

Joint Response to “*After the Storm: Voices from the Delta*”

Rangoon, Burma

8 April 2009

We represent a number of international relief agencies working on the ground inside Burma providing urgent humanitarian assistance to thousands of communities affected by Cyclone Nargis across the Irrawaddy Delta.

We have reviewed the report, “After the Storm” written by the Emergency Assistance Team (EAT) and the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, and believe it necessary to provide a balanced and accurate view of the situation in Burma after Cyclone Nargis. In summary, the EAT-Johns Hopkins report is both inaccurate and does a disservice to the courageous and resilient survivors of Cyclone Nargis. While we recognize the situation on the ground was problematic in May-June 2008, the size of the problems do not compare to the enormous achievements and successes accomplished by many international and local groups working together to respond to the crisis.

The implications and conclusions in the EAT-Johns Hopkins report that abuses are systematic, ongoing and being ignored, are inaccurate and without basis. We found a number of shortcomings in the report, including its premise, methodology and most of its findings. Below is a summary of our response.

The Report’s Premise:

The Report states that *“The voices, experiences and eye-witness accounts of the response to Cyclone Nargis have been missing from the international debate around the relief effort.”* It further states that it is the *“only independent assessment of the response to bring forth the uncensored voices of survivors conducted by relief workers operating free of SPDC control.”*

This statement is incorrect and misleading. A large number of independent organizations operating in Burma have conducted assessments of relief efforts. Taken together, these assessments represent the experience of hundreds of thousands of cyclone survivors and relief workers. Between the international NGOs alone, we have a combined staff of over 4,000 Burmese and expatriate field personnel living and/or working in over 2,000 cyclone affected villages. The uncensored voices of these survivors and relief workers recording conditions and relief activities have been ignored by the EAT-Johns Hopkins report.

To our knowledge, the authors from EAT-Johns Hopkins did not make an effort to obtain information from any of the over 50 international and independent organizations providing on-the-ground humanitarian relief over the past nine months inside Burma.

The Survey Methodology Used:

The Report explains its survey methodology as follows: *“A total of 90 interviews were conducted. Interviewees were 33 relief workers and 57 survivors, interviewed in storm-affected areas (including in Irrawaddy Division) and in Thailand.”*

Given the magnitude of the emergency response from May to November 2008, the survey methodology used is inadequate to represent the experiences of over two million cyclone survivors, especially those living in remote areas. Only 33 relief workers and 57 cyclone survivors were interviewed in Rangoon and along the Thai-Burma border – not in any of the thousands of villages affected by the storm located in the Irrawaddy Delta. The report, for example also makes claims about discrimination based on ethnicity and religion, yet doesn't reveal the number of religiously or ethnically heterogeneous villages included in the sample. In the end, we do not support the sampling methodology and feel it is not rigorous enough to support the broad, conclusive 'findings' made in the report.

By comparison, reputable international humanitarian agencies operating inside Burma have conducted numerous assessments of relief efforts using significantly larger sample sizes along with robust and transparent methodologies. For example, some agencies who have conducted such evaluations and assessments include World Vision, CARE, Save the Children, Caritas, Action Aid, Welthungerhilfe, Action by Churches Together (ACT), the International Agency Standing Committee (IASC), International Development Enterprises (IDE) and fourteen local NGOs. These agencies have used hundreds of trained, local interviewers to conduct the field work. More significantly, compared to the small sample of 57 survivors used in the EAT-Johns Hopkins survey, our assessments have spoken directly with over 5,000 survivors in at least 150 different village tracts and more than 500 villages (lists are available on request). Our surveys have taken place over the entire period of the relief operations (May 2008 to March 2009). Our findings are in sharp contrast to the EAT-Johns Hopkins report.

The EAT-Johns Hopkins Report's Findings

The report lists a number of findings, almost all of which misrepresent and contradict the on-the-ground experiences of thousands of foreign and local relief workers, professionals, foreign embassy personnel and independent observers.

1. While we have many concerns over the content of the EAT-Johns Hopkins report, we do agree with one finding of the report, namely, that the *'aid that did reach villages was often inadequate to meet the needs of the communities.'* Our assessments indicate that most villages did receive aid, but not in sufficient quantity. This is true even today – April 2009. There are still desperate needs and we have continued to express concern and advocate for greater levels of assistance.

2. The Report concludes there was *"a systematic obstruction of relief aid operating on both international and local levels."* We share the frustration that foreign agencies based in Thailand or in the region faced in trying to get emergency relief operations launched during the first few chaotic weeks after the cyclone. And it was inexcusable that foreign staff of organizations in-country were not allowed to enter the Delta in the first couple of weeks. However, we must pay tribute to and not ignore the thousands of local Burmese organizations, relief workers and civic-minded individuals who stepped in to respond immediately and worked tirelessly under extreme conditions for weeks on end.

Despite the initial restrictions, numerous international and local organizations were, in fact, able to provide significant amounts of aid within the first three weeks of the disaster. For example, by 18 May 2008, two weeks after the cyclone, Save the Children had reached over 160,000 people (including 70,000 in Irrawaddy Division) with food, water plastic sheeting, kitchen equipment and oral rehydration solution. Many other organizations report a similar experience. Were these experiences sufficient to address the tremendous need – absolutely not. However, there must be an explicit acknowledgement that the operational conditions in the Irrawaddy Delta now bear no

resemblance to the restrictions of the first few weeks. Since then, over the past nine months, more than 110 relief organizations have provided life-saving aid without significant interference by the SPDC.

3. The Report also states that “*theft and confiscation of relief supplies by authorities was frequently reported.*” This statement ignores the role of international NGOs and takes anecdotal evidence and places it out of context. We do know there were rare incidences of confiscation during the early period of the relief effort. International and local relief groups did not hand over relief supplies to the Government. We were able to deliver relief supplies directly to cyclone survivors in virtually all circumstances. For example, IDE, an international organization provided over \$10 million of assistance to approximately 1 million survivors in 1,200 villages across eleven of the hard-hit townships during a 10 month period, without confiscation or theft by the SPDC. Many foreign governments did deliver their donated supplies directly to the Government of Myanmar. Examples include Japan, Singapore, Saudi Arabia and Thailand.

4. Another of the Report’s findings was that there was “*discrimination in the delivery of cyclone relief based on ethnicity and religion*”. The reality is that except for minor exceptions, aid has been delivered following humanitarian principles of impartiality. International agencies selected villages and communities for delivery of aid entirely independently. When there was evidence of partiality, it was usually not at the SPDC’s instigation, but instead reflected longstanding identity conflicts between communities. In contrast to the implications of the EAT-Johns Hopkins report, international agencies have reinforced conflict-sensitive approaches which aim to build understanding between identity groups and divided communities. Progress is being made on reducing discrimination.

5. Involuntary return from temporary resettlement sites was a problematic issue in May-July 2008. However, at present most displaced persons have returned to their place of origin or relocated while some pockets of displaced people and plans for relocation remain an issue. UN agencies and INGOs are seeking ways to address this directly with the authorities and the affected persons.

6. Finally, the report claims the SPDC used forced labor – including forced child labor for rebuilding projects to repair cyclone damage to schools, roads and etc. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO) which monitors forced labor, international law is clear that work exacted during the immediate emergency period is not forced labour. There is no evidence that this exemption to the use of forced labour was widely exercised during the immediate emergency period. The ILO during that time did not receive any report on the use of forced labour. However, during the early recovery period the ILO did receive two reports of the use of forced labour. An intervention, in a form of awareness-raising, was initiated to ensure that the local authorities in the region understood their responsibilities under the law. The reported practice ceased immediately. A monitoring mechanism was put in place to identify any repeat of such behaviour. No further complaints have been received. The practical and logistic difficulties for people to actually make a complaint were and continue to be a problem. The above therefore does not prove that more incidents of forced labour have not occurred.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we’d like to highlight the following:

- Dozens of international and local relief agencies along with foreign embassies are continually examining humanitarian aid delivery from inside Burma. They are able to do so independently and firsthand.

- The international humanitarian assistance delivered to date has been life-saving and life sustaining for millions of cyclone survivors. It has reached them without significant interference.
- INGOs in Myanmar work within constraints and continuously seek to address and put into place mechanisms that improve accountability, transparency and protection issues in a responsible manner . (A special working group, a Protection cluster, has been set up under the Inter Agency Standing Committee which seeks to address protection-related issues.)
- The effect of broadly misrepresenting the situation on the ground in the Delta after Cyclone Nargis through the EAT-Johns Hopkins report can be to undermine the case for further aid to the survivors. Far from improving the situation, it will lead to significant further suffering for hundreds of thousands of people. Recovery from this massive disaster is still very tenuous. It is clear that aid needs to be ramped up to support the two million cyclone survivors who continue to struggle under grim conditions today.
- The news release dated 27 February 2009 from EAT-Johns Hopkins called for a review “before further assistance is delivered.” None of the "voices" quoted in the EAT-Johns Hopkins report, and none of the survivors that relief agencies have spoken to, are calling for such a pause in aid. To the contrary, the consistent "voice" of all the people in the Delta, in direct contradiction to the report, is "Please, don't abandon us". This strongest of voices is completely absent from the report.

We owe it to the courageous survivors of Cyclone Nargis to collectively engage in helping them rebuild their lives. In the spirit of research and learning, we would welcome an opportunity to meet with the authors of the report to discuss their findings and concerns. In particular, we invite representatives from EAT and the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health to visit the Delta together to meet directly with cyclone survivors to hear their views on continued assistance. We believe our common efforts at reflection, debate and mutual accountability can ultimately serve to improve the lives of survivors in Myanmar during this most critical juncture.

Signed by:

Action Aid
 ADRA
 Burnet Institute
 Care
 CESVI
 Danish Church Aid
 Hope International
 International Development Enterprises
 International Rescue Committee
 Lutheran World Federation
 Malteser

Mercy Corps
 Merlin
 Norwegian Peoples Aid
 Norwegian Refugee Council
 Pact
 Population Services International
 Relief International
 Save the Children
 Welthungerhilfe (German Agro-Action)
 World Vision