



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

The Myanmar Nargis Aftermath: A Disaster in Governance

Nyi Nyi Kyaw

16 May 2008

Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar, which made headline news across the globe, triggered denunciations of the military regime in delaying the international humanitarian relief efforts. The cyclone-struck country suffers from bad governance that has turned a natural disaster into a looming public health crisis.

"IT SHOULD be a simple matter. It's not a matter of politics. It's a matter of a humanitarian crisis," said the US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. She was reacting to the delays by the Myanmar government in letting in relief assistance to its cyclone-hit population. Ms Rice's comment however exemplifies the two-dimensional disaster that the Myanmar people are currently suffering from: they are suffering from not only a natural calamity but also a disaster in governance.

Regional and international newspapers and television programmes have captivated public attention with their reports on the devastating impact of the cyclone Nargis on Myanmar's former capital Yangon and cities and villages in the Ayeyarwaddy Delta. Along with these reports have come accusations from the international community that the junta is intentionally delaying the provision of humanitarian assistance to the cyclone-inflicted people and areas.

Next to the Asian Tsunami of 2004 which killed more than 200,000 people from many Asian countries, especially Indonesia, this cyclone attack in Myanmar is the second most serious natural disaster in Asia in the twenty-first century in terms of human devastation.

After the tragic cyclone hit Yangon and the Delta on 3 May, various estimates of human deaths have been produced by the military government and other bodies including foreign missionaries in Myanmar, media, and international organizations. The latest estimate of the death toll released by the junta on 10 May is 28,458 dead and 33,416 people missing. However, independent estimates have put the death toll at more than 100,000. One extreme estimate by an international agency even counted the number as around 600,000. The tragedy does not stop there. The United Nations estimates that between 1.5 and 2 million people have been severely affected by the cyclone.

Myanmar had advance warning

Natural disasters are inevitable. However, there are now resources, especially technological expertise, to anticipate or contain their fallouts before and after the outbreak. For example, when strong storms are approaching, there is now expertise, at least in some places, to predict their time of occurrence, track and destructibility. This information is usually freely shared with countries which lack such technology to track climate changes. The Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) warned the Myanmar authorities of the tropical cyclone Nargis's track and severity 48 hours before it struck.

At the same time, most countries are able to reduce the amount of devastation in many ways after the natural disasters. All sorts of relief effort can be immediately put in place to alleviate the suffering of those affected. Dead bodies can be removed promptly in order to prevent the subsequent outbreak of contagious diseases. Broken transportation and communication systems can be immediately repaired so that relief aid can reach the most severely affected people and places.

Food and water can be distributed to the hungry and thirsty. However, all of these critical needs have been neglected by the junta in Myanmar. This neglect has posed a serious impediment to the free, quick flow of assistance from the international community. Myanmar is proof for specialists in non-traditional security issues that when a natural disaster combines with a governance disaster, the impact on human suffering is enormous.

Governance disaster

The junta manifested its irresponsibility and neglect both before Nargis hit, as well as after the attack. They failed to send warnings and make proper preparations, such as evacuating those in Nargis' path, before the cyclone attack -- despite the warning from the IMD. Worse, the junta did not provide any significant support to the cyclone-hit area after the tragedy. Worst, they have been blocking the international humanitarian assistance in many ways. This is what we can call a 'governance disaster'.

According to the UN, at least one million survivors have been living without any aid for more than a week after the cyclone tragedy because the aid shipments have been delayed or blocked by the stubborn junta. Meanwhile, epidemiologists have already warned that many contagious diseases will follow and kill many more people if relief is further delayed. Many outbreaks of contagious diseases in the Delta caused by lack of clean water and preventive medicine have already been reported.

The international agency Oxfam has predicted that the lives of up to 1.5 million people will be put at risk in the form of a public health catastrophe if proper measures are not taken urgently. Yet, the junta still continues to delay immediate relief aid, although some restrictions have been eased and some aid has been distributed already.

The World Food Program (WFP) has stated that Myanmar has less than 10 per cent of the international staff, material and general logistics apparatus that is needed to manage the crisis. Furthermore, less than 20 percent of food that is needed can be distributed. Indeed, local and international NGOs, individuals and Myanmar citizens abroad have given a hand in

providing humanitarian assistance. However, it is not enough. What is currently needed most in Myanmar is a free flow of a large amount of international aid and foreign expertise.

The referendum

During this enormous crisis, the military regime exposed its inner will by holding the referendum on the newly-written constitution. It was a cunning effort to document the strong hold on power by the military, on 10 May, ignoring the calls from both within and outside the country, including that of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, to postpone it. The junta announced earlier that the date of the referendum would be moved to 24 May only in those areas in the Delta most severely hit by the storm.

The referendum did not allow any foreign observers and widespread cheating and insincerity were witnessed by voters at the polling stations. This holding of the referendum despite the calls at home and outside is a clear sign of the junta's disregard for the welfare of the Myanmar people in addition to the brutal crackdown on the mass protests in response to the sudden price hike of fuel led by Buddhist monks last September.

While the junta has been blocking the relief system throughout, the calls for humanitarian intervention have emerged from both within and outside Myanmar. On the other hand, some prefer negotiations with and pressures on the junta through the governments that are friendly to Myanmar.

Whatever the approach, the most important is to prevent a public health crisis looming as soon as possible. No more time must be wasted. Myanmar will continue to experience both natural disaster and governance disaster until a workable, quick solution to solve the problem of delayed assistance to the cyclone-inflicted country is found.

Nyi Nyi Kyaw is a native of Myanmar where he has lived all his life. He came to Singapore to pursue his MSc (International Political Economy) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.