families lined up along the road to receive sweets, instant noodle packets or anything else tossed from the windows by the wealthy to the destitute.

The military did not appear to be stopping those efforts, nor was it banning monks from sharing their supplies. But some donors were clearly not desirable in the eyes of the military.

Kyaw Dhyu, for example, is perceived as unfriendly to the military because he assisted the protesting monks during the demonstrations last year and was jailed for a month.

The military is also trying to minimize any foreign presence or role in the relief effort. An American antiques dealer said he was prevented from handing out bags of rice by the military in the delta.

Here in Ma Ngay Gyi, in the furthest southern reaches of the delta, a reporter was detained for an hour and a half Sunday by soldiers who said they had orders to report any foreigners in the area.

In what was emblematic of the wider tensions over the issue of aid distribution, an argument broke out in the village between soldiers and some villagers who said any foreigner was suspect and the village chief, Myint Oo, who solicited aid from a visitor for the rebuilding of a school that had been flattened by the cyclone.

"The government told us that school must reopen June 1 if you have a schoolhouse or not," Myint Oo told his visitor. "Teach under a tree if you have to, they said."

When he began describing the destruction of the school and village a portly man in a white T-shirt who appeared to also hold a position of power, interrupted. "Don't tell these foreigners anything," the man said.

Myint Oo replied that he wanted to talk to the visitors because they might be able to help rebuild the village.

"They will send the facts to the world and show the weakness of the Myanmar government," the man in the white shirt said.

He looked directly at Myint Oo and said in a loud voice, "Come outside."

Men in the village rushed to the reporter's arriving boat and made the universal gesture of food, putting pinched fingers up to their lips.

As the visitors were leaving, a woman in the village asked a soldier holding an AK-47 assault rifle why they had detained the foreigners.

"These are orders," the soldier replied. "Be quiet."

Rights group slams Indonesia, China for protecting Myanmar junta

DPA - 10 May 2008

Bangkok - Indonesia's move to block a resolution in the United Nations' Security Council over Myanmar's cyclone crisis was "unbelievable and unacceptable," Sunai Phasuk, a representative of rights group Human Rights Watch, said Saturday. Indonesia has no excuse for its cynical tactics because it received massive lifesaving international help after the tsunami disaster in December 2004, said the New York-based agency's international representative.

It was "no surprise" that China also helped block attempts to force Myanmar's reclusive generals into responding as China habitually protected the authoritarian ally, Sunai said.

China and Indonesia on Thursday rejected a French proposal allowing the Security Council to ratchet up the pressure on Myanmar to let aid workers have full access to survivors. The proposal said the Security Council might invoke "responsibility to protect" resolutions so that aid could be delivered whether the government in Yangon accepted it or not.

"But where is Asean? Asean wants nothing more than a quiet life and peace and stability, but this is a very foolish position," Sunai said, adding that "There is clearly the risk of a popular explosion in Burma (Myanmar) as anger rises over the military's lack of care for the people."

Asean's "shocking" delay in condemning last September's brutal crackdown in Myanmar against protesting monks showed its true lack of heart, he added.

Human Rights Watch's Asia director Brad Adams said in New York criticized China over its reaction to the Myanmar crisis. "The World is watching to see if China does the right thing for Burma's cyclone victims," he said.

If China fail's do to everything in its power to get aid into Burma "it will share responsibility for the deaths of tens of thousands of people," Adamas added.

US official: 1 shipment to be allowed to Myanmar

Associated Press - 09 May 2008

WASHINGTON — The governing military junta in Myanmar has agreed to allow a single U.S. cargo aircraft to bring in relief supplies for victims of a devastating cyclone, the Bush administration said Friday.

White House spokesman Gordon Johndroe said the United States welcomed the go-ahead to land a U.S. military C-130 in the country on Monday. He said he hopes this is the beginning of continued aid flowing into Myanmar from the United States and other nations and international relief agencies.

Earlier Friday, Ky Luu, director of the U.S. office of foreign disaster assistance, had said that skilled aid workers were being forced to sit on the sidelines as victims of last week's cyclone die. His comments reflect mounting frustration among the United States and other countries as they wait for permission from the military-led government to begin trying to help.

Said Johndroe: "We will continue to work with the government of Burma to allow other assistance. We hope that this is the beginning of a long line of assistance from the United States to Burma."

Johndroe also said that while the U.S. still has limited leeway to help, "One flight is much better than no flights."

"They're going to need our help for a long time," Johndroe said.

The U.S. military has C-130 cargo aircraft and about a dozen helicopters in the region, ready to fly supplies into Myanmar. Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman said Friday that the aircraft could reach Myanmar in a few hours.

In addition, U.S. Navy ships have begun moving from the Gulf of Thailand toward Myanmar to be available if needed.

Johndroe said he could not speak to one specific cause for the breakthrough, but added: "Clearly the junta has determined that the magnitude of this disaster requires additional assistance."

Luu had urged the generals to allow access to foreign aid teams, including a group of U.S. specialists waiting in Thailand; he said desperately needed supplies are piling up on airport tarmacs.

"This is a very vulnerable population, and a shock of this magnitude is going to take people right off the cliff,"

"People are dying, and it's approaching a week," he said.

Nargis: the junta barter aid in exchange for "yes" vote on the constitution

AsiaNews – 09 May 2008

The first cases of cholera and an alarm over deaths from hunger. But in the area of Yangon, the officials of the regime are permitting aid for the victims of the cyclone only in exchange for a favourable vote on tomorrow's referendum on the new constitution. The regime clarifies: yes to aid from abroad, but no to aid workers.

Yangon - In Myanmar, aid is being bartered after Nargis in exchange for votes in favour of the new constitution, with the sham referendum of the military junta scheduled for tomorrow. This is recounted to AsiaNews by some of the inhabitants of Yangon, one of the areas hardest hit by the cyclone. While the first cases of cholera are being verified, and food and medicine are in short supply, the junta today clarifies its position on openness to NGOs and international agencies: it can only accept aid, but not foreign aid workers in its territory, repeating its intention to manage distribution itself.

Anonymous sources for AsiaNews in the country report that "members of the Union Solidarity and Development Association (editor's note: USDA, an association sponsored by the junta) continue to circulate around Yangon and the surrounding villages, obliging the citizens to vote - in an early and irregular manner - in favour of the constitution, in exchange for food aid.

Even those who want to buy materials to rebuild their homes, or tents and tarps, are being required to give in to the extortion of the USDA". This is happening, for example, in the municipalities of Thingangyun and north and south Dagon.

Myanmar junta hands out aid boxes with generals' names

AP - 11 May 2008

YANGON, Myanmar - Myanmar's military regime distributed international aid Saturday but plastered the boxes with the names of top generals in an apparent effort to turn the relief effort for last week's devastating cyclone into a propaganda exercise.

State-run television continuously ran images of top generals _ including the junta leader, Senior Gen. Than Shwe _ handing out boxes of aid to survivors at elaborate ceremonies.

One box bore the name of Lt. Gen. Myint Swe, a rising star in the government hierarchy, in bold letters that overshadowed a smaller label reading: "Aid from the Kingdom of Thailand."

"We have already seen regional commanders putting their names on the side of aid shipments from Asia, saying this was a gift from them.

Officials have said only one out of 10 people who are homeless, injured or threatened by disease and hunger have received some kind of aid since the cyclone hit May 3.

The government's abilities are limited. It has only a few dozen helicopters, most of which are small and old. It also has about 15 transport planes, primarily small jets unable to carry hundreds of tons of supplies.

"Not only don't they have the capacity to deliver assistance, they don't have experience," said, the British aid worker. "It's already too late for many people. Every day of delays is costing thousands of lives."

Myanmar vote heavily favors military-backed constitution amid irregularities

AP - Sunday, May 11

YANGON, Myanmar - Witnesses say a proposed military-backed constitution in Myanmar appears to have won overwhelming approval in a referendum in which there was visible intimidation of voters.

The witnesses and local officials who watched the local counting of votes Saturday say the vote appeared to average 80 percent to 90 percent

in favor of the draft charter. The ruling junta's critics consider the proposed constitution unfair and undemocratic.

Witnesses say they saw cases of intimidation of voters at various polling stations around the country, including orders to affix fingerprints to ballot papers.

The results of the referendum are unlikely to be announced until after late voting on May 24 in areas badly hit by recent Cyclone Nargis.

Another storm heading for Burma

Agence France-Presse – 09 May 2008

THE United Nations today warned another storm was headed in the direction of Burma, which could complicate the slow-moving relief efforts from deadly Cyclone Nargis.

"Our meteorological people tell us there's likely to be fairly strong rainfall in the next seven days," he said.

"That's going to be a big issue with unpaved roads. Heavy rainfall could complicate things for all those people going without shelter," Horsey said.

"If there's an epidemic of water-borne disease and a lack of shelter when a storm comes in ... if we have another storm coming into the delta, that's going to be a significant concern for all those people without shelter."

"If we don't get this relief effort up to full scale quickly, there's significant risk of a second round of this disaster which could potentially kill as many people as the initial cyclone," Mr Horsey said.

Myanmar 'not ready' for foreign rescue teams: state media

AFP – 09 May 2008

YANGON - Myanmar is "not ready" for foreign search and rescue teams after the deadly cyclone, the foreign ministry said Friday in a state newspaper, announcing that some aid workers had been deported.

A search and rescue team and media who arrived Wednesday on a flight from Qatar were deported the same day because Myanmar authorities believed the plane was only carrying supplies, not workers, the statement said.

"The relevant parties from the Myanmar side did not have prior information on the presence of such teams. The Myanmar side understood that only handing over of donated emergency provisions would take place," it said.

"Currently Myanmar has prioritised receiving emergency relief provisions and is making strenuous efforts to transport those provisions without delay by its own labours to the affected areas," it said.

"As such, Myanmar is not ready to receive search and rescue teams as well as media teams from foreign countries."

Myanmar will only accept donations of cash or emergency aid, the statement added, saying the country needed medical supplies, food, clothing, generators and shelters.

"The donors and the international community can be assured that Myanmar is doing its best ... to relieve the suffering of victims of Cyclone Nargis."

So far 11 charter flights carrying international aid have arrived in Yangon "with prior consent" from Myanmar authorities, the statement said.

"Myanmar authorities on their part have been making their best efforts to forward and distribute the donated provisions to the victims in a timely manner," it said.

Grim fight for survival after Myanmar cyclone

AFP - 08 May 2008

YANGON - More than one million homeless in Myanmar were battling to stave off disease and hunger Thursday, but the military government maintained tight limits on foreign assistance six days after a massive cyclone.

Aid has only trickling in despite warnings that specialists were needed to deliver food and water into disaster zones strewn with rotting bodies, and it was unclear if the regime had yet given visas to foreign aid staff.

The United Nations Security Council was divided on how to respond to the emergency, with Western members urging strong pressure on Myanmar to allow foreign relief aid while China warned against politicising the issue.

Chinese deputy ambassador Liu Zhenmin said the issue involved a natural disaster that should be handled by competent UN agencies and not by the Security Council, which is tasked with handling threats to international peace and security.

U.S. mulls food drops to devastated Myanmar

CNN - 08 May 2008

WASHINGTON -- The United States is considering air-dropping aid to victims of the cyclone in Myanmar even without permission from the military government, a U.S. official said Thursday.

A man stands by the wreckage of his house Thursday in Yangon, Myanmar.

Ky Luu, director of the U.S. Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, said dropping food and supplies by air to needy victims could be an option if the government continues to limit access of aid workers.

"Anything that might have a positive impact is being looked at and is being discussed," he told reporters. "Everything within the law is being considered at this point in time."

However, Defense Secretary Robert Gates on Thursday told reporters he "couldn't imagine" the United States dropping aid by air without permission from the Myanmar government.

The United States has also been pushing for access, pledging \$3.25 million and offering to send U.S. Navy ships to the region to help relief efforts.

When pressed on whether food drops would be legal, Luu said a recent U.N. mandate calling for a "responsibility to protect" could pave the way for such action, but he wasn't entirely sure of the legal ramifications.

"Let's say we were only given permission to be able to drop off food, then ... that is something that we would do," he said.

But Luu, cautioned, air drops are not the most efficient way to get aid to those in need because there is no infrastructure on the ground to deliver it to the affected areas.

"You can bring in commodities but if they are not reaching the impacted areas, if they are not available in terms of warehouse space and logistics -- forklift capacity and trucks and helicopters to go and bring it out -- we may be inundated and create a logjam," he said

It would be best, he said, to have aid workers in the country.

Luu said victims of the cyclone are in desperate need of clean water and temporary shelter. He stressed the importance of getting the U.S. Disaster Assistance Response Team into the country to determine how to best help aid efforts.

So far the Myanmar government have refused to provide visas for U.S. aid workers and for the DART team.

"The DART's presence helps us make informed decisions and helps us be able to get the resource out quicker," Luu said. "Without the DART on the ground or without other operational partners, it's very difficult at this point in time to tell you exactly what the conditions are on the ground; how many people are impacted; what are the needs."

Malaria, diarrhea reported after storm hits Myanmar

Associated Press - 08 May 2008

Health experts are scrambling to prevent widespread illness after reports of malaria outbreaks and diarrhea surfaced in areas of Myanmar hardest hit by a cyclone, U.N. health officials said Thursday.

Early estimates indicate 20 percent of children in the most devastated areas are suffering from diarrhea, and the situation could worsen, said Osamu Kunii, UNICEF's chief of health and nutrition in Yangon, Myanmar's largest city.

"Most of the area is covered by dirty water," he said. "There's a lot of dead bodies and they have very poor access — sometimes no access — to clean drinking water or food."

Water purification tablets are unlikely to help because much of the water supply has been contaminated by saltwater, he said.

It was unclear how many people may have malaria, but the mosquito-borne disease is endemic to Myanmar's Irrawaddy delta, said Poonam Khetrapal Singh, deputy director of the World Health Organization's Southeast Asia office in New Delhi. She said 10,000 mosquito nets were being sent in.

"Safe water, sanitation, safe food. These are things that we feel are priorities at the moment," Singh said.

The WHO team in Myanmar is working to assess the situation, and a few international technical experts are making their way into the country, Singh said.

"It reminds me of the tsunami when every day the figures kept rising, and that's really the pattern here," she said, referring to the 2004 Asian tsunami, which killed nearly 230,000 people.

Kunii said the situation in Myanmar is worse in some ways because more people suffered severe injuries from strong winds, high tides and flooding. And he noted that after the tsunami, food and water could be obtained from inland areas that were not hit by the killer waves.

"This time it is quite difficult because most of the areas are quite remote and difficult to access," Kunii said. "We are trying our best."

UN secretary-general calls on Myanmar to delay referendum

Associated Press - 08 May 2008

UNITED NATIONS — The U.N. secretary-general is calling on Myanmar to postpone its constitutional referendum and focus on cyclone relief.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said Thursday that he is "deeply concerned about the welfare of the people of Myanmar at this time of national tragedy."

He is asking Myanmar's government to postpone its planned referendum on a new constitution two days from now and "focus instead on mobilizing all available resources and capacity for the emergency response efforts."

Myanmar's military junta has postponed voting in some parts of the country, including Yangon, some outlying areas and parts of the delta heavily damaged by the storm.

Rotting corpses pile up as Myanmar stalls on aid

CNN - 08 May 2008

YANGON, Myanmar -- Myanmar's cyclone survivors have insufficient fuel to burn the rotting corpses of the dead as the country's military junta continues to block access for aid groups.

Relief agencies say decomposing corpses litter ditches and fields in the worst-hit Irrawaddy delta area as survivors try to conserve fuel for transporting much-needed supplies.

The international community is growing increasingly frustrated with the junta's lack of progress in granting visas for relief workers and giving clearance for aid flights to land.

Another plane has received permission to land, but the status of other flights remained uncertain even as a clearer picture emerged of the scope of death and desperation in Myanmar.

CNN's Dan Rivers, one of the few international journalists to have visited the hardest-hit areas of Myanmar, said relief had not reached the people who needed it most.

"We're hearing dreadful stories of hundreds of dead bodies left lying in the fields, decomposing," he said. "These people need help immediately."

Gregory Beck, of the International Rescue Committee, said the struggle to get aid workers and supplies into the country continued.

"We can't delay on this -- this is a huge disaster and the longer [Myanmar] waits the worse it's going to become."

Myanmar's government has asked for international aid, but the junta has balked at allowing assessment teams into the country -- a step that most agencies and countries take before deciding how much and what kind of aid to provide.

Horseley said Myanmar's government "is more open to goods" rather than aid workers, but said it was understandable considering the military regime's "reticence to engage with the international community." But he pointed out that such a major disaster "would overwhelm any government."

Horseley said the regime had provided a number of helicopters and a larger number of boats to the relief effort.

He said the main hurdle was getting them into the flood-soaked delta, where nearly 5,000 square kilometers (2,000 square miles) remained underwater.

"When vast areas are flooded.. helicopters can't land," Horseley said. "When you get down to the tip of the delta, it's not much above sea level. When you get a major storm surge ... it doesn't drain back again."

The problem, he said, was compounded by the current monsoon period in South Asia.

U.S. envoy: Myanmar deaths may top 100,000

Associated Press – 07 May 2008

YANGON, Myanmar - The death toll from the cyclone that ravaged the Irrawaddy delta in Myanmar may exceed 100,000, the senior U.S. diplomat in the military-ruled country said Wednesday.

"The information we are receiving indicates over 100,000 deaths," the U.S. Charge D'Affaires in Yangon, Shari Villarosa, said on a conference call.

The U.S. figure is almost five times more than the 22,000 the Myanmar government has estimated.

The U.S. estimate is based on data from an international non-governmental organization, Villarosa said without naming the group. She called the situation in Myanmar "more and more horrendous."

"I think most of the damage was caused by these 12-foot storm surges," she said.

Villarosa also said about 95 percent of the buildings in the delta region were destroyed when Cyclone Nargis battered the area late Friday into Saturday.

Based on the same data, 70,000 people are missing in the Irrawaddy Delta, which has a population of nearly six million people, Villarosa said.

Villarosa said: "I can only assume that the longer the delay, the more victims that are created."

Little aid has reached the area since Nargis hit, and on Wednesday crowds of hungry survivors stormed reopened shops in the devastated Irrawaddy delta.

"There were long lines of people trying to buy what food was available, even at those higher prices," Risley said.

The delta, Myanmar's rice-growing heartland, has been devastated by Cyclone Nargis, threatening long-term food shortages for survivors, experts said.

"We can't delay on this -- this is a huge disaster and the longer (Myanmar) waits the worse it's going to become," International Rescue Committee spokesman Gregory Beck said.

The Rome-based U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that five states hit hardest by Saturday's cyclone produce 65 percent of the country's rice, The Associated Press reported.

"There is likely going to be incredible shortages in the next 18 to 24 months," Sean Turnell, an economist specializing in Myanmar at Australia's Macquarie University told AP.

CNN's Dan Rivers, the first Western journalist into the devastated town of Bogalay, said Wednesday that it was difficult to find the words to describe the level of destruction.

"Ninety percent of the houses have been flattened... the help that these people are getting seems to be pretty much nonexistent from what we've seen."

He saw members of Myanmar's army clearing roads, but handing out little food or medicine.

"There has been scant help, really. I think we saw one or two Red Cross vehicles in the entire time we were driving," Rivers said of his travels over a 12-hour period.

Hundreds of World Vision staff are already in Myanmar with limited supplies, according to Bangkok spokesman James East.

"Even when aid comes in, it's going to be a logistical nightmare to get it out to the remote delta region," East said.

Based on a satellite map made available by the U.N., the storm's damage was concentrated over about a 30,000-square-kilometer area along the Andaman Sea and Gulf of Martaban coastlines, home to nearly a quarter of Myanmar's 57 million people.

UN should force Myanmar to accept cyclone aid: French FM

AFP - 07 May 2008

France's foreign minister said Wednesday the UN Security Council should force Myanmar's military junta to allow aid supplies into the cyclone-hit country.

Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said the UN concept of a "responsibility to protect," in cases where a state fails in its duties towards its population, could form the basis of a Security Council resolution.

"We are trying to see at the United Nations if we can use this responsibility to protect for there to be a resolution that imposes the passage (of aid) to the Myanmar government," Kouchner told reporters.

Rice says Myanmar crisis 'not a matter of politics'

AFP - 07 May 2007

WASHINGTON - US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Wednesday urged cyclone-hit Myanmar to admit international disaster relief, saying it was a humanitarian crisis rather than a political issue.

"What remains is for the Burmese (Myanmar) government to allow the international community to help its people," Rice told reporters in Washington.

"It should be a simple matter. It's not a matter of politics. It's a matter of a humanitarian crisis," Rice said.

Rice said she was "deeply concerned by the growing humanitarian crisis in Burma."

She added: "This is the type of crisis that will only get worse."

Rice recalled that she and US officials were speaking "to governments that may have influence with Burma" in order to persuade the authorities in Myanmar to allow in relief.

Her spokesman, Sean McCormack, said Washington is urging Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan, India and China to use "any leverage" they may have with Myanmar to allow relief teams into the cyclone-stricken nation.

UN Calls on Myanmar to Facilitate Aid Delivery to Cyclone Victims

UN News Centre – 07 May 2008

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and the top United Nations humanitarian official today urged Myanmar authorities to facilitate the delivery of aid in the wake of the deadly cyclone that wreaked death and destruction in the country several days ago.

"The Secretary-General believes that this is a critical moment for the people of Myanmar, and emphasizes the importance of providing as much assistance as possible in the vital first few days following the cyclone's impact," according to a issued today by Mr. Ban's spokesperson.

He welcomed today's news that some UN aid officials will be allowed into Myanmar tomorrow, which will assist assessment and prioritization efforts.

"Given the magnitude of this disaster, the Secretary-General urges the Government of Myanmar to respond to the outpouring of international support and solidarity by facilitating the arrival of aid workers, and the clearance of relief supplies in every way possible," the statement added.

"This can significantly aid the Government in responding to this tragedy."

Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes echoed Mr. Ban's call, stressing that "any delays are going to be potentially critical" in the face of such a disaster.

Members of a UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) team will be flying to Myanmar tomorrow to coordinate relief efforts together with the national authorities.

Mr. Holmes, who is also UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, stated that while assistance has started to arrive, the effort is clearly not adequate given the enormity of the situation. "We are faced here with a major catastrophe," he told journalists at UN Headquarters.

The UN has been "intensely" discussing access for aid workers, visas and the easing of custom regulations with the Government since the tragedy struck. "The cooperation is reasonable and I think heading in the right direction," Mr. Holmes noted.

The Under-Secretary-General added that the UN will allocate at least \$10 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) for the aid effort. In addition, over two dozen

countries have indicated their willingness to contribute to relief efforts, in the amount of \$30 million.

The UN is working with the Government to prepare a flash appeal to donors to be launched on Friday.

Cyclone Nargis, which made landfall in the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) delta region and then moved across the country's largest city, Yangon, caused widespread destruction, including destroying homes, tearing down trees and power lines and damaging communications.

Myanmar authorities have declared five regions – Yangon, Ayeyarwady, Bago, Mon and Kayin – disaster areas. The combined total population of the disaster areas is around 24 million.

Mr. Holmes said the process of aid beginning to arrive has started. Humanitarian agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are distributing food, water purification tables, plastic sheeting and health kits – just some of the most urgent needs.

The UN World Food Programme (WFP) today sent four aircraft loaded with critically needed food aid, including 45 metric tons of high energy biscuits, and other relief items.

"Time is of the essence and we are already reaching storm victims with food. We are mobilising all possible resources to save lives given the massive disruption in food, water, and shelter caused by this storm," said WFP Executive Director, Josette Sheeran, speaking from Washington D.C.

The WFP-chartered aircraft are expected to arrive at Yangon airport early Thursday morning – the first UN flights to arrive in the city.

Myanmar blocks UN emergency airlift for cyclone victims

Associated Press - 08 May 2008

YANGON, Myanmar - Myanmar's isolationist regime blocked United Nations efforts Thursday to airlift urgently needed high-energy biscuits to survivors of a cyclone that may have killed more than 100,000 people, U.N. officials said.

Paul Risley, a spokesman of the U.N's World Food Program in Bangkok, said three flights were waiting to take off from Dubai, Dhaka and Thailand with 50 tons of biscuits. A fourth shipment aboard a scheduled Thai Airways cargo flight was likely to bring some biscuits later Thursday.

He told The Associated Press that the WFP was in "constant touch" with the military junta to obtain the flight clearance for the first major airlift of international aid, but there has been no word from officials.

Earlier, a statement from WFP in Washington indicated that a green-light for the airlift had been given, saying the planes were scheduled to land in Yangon early Thursday.

A handful of smaller shipments from neighboring countries arrived earlier in the week.

"We are in constant discussion with them in Yangon, and we expect to receive clearance," Risley said.

"It is enough of a challenge that visas are being held up for bringing in experience international relief workers, but it is specially frustrating that critically needed food aid is being held up," he said.

State radio said "unscrupulous elements" in Yangon were spreading rumors of an impending earthquake, a second cyclone and looting in the country's largest city. Residents say that some looting did occur at markets and stores after the storm hit.

It appeared the regime was trying both to calm the population and stop any gatherings that might turn into political agitation against widely detested military rule.

Entire villages in the Irrawaddy delta were still submerged from the storm, and bloated corpses could be seen stuck in the mangroves. Some survivors stripped clothes off the dead.

A spokesman for the U.N. Children's Fund said its staff in Myanmar reported seeing many people huddled in roughly built shelters and children who had lost their parents.

"There's widespread devastation. Buildings and health centers are flattened and bloated dead animals are floating around, which is an alarm for spreading disease. These are massive and horrific scenes," Patrick McCormick said at UNICEF offices in New York.

China urges Myanmar to work with the international community on aid

Associated Press - 08 May 2008

BEIJING - China has urged close ally Myanmar to work with the international community to recover from a cyclone.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang told a news conference Thursday that China hopes "Myanmar will cooperate with the international community."

Qin also said China would give an additional \$4.3 million for relief efforts, in addition to its initial pledge of \$1 million.

UN officials: Myanmar cyclone a 'major, major disaster'

Associated Press - 07 May 2008

YANGON, Myanmar - Hungry crowds of survivors stormed the few shops that opened in Myanmar's stricken Irrawaddy delta, where food and international aid has been scarce since a devastating cyclone killed more than 22,000 people, the U.N. said Wednesday.

Corpses floated in salty flood waters and witnesses said survivors tried desperately to reach dry ground on boats using blankets as sails.

The United Nations said some 1 million people were homeless.

"Basically the entire lower delta region is under water," said Richard Horsey, Bangkok-based spokesman for the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Aid.

"Teams are talking about bodies floating around in the water," he said. This is "a major, major disaster we're dealing with."

Horsey predicted the number of fatalities could rise "dramatically."

A few shops opened Wednesday in the delta but were quickly stormed by people, said Paul Risley, a spokesman for the U.N. World Food Program in Bangkok, quoting his agency's workers in the area.

"Fist fights are breaking out," he said.

The military junta normally restricts the access of foreign officials and organizations to the country, and aid groups were struggling to deliver relief goods.

"Most urgent need is food and water," said Andrew Kirkwood, head of Save the Children voluntary group in Yangon. "Many people are getting sick. The whole place is under salt water and there is nothing to drink.

They can't use tablets to purify salt water," he said.

WHO says Burma faces major health worries

Associated Press - 06 May 2008

Fears of outbreaks fueled by mosquitoes, dirty water and poor sanitation were among the World Health Organization's biggest concerns after a devastating cyclone hit Burma, home to one of the world's worst health systems.

WHO was waiting Tuesday for permission from the country's ruling junta to send in medical teams but demolished infrastructure would likely hamper early efforts, said Vismita Gupta-Smith, spokeswoman for WHO's regional office in New Delhi.

"The communications are broken down and the roads are not operational," she said. "But the officers are on the ground and are ready for rapid assessment, surveillance and mobilization."

Teams will work to prevent mosquito-borne diseases such as malaria, as well as diarrhea and other outbreaks that can spread quickly amid a lack of clean water and sanitation. Major concerns also include respiratory illnesses among children forced to sleep outside and injuries suffered during the storm, Gupta-Smith said.

WHO was waiting for Burma's military leaders to request aid from a regional emergency fund the UN agency set up last year to fill the time gap between international donors' pledges and the actual arrival of aid.

About US \$175,000 would be available right away, she said.

Myanmar approves UN aid flight

Associated Press - 07 May 2008

GENEVA - The international relief effort for hundreds of thousands of Myanmar cyclone victims picked up speed Wednesday as India dispatched two planeloads of aid and Myanmar authorized the United Nations to send its own air shipment, officials said.

But permission is still pending for a U.N. coordination team to accompany the flight, which was set to take off Wednesday. U.N. spokeswoman Elisabeth Byrs said U.N. staff in Bangkok also were awaiting approval of their visas so they can go to Myanmar and assess damage.

Myanmar government's slowness in issuing visas to aid workers appeared to remain a problem.

India sent two air force planes carrying about 8.8 U.S. tons (8 metric tons) of relief supplies, including tents and medicine, according to the Defense Ministry.

They follow two Indian navy ships that left Tuesday for Yangon, Myanmar's largest city, with similar supplies, said Navtej Sarna, the spokesman for India's External Affairs Ministry.

Indonesia, said Wednesday it would soon send emergency aid worth \$1 million.

Two military planes carrying food, medicine, blankets and 55 relief workers will leave Thursday, said Maj. Gen. Syamsul Maarif, chief of Indonesia's disaster management coordination agency.

Elisabeth Byrs, Geneva spokeswoman for U.N. relief efforts, said she expected the United Nations cargo plane would go from Brindisi, Italy, to Myanmar later Wednesday, but that it is still unclear where it will land in Myanmar.

"We are working on that," Byrs said.

She said U.N. officials hoped to have U.N. experts accompany the flight, but that they were still waiting for Myanmar authorities to grant them permission.

Byrs said the U.N. flight was approved Tuesday in a meeting between U.N. and Myanmar officials in New York.

"We hope this spirit of openness will continue," Byrs said.

Care Australia allowed into Burma

The New Australian - 06 May 2008

A leading Australian aid agency says the Burmese military regime has allowed its efforts to provide urgent relief following the catastrophic aftermath of Cyclone Nargis.

CARE Australia, which has operated in parts of Burma for 14 years, has already begun providing plastic sheeting for emergency shelter, food, water and other essentials.

CARE Australia spokesman Robert Yallop said that authorities had been cooperative.

"We've had full support from the authorities, working with the UN. The scale is quite enormous," Mr Yallop told the Nine Network.

"Every indication that we have at the moment is that we've been receiving full cooperation from the government authorities in Myanmar Burma.

"The UN is basically organising most of that interaction with the government authorities, but we have certainly had no impediment to our activities to date."

Mr Yallop said CARE's team in Burma had been shocked by the extent of the devastation, and called for Australians to donate money to the relief fund.

"The CARE Australia team's were out yesterday in areas just on the outskirts of Yangon (Rangoon), along the river. They were shocked," Mr Yallop said.

"What they found were that there were thousands of people who are now living in pagodas, in schools, who've lost their houses.

"We're beginning to provide plastic sheeting for shelter, provide food, water and other immediate needs.

"But the scale of this is quite enormous and in the coming days the requirements are going to be much, much greater.

"There are a lot of things that need to be brought in.

"We will be bringing in materials and equipment from Thailand, but what we really need at the moment is the generous support of the Australian public so that we can simply get enough resources to provide assistance for this effort."

UK pledges £5m in aid for Burma

BBC - 06 May 2008

Britain has promised £5m to Burma to help the survivors of a cyclone that struck on Saturday.

International Development Secretary Douglas Alexander told BBC News it was the right response for "an extremely serious humanitarian situation".

International aid agencies are pushing to gain access to the area for a massive relief operation.

Some UK charities have already begun distributing aid packages.

Save the Children aims to provide 30,000 families with food supplies, water purification kits, plastic sheeting, kitchen equipment and rehydration salts.

Speaking earlier at a conference in London, the prime minister offered sympathy on behalf of the British people to those suffering in Burma.

Gordon Brown said: "I believe nearly a million people are now in need of food aid, and we will have to help the families of those where people have died.

"I want to pledge on behalf of the British government that we will work with the whole international community to make sure that the food aid and the other support that is necessary is available to the people of Burma."

Save the Children, which has had a presence in the military-ruled country for 13 years, says there are difficulties distributing aid.

Amanda Weisbaum, head of emergency response, said: "Public transport prices have risen 1,000%. Fuel and all transport are hard to source and, with a few exceptions, electricity and landline communications have also been cut.

"Trucks and boats and other logistical support are also needed to help distribute the materials.

"Families are using flood water and water from lakes. Food is available but the cost has gone up by 50%," she added.

Sarah Ireland, Oxfam's East Asia regional director, said: "The aid effort faces huge challenges.

"Some 24 million live in the areas affected by the storm. Communications are down in the cyclone-hit areas, roads have been washed away and getting aid to people will be very difficult.

"The international community needs to be quick both to respond to this crisis and to ensure the needs of those most affected are met."

Myanmar cyclone death toll soars past 22,000: state radio

AP - 06 May 2008

YANGON, Myanmar - The cyclone death toll soared above 22,000 on Tuesday and more than 41,000 others were missing as foreign countries mobilized to rush in aid after the country's deadliest storm on record, state radio reported.

Up to 1 million people may be homeless after Cyclone Nargis hit Burma, early Saturday. Some villages have been almost totally eradicated and vast rice-growing areas are wiped out, the World Food Program said.

Images from state television showed large trees and electricity poles sprawled across roads and roofless houses ringed by large sheets of water in the Irrawaddy River delta region, which is regarded as Myanmar's rice bowl.

"From the reports we are getting, entire villages have been flattened and the final death toll may be huge," Mac Pieczowski, who heads the International Organization for Migration office in Yangon, said in a statement.

UN Humanitarian Chief Offers Emergency Funds for Cyclone-Hit Myanmar

UN News Centre - 06 May 2008

The top United Nations humanitarian official announced today that he is prepared to provide a grant from the Central Emergency Response Fund to help those affected by the deadly cyclone which struck southeast Myanmar over the weekend.

"The Government of Myanmar has indicated that they are open to international assistance. We appreciate the Government's announcement that it is making available approximately \$5 million from its own resources for emergency relief, and I am ready to allocate a significant amount from the CERF as the most urgent needs become clear," said Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator John Holmes.

UN agencies have already begun working to address the situation. The UN refugee agency is emptying its emergency shelter material stockpiles in neighbouring Thailand of plastic sheeting and tents for some 10,000 people for urgent dispatch to Yangon. The supplies would be distributed through a Disaster Management Committee that had been established by the Myanmar Government.

Jennifer Pagonis, spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees told journalists in Geneva that the agency's office in Myanmar yesterday purchased \$50,000 worth of urgently needed basic supplies in Yangon for distribution, including emergency tarpaulins, plastic sheeting and canned food.

In addition, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) has dispatched five assessment teams to three of the affected areas and is positioning relief supplies. The agency says it will work with partners and the Government to provide access to clean water, safe sanitation and improved hygiene, and will seek to protect children and help them return to school as soon as possible.

The emergence of water borne and vector borne diseases are a major concern for the UN World Health Organization, which has stressed the need to have access to potable water to avoid diseases. Noting that malaria is present in the part of the country hit by the storm, the agency also stressed the need for insecticide-treated mosquito nets for those affected.

Bush urges Myanmar rulers to accept US aid

AFP - 06 May 2008

WASHINGTON - US President George W. Bush on Tuesday urged Myanmar's military rulers to "let the United States come and help you" following a devastating weekend cyclone that killed at least 22,000.

"We want to do a lot more," Bush said at a signing ceremony for a law giving the highest civilian award the US Congress can bestow on Myanmar democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, the junta's leading foe.

"We're prepared to move US Navy assets to help find those who've lost their lives, to help find the missing, to help stabilize the situation. But in order to do so, the military junta must allow our disaster assessment teams into the country," said the US president.

Bush spokeswoman Dana Perino said a Disaster Aid Response Team (DART) was ready to go into Myanmar and that two US Navy ships -- already nearby for a disaster relief exercise and loaded with water and other key aid staples -- were steaming towards Myanmar.

"Our message is to the military rulers: 'Let the United States come to help you, help the people,'" Bush said as Myanmar's government said foreign relief groups would have to "negotiate" to get into the battered country.

In Geneva, the United Nations said it had a disaster-assessment team in neighbouring Thailand still awaiting entry visas -- while the government underlined that foreign relief experts would not be allowed in automatically.

Perino again expressed US concerns that the junta might turn away aid offers, saying that Washington had asked for visas for the DART workers and had not heard back.

"Our hearts go out to the people of Burma. We want to help them deal with this terrible disaster. At the same time, of course, we want them to live in a free society," Bush said at the White House ceremony.

Transport, visa hurdles slowing aid to Myanmar storm victims

Associated Press - 06 May 2008

GENEVA - Travel and visa obstacles on Tuesday hampered aid deliveries to the hundreds of thousands of people in Myanmar now believed to be homeless after the devastating cyclone, officials said.

But a green light from Myanmar's military rulers to accept aid has started the global relief effort rolling.

"This assistance is on its way," said United Nations relief spokeswoman Elisabeth Byrs, but she said U.N. workers planning to assess needs are still awaiting their visas to enter the country.

But the United States and France complained about Myanmar's reluctance to accept direct aid.

French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said France minimized its aid to about \$309,000. He said Myanmar officials are willing to accept aid but insist on distributing it themselves, which he said was "not a good way of doing things."

"It's not a lot but we don't really trust the way the Burmese ministry would use the money," said Kouchner.

Anne-Francoise Moffroid, the EU desk officer dealing with the crisis, said it was difficult to know how many people will need aid. Affected areas are isolated and difficult to reach and infrastructure has been destroyed, she said.

"Many volunteers from the local Red Cross have died in the disaster," she said. "I think it will be a major challenge to bring assistance to these areas."

Simon Horner, spokesman for the EU humanitarian office, called it "a massive disaster," particularly in the Irrawaddy delta.

"The reports that are coming back from some of our partner organizations ... is that there are some communities where the destruction is close to 100 percent," Horner said.

The military government generally makes it difficult for aid workers to move around the country without permission, and obtaining visas to bring in more international staff also is an obstacle.

The U.N. emergency relief coordinator said that a number of organizations felt visas were "a concern" and that the United Nations was asking the government to ease the situation.

"Since we now have the green light for international aid to go there, I hope we will get the visas as soon as possible," UNICEF spokeswoman Veronique Taveau said.

The U.N., Red Cross and other aid organizations have been organizing shipments to the country.

"Our first shipment is arriving today," said Eric Porterfield, spokesman for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

He said the federation was working with the Myanmar Red Cross, which has been playing a leading role in the initial distribution of aid.

The national Red Cross staff and 18,000 volunteers are handing out plastic sheets, drinking water, insecticide-treated bed nets and clothes, Porterfield said.

Myanmar: A father too weak, a family goes hungry

World Vision - Asia Pacific - 06 May 2008

Maung Soe is one of millions of children affected by the super cyclone Nargis, which created the worst disaster in Myanmar's recorded history.

It has been three days since the cyclone hit Maung Soe's village and destroyed his family's home. He ran for his life with his eight family members to seek shelter at the local school in the town of Hlaing Thar Yar, forty minutes drive from Yangon. They have been there ever since.

It is too dangerous to leave.

Maung Soe's 46 year-old father, U Myint Maung, tells of their escape from the deadly cyclone: "I often sleep at my workplace. I come back home only twice a week to bring back some money for the family as the daily travel cost is too much for us."

"But that night (May 2) I saw a warning on TV that a storm was heading toward Yangon. My wife was away from home on a trip and I worried for my family so I went back home. The storm started coming at about midnight. I didn't sleep at all. At about 5 am (on May 3) our (wooden-bamboo) house was destroyed."

"At first, I took my three youngest family members (six-month-old grand daughter, two and five year old son and daughter, respectively) and ran to a nearby house that was still OK," he explained.

Then, about 8 am, battling through rain and wind, we ran to the school as it is the only place that could not be blown away in our neighbourhood."

The two-storey concreted building, which normally accommodates 2000 school children, has become a shelter for more than 5000 cyclone affected people. More than half of them are children.

U Myint Maung explained the situation at the school was not good. "I didn't have enough strength to fight for a ration-card today and the authorities can not provide enough meals for everyone so my family has nothing to eat and no water today," he said.

U Myint Maung is just one of thousands of people who have gone hungry in the past three days. The city of Yangon, the biggest city and economic hub of Myanmar, has been in total chaos. The public transportation system is still paralysed by fallen trees, cables and lack of fuel. Most of the city buses are run with natural gas but gas stations cannot open as there is no electricity.

World Vision was one of the first to respond, providing much needed drinking water for the people staying at the school. But Myint Maung is unsure of what the future holds. "Our place is still unliveable. Everything is under water. I have no money to repair my house," he explained.

At least 15,000 killed in violent cyclone in Myanmar

Xinhua - 05 May 2008

YANGON-- At least 15,000 people have been killed in two divisions of Yangon and Ayeyawaddy in a violent cyclone storm Nargis that swept Myanmar's five divisions and states on last Friday and Saturday, according to official sources Monday evening.

It is estimated that the casualties in Ayeyawaddy division's Bogalay alone will exceed 10,000 and at least 1,000 in Laputta in the same division.

Earlier official figures show that 3,880 people were killed in Ayeyawaddy division including 20 in Bogalay and excluding Laputta, and 59 in Yangon division.

The sources said that 2,375 people in Ayeyawaddy division and 504 in Yangon division are missing.

In Haing Kyi island in the Ayeyawaddy division alone, nearly 20,000 houses were destroyed, leaving 92,706 people homeless, earlier report said.

The deadly cyclone, which occurred over the Bay of Bengal, hit five divisions and states -- Yangon, Bago, Ayeyawaddy, Kayin and Mon.

Myanmar has declared the five divisions and states as disaster-hit regions.

The government has formed a national central committee for prevention of natural disaster to promptly and effectively carry out relief and resettlement tasks.

Myanmar ready to receive aid: UN spokeswoman

AFP - Monday, May 5

GENEVA - Myanmar's military junta has indicated it is ready to receive international aid after a cyclone hit the country killing thousands, a UN humanitarian office spokeswoman told AFP.

They have "shown their disposition to receive international aid after the cyclone but the modes remain to be determined", said UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs spokeswoman Elisabeth Byrs.

"We are very busy, we are worried that there are some thousands of people left homeless," she added.

"We must not forget that the population living in the affected zones in the delta reaches 24 million people."

Five UN experts on catastrophes are ready to head to the location, Byrs told AFP.

The UN agency in charge of children UNICEF on Monday deployed five fact-finding missions, while the World Food Programme has delivered 500 tonnes of food to Yangon and generators to Cambodia, added the spokeswoman.

The satellite Unosat, which generates images for the international community in the humanitarian aid efforts, has also been activated, said Byrs.

The UN is considering making an urgent appeal for Myanmar, she added. More than 10,000 people have been killed in a tropical cyclone that struck Myanmar at the weekend, Foreign Minister Nyan Win told state television, adding that his nation would welcome international aid.

"According to the latest information, more than 10,000 people were killed," Nyan Win said, after briefing foreign diplomats.

"Information is still being collected, and there could be more casualties," he added.

EU releases 3 mln dlrs in aid for cyclone-hit Myanmar

AFP - 05 May 2008

BRUSSELS - The European Commission released on Monday two million euros (three million dollars) in initial emergency aid for victims of a weekend cyclone in Myanmar.

"This is a terrible catastrophe that demands a quick and effective humanitarian response," EU Humanitarian Aid Commissioner Louis Michel said in a statement.

"Hundreds of thousands of people, many already destitute, are in desperate need," he added.

The commission said that it was dispatching additional aid experts in the region to the country to supplement its expert at its Yangon office, with whom it had established contact despite bad communications.

The European Union's executive arm noted that there have been "unconfirmed reports of up to 95 percent destruction" in some communities blasted by high winds and tidal waves in the Irrawaddy Delta.

As a result, the EU aid would target providing shelter and drinking water.

US provides initial aid to cyclone-ravaged Myanmar

AFP - 05 May 2008

WASHINGTON - The United States said Monday it is providing an initial sum of 250,000 dollars in aid to cyclone-ravaged Myanmar through its embassy in Yangon and is looking at what more it can do to help.

"The embassy (in Yangon) did issue a disaster declaration authorizing an immediate release of 250,000 dollars in support for the Burmese government," State Department deputy spokesman Tom Casey told reporters.

Casey said a US disaster assistance response team was "standing by and ready to go into Burma (Myanmar) to help try and assess needs there," but had apparently not received permission from the ruling junta in Yangon.

White House spokesman Scott Stanzel indicated earlier that aid released through the embassy "will go through the World Food Program and other aid entities, so it doesn't necessarily go directly through the government."

Both Stanzel, who expressed US concern "about the reports coming out of Burma and mourn the loss of life," and Casey suggested more aid would be available.

Referring to the immediate embassy aid, Casey told AFP later: "This is an initial contribution. It is not intended to the full extent of US assistance."

Norway offers 1.3 million euros in aid to cyclone-hit Myanmar

AFP - 05 May 2008

OSLO - Norway said Monday it was ready to offer up to 10 million kroner (1.3 million euros, 1.96 million dollars) in emergency aid to Myanmar, where a weekend cyclone killed more than 10,000 people.

The Scandinavian country said however it would not provide the aid directly to the military junta, preferring instead to channel the money through the United Nations or the Red Cross.

"The situation is very difficult for the Burmese people, who were already living in a precarious situation," Norwegian Development Cooperation Minister Erik Solheim said in a statement.

"It is now important to ensure that the international community can provide the necessary aid to the affected regions," he added.

Asked who would receive the Norwegian aid contribution, a spokesman for the minister, Hilde Klemetsdal, excluded a direct transfer to the military regime.

"It's too early to say since the Myanmar regime has yet to officially request any aid from the international community," she told AFP.

"But it will not be through the regime. It would be more natural to channel it through the UN and/or the Red Cross," she added.

ASEAN chief urges support for storm-hit Myanmar

AFP - 05 May 2008

JAKARTA - ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan called Monday for all member states to offer "urgent relief assistance" to Myanmar.

"I heard the news of the cyclone with deep concern," Surin said in a statement from the Jakarta headquarters of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

"I am sure Myanmar's neighbours in ASEAN are standing by ready to join the international community to extend help in whatever form the government of Myanmar would like them to do."

He said such assistance would be "in line with the spirit" of the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response, which was signed in 2005 but was not yet in force.

"Given the frequency of such major natural disasters, ASEAN must on its own as well as in collaboration with its friends and partners intensify efforts in disaster management and emergency response," he said.

Thailand donates cash, necessities to cyclone-hit Myanmar

TNA - 05 May 2008

BANGKOK– The Thai Foreign Ministry has donated US\$50,000 while the military has offered dried food and medicines to Myanmar which was hit by cyclone Nargis last week, Foreign Minister Noppadon Pattama said on Monday.

In addition, Thailand is dispatching a C-130 military transport aircraft to deliver 9-tonnes of relief supplies for cyclone victims in Myanmar. The special flight is expected to depart Bangkok Tuesday morning.

Mr. Noppadon said he would inform the cabinet during a weekly meeting on Tuesday so that more assistance could be handed out.

India sends two naval ships carrying relief to storm-hit Myanmar

The Hindu - 05 May 2008

New Delhi: India is sending two naval ships with relief and medical supplies to Myanmar.

The ships carrying food items, tents, blankets, clothing and medicines will sail to Yangon from Port Blair, the External Affairs Ministry announced here.

President Pratibha Patil, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee have sent messages of condolence, expressing their deep distress at the devastation caused by the natural disaster.

The top leadership has also conveyed India's readiness to provide immediate emergency relief assistance and to assist Myanmar in its rehabilitation efforts.

MAP Responds to Devastation in Myanmar

Reuters via MAP International - 05 May 2008

Medical Assistance Programs (MAP) International will provide emergency medical aid to help people in Myanmar affected by a devastating category four cyclone that struck the southeast Asian nation May 2.

An estimated 2 million people are homeless and are in need of potable water, medicines and shelter.

"With a disaster such as this cyclone, our concern is to prevent a second wave of death from disease outbreaks," said Chris Palusky, MAP International director of humanitarian affairs.

Mr. Palusky said MAP is working with partner organizations to fully assess what immediate aid is needed in evacuation shelters in Myanmar.

UN stands ready to assist after deadly cyclone batters Myanmar

UN News Centre - 5 May 2008

The United Nations has offered its assistance to Myanmar authorities in responding to the deadly cyclone which struck the South-East Asian nation on Friday, leaving death and widespread devastation in its wake.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Cyclone Nargis made landfall in the Irrawaddy delta region, some 250 kilometres southwest of Yangon around 4 pm on 2 May.

With winds of over 190 kilometres per hour, the storm hit Yangon later that same night, tearing down trees and power lines and causing widespread flooding.

Thousands have reportedly been killed. In addition, "the numbers in need of assistance are expected to be sizeable," OCHA said.

Buildings have been badly damaged throughout Yangon, and a significant number of people have been left without shelter. Electricity is unlikely to be restored for several days and water supplies are expected to be a major problem. Many roads remain impassable and the airport has been closed until further notice.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said today he is "very much alarmed" by the news coming out of Myanmar's Foreign Ministry that casualties have risen to over 10,000. Speaking to reporters in New York, he added that lack of communications has made it difficult to ascertain the extent of the casualties and damage.

A UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) team has been organized and is on stand-by to assist the Government in responding to humanitarian needs, according to a statement issued by the UN on Sunday.

"The United Nations is also prepared to extend other necessary assistance and to mobilize international aid in support of the Government, if needed," the statement added.

The most immediate needs include food, plastic sheeting, water purification tablets, cooking sets, mosquito nets and emergency health kits.

In addition, Mr. Ban's chief of staff today discussed possible UN assistance with Myanmar's Ambassador to the world body, who stressed the need for the immediate delivery of supplies.

The two conferred on communications and coordination in providing assistance as well as the possibility of the release of funds from the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF).

Cyclone plunges Myanmar into primitive existence

Associated Press, 5 May 2008

YANGON, Myanmar — Residents of Myanmar's largest city were plunged into a primitive existence Monday, using candles instead of electricity, lining up to buy shrinking supplies of water and hacking their way through streets blocked by trees felled in a cyclone that killed more than 350.

Older citizens said they had never seen Yangon, a city of some 6.5 million, so devastated in their lifetimes.

With the city's already unstable electricity supply virtually nonfunctional citizens lined up to buy candles, which doubled in price, as well as water since lack of electricity-driven pumps left most households dry. Some walked to the city's lakes to wash.

Hotels and richer families were using private generators but only sparingly, given the soaring price of fuel.

Despite the havoc wreaked by tropical cyclone Nargis across wide swaths of the Southeast Asian country, the government indicated that a referendum on the country's draft constitution would proceed as planned on May 10.

"It's only a few days left before the coming referendum and people are eager to cast their vote," the state-owned newspaper Myanmar Ahlin said Monday.

Pro-democracy groups in the country and many international critics have branded the constitution as merely a tool for the military's continued grip on power.

Should the junta be seen as failing disaster victims, voters who already blame the regime for ruining the economy and squashing democracy could take out their frustrations at the ballot box.

The Foreign Ministry called resident ambassadors to a meeting Monday, and some diplomats said they expected the government to request foreign emergency assistance.

Some in Yangon complained the 400,000-strong military was doing little to help victims after Saturday's storm, only clearing streets where the ruling elite resided but leaving residents to cope on their own in most other areas.

"Where are all those uniformed people who are always ready to beat civilians?" a trishaw driver, who refused to be identified for fear of retribution, said Sunday. "They should come out in full force and help clean up the areas and restore electricity."

Residents, as well as Buddhist monks from the city's many monasteries, banded together, wielding axes and knives to clear roads of tree trunks and branches torn off by the cyclones 120 mph winds.

Several residents said the streets were like forests, scattered as they were with trees and debris.

Airlines announced Yangon's international airport had reopened, but public transport was almost at a standstill. Vehicles on the road had to cope with navigating without traffic lights.

Many stayed away from their jobs, either because they could not find transport or because they had to seek food and shelter for their families.

"Without my daily earning, just survival has become a big problem for us," said Tin Hla, who normally repairs umbrellas at a roadside stand. With his shanty town house destroyed by the storm, Tin Hla said he has had to place his family of five into one of the monasteries which have offered temporary shelter to many homeless.

Most telephone landlines, mobile phones and Internet connections were down.

The city was plunged into almost total darkness overnight, security concerns mounted, with reports of robberies in some working class suburbs circulating. Many shops sold their goods through partially opened doors or iron grills. Looting was reported at several fresh food markets, where thieves took vegetables and other items.

At least 351 people were killed, including 162 who lived on Haing Gyi island off the country's southwest coast, military-run Myawaddy television station reported. Many of the others died in the low-lying Irrawaddy delta.

"The Irrawaddy delta was hit extremely hard not only because of the wind and rain but because of the storm surge," said Chris Kaye, the U.N.'s acting humanitarian coordinator in Yangon. "The villages there have reportedly been completely flattened."

State television reported that in the Irrawaddy's Labutta township, 75 percent of the buildings had collapsed.

The U.N. planned to send teams Monday to assess the damage, Kaye said. Initial assessment efforts had been hampered by roads clogged with debris and downed phone lines, he said.

Myanmar, also known as Burma, has been under military rule since 1962. Its government has been widely criticized for human rights abuses and suppression of pro-democracy parties

such as the one led by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest for almost 12 of the past 18 years.

Last September, at least 31 people were killed and thousands more were detained when the military cracked down on peaceful protests led by Buddhist monks and democracy advocates.

The Forum for Democracy in Burma and other dissident groups outside of Myanmar urged the military junta Sunday to allow aid groups to operate freely in the wake of the cyclone — something it has been reluctant to do in the past.

Referendum, the Burmese junta imposes early and rigged voting

AsiaNews – 30 April 2008

With the excuse that on May 10 a day of work will be lost, together with a day's pay, soldiers are forcing village inhabitants to vote early and for the "yes". Authorities deny entry to journalists and diplomats.

Yangon - Burmese day labourers who will vote on the constitutional referendum on May 10 will be deprived of their pay, unless they choose to vote in advance and opt for the "yes". This is the latest threat from the military leaders seeking approval from voters, who for the most part maintain that the new constitution is only an instrument to legitimise the power of the generals. At the same time, the authorities are closing the borders to foreign visitors in the attempt to limit the presence of "inconvenient" journalists and observers in the days around the scheduled voting.

Sources for AsiaNews in the area of Mandalay denounce the pressure of soldiers in the villages, who are going from house to house telling people: "Vote for the yes now in a few minutes, instead of losing time and money on May 10; on that day the lines will be long and you your daily salary will not be reimbursed". There are also cases in which food rations are promised for the entire year to villages that support the new charter.

In addition to the "no" of the voters, the threat that the regime is seeking to dismiss is that of foreigners. The newspaper The Irrawaddy reports that there are restrictions on the granting of entry visas. According to "reliable" sources close to the Burmese opposition cited by the newspaper, yesterday two Japanese citizens were stopped at the airport of Yangon and forced to return home, because they were suspected of being journalists.

The embassies are restricting even the tourism visas being released in this period. All of the Burmese diplomatic offices abroad are scrupulously examining each request, submitting those of journalistic origin to the scrutiny of the information ministry as well.

Myanmar "forces" civil servants to vote for charter

Reuters - 02 May 2008

YANGON - Hundreds of government workers in Myanmar have been forced to vote in favor of an army-drafted constitution in non-secret ballots held more than a week before a May 10 referendum, some of the workers said.

In one of the cases, about 700 employees in the Ministry of Electric Power-2's Yangon office had to tick their ballot papers on Wednesday with local referendum officials looking on, witnesses said.

"We were all shocked and some people were furious but they couldn't do anything," one of those present said. The worker did not want to be identified for fear of recriminations from the former Burma's military rulers.

"They said those who wanted to vote 'no' had to hand in their resignation," the worker said.

Need new papers? Vote 'Yes' in the referendum

AsiaNews – 02 May 2008

In the cities people who have to renew their driver's licence are told to vote 'Yes' in advance polls. Government officials use fake trial runs to get voters to mark 'Yes' on ballots.

Yangon – As the military continues to get the poor and the illiterate to vote in favour of the constitution by using threats and tricks, in the cities the ruling junta is pressuring voters to cast a favourable ballot if they want to get their papers. Sources in fact have told AsiaNews that in government offices officials are telling those who want to renew their driver's licence or register a new car that they must vote Yes in advance polls if they want their papers.

Elsewhere in Yangon and Mandalay residents are complaining that the military regime is pulling tricks out of its hat that verge on the ridiculous.

Government officials are actually telling people that they must take part in referendum trial runs so that they can be shown how to vote by placing an X on the 'Yes' box; however, once this is done the supposedly fake ballots are taken and participants are told that they don't have to go to vote on 10 May, the day when Myanmar's generals expect their new constitution to be approved, which many human rights activists and the country's pro-democracy opposition see as a simple tool to legitimise the status quo.

"We are awed and scared of how the junta is determined to force upon us this constitution that no one wants, not even public servants or soldiers," said the sources that remained anonymous for their own security.

Democracy, Burma-style

The Wall Street Journal - 01 May 2008

Burmese go to the polls next week to vote on a new constitution, but their ballots won't matter much. The document on offer from the military junta isn't meant to empower the people – it's for their rulers. If there's any good news here, it's that this farce may spark another march for freedom.

The constitution, released April 9, is full of references to "democracy," but not the kind of freedom that liberal nations promote. The constitution reserves 25% of parliamentary seats for army appointees and allows the commander-in-chief to seize control during a state of emergency. Either the president or one of two vice presidents must be elected by army representatives. Specific clauses disqualify opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi from running for high office because she was married to a foreigner.

The junta hasn't left anything to chance. Hundreds of thousands of Buddhist monks and nuns are forbidden from voting. Local-level officials have been instructed by their higher-ups to ensure their districts vote "yes." At the Burmese embassy in Singapore last weekend, hundreds of Burmese expats wearing T-shirts emblazoned with the word "no" were turned away from advance voting.

The junta itself seems to realize its constitution might be unpopular. Although the government has launched a massive advertising campaign with slogans such as "to approve the state constitution is the national duty," they're charging nearly one U.S. dollar per copy of the document – too dear for ordinary Burmese. The text is also available only in Burmese, making it difficult reading for millions of ethnic minorities whose native language is not Burmese.

You'd think this episode might be a good opportunity for Burma's closest trading partners to gently steer its friend toward the right track. But no: Thailand's foreign minister this week welcomed Burma's prime minister to Bangkok, hailing the constitution as "a step toward democracy." The PM had an audience with the King last night, and dined at the home of his Thai counterpart Tuesday. Burma's neighbor to the west, India, hasn't said a word.

The United States, at least, seems to be telling it like it is. The constitution "would appear intended only to perpetuate the rule of the existing military junta in Burma," State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said. The U.S. has introduced a resolution to the United Nations Security Council calling for dialogue with Ms. Suu Kyi. China is expected to veto it.

So once again, the Burmese people are left to shoulder their fight for freedom alone. Remarkably, they seem willing to do so, even after the military killed more than 30 peaceful protestors last year. More than 70 people have been arrested in the past week for campaigning against the constitution. Saturday, dozens of protesters congregated around Shwedagon pagoda – the focal point of protests last September – and scores more protested on the streets of Sittwe, in western Burma.

The last time Burma held elections, in 1990, Ms. Suu Kyi's party won by a landslide, but the junta simply annulled the results and kept on ruling. There's nothing to say that won't happen again this time, if the people of Burma are brave enough to vote "no."