

# The Mon Forum

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## Some Acronyms in This Issue

- SPDC - State Peace and Development Council,  
HURFOM- Human Rights Foundation of Monland  
IBGOs - International Non-governmental Organizations  
NGOs - Non-governmental Organizations  
OCHA - UN Office for Coordinating Humanitarian Affairs  
PSB - Press Scrutiny Board  
NLD - National League for Democracy

## News

### Border-town Malaria Rates Rise

June 27, 2008, By HURFOM:

The number of malaria patients among Burmese migrants on the Thai-Burma border has dramatically increased this month, said a health worker from the Mae Tao Clinic based in Mae Sot, Thailand.

“More than 180 patients visit our clinic each day, and our blood tests are revealing around 30 people per day are infected with malaria. Just last month we found over 1,000 people had malaria,” said Sarkbaw, the operations manager at the Mae Tao clinic.

Another clinic staffer went on to say that many of the patients were not familiar with the area and so did not know how to reduce the risk of being infected. The border is a high-risk area for malaria, more so than many of the inland villages they have traveled from.

Dr. Cynthia Maung’s Mae Tao clinic is now suffering from a shortage of available beds due to the influx of patients with malaria; they are currently treating over 100 patients infected with the mosquito-borne illness.

Malaria is extremely dangerous and can prove fatal if not detected early; even with treatment three people suffering from malaria died last month at the Mae Tao clinic and Three Pagodas Pass also on the border in Thailand’s Kanchanaburi Province reported similar numbers.



Over-crowded hospital in a border town with migrants from Burma

## Urgent and More Assistance to Cyclone Victims - Hope

Although there was a visit paid by UN Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon and his message “I come to Myanmar with a message of **Hope**”, the people in Burma’s cyclone hit devastated area still facing many hopelessness situation.

Only over 230 relief workers from UN Agencies were received visa from Burmese military regime by the end of June and UN also admitted that their relief efforts could reach to 40% of cyclone effected population after nearly 2 months of deadly hit cyclone.

Thousands of people in Irrawaddy Division of delta area still need helps for basic foods especially rice and clean drinking water, sheltherring materials like blankets and mosquito nets, and medicines that could provide some diseases.

The communities those live far from the main cities or relief and resettlement centers did not see any type of assistance, and they are hardly find to get foods and other assistance. Besides the aid assistance provided by UN Agencies, and International Aid Agencies, **the community to community direct assistance** was also helpful for the isolated communities.

The Buddhist community of Burma has showed their kinds each other in order to safe lives and participated in helping the victims, but they also faced some restriction. Additionally, there is a need for the coodination and protection among those worked for international agencies and community to community assistance program, because the victims hope to receive assistance.

With an outbreak already evident, staff at Mae Tao are concerned about the upcoming rainy season when a high number of malaria-related deaths are usually expected.

According to the Shoklo Malaria Research Unit based in Mae Sot, during the rainy season breeding grounds for malaria-carrying mosquitoes emerge, especially

in areas like Mae Sot where heavier rainfall contributes to a higher population of mosquitoes.

Their research supports the on-the-ground reports of a higher incidence of malaria. According to a Mae Tao senior medic the statistics produced from research they conducted through an anti-malaria program on the Thai-Burma border show an increase in infection rate from last year to this year.

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## A Mon migrant worker shot in southern Thailand

by HURFOM

A Burmese migrant worker was shot by an unidentified Thai gang last night in southern Thailand . Nai Myat Soe was shot when he and his son went to the rubber plantation in Tha Chana Township , Surat Thani province at midnight.

Blai Due son of Nai Myat Soe said “My father was shot three times in the chest”.

They were shot at when they went to the rubber plantation on a motorcycle around 12 pm. Blai Due escaped.

“My father died 10 minutes after he was shot on the way to hospital. Surat Thani police are still investigation the killing,” said Blai Due.

Blai Due and his family have been working in the rubber plantation for about two months. They hail from Thanpyuzayart Township in Mon state. The

family migrated to Thailand more than 10 years ago.

Many Burmese migrant workers are working in rubber plantations in Surat . Migrant workers have been facing many problems with gangs torturing and killing them, said a worker in Surat Thani.

On February 9, some Burmese migrants were shot at while they were working in a rubber plantation in the same province in Ban Na San.

Last January, a group of migrant workers were robbed by a gang which included two Mon youths. The robbers damaged and burnt property of workers.

Up to two million Burmese migrants are estimated to be working in Thailand , less than 500,000 of them legally according to the Chiang Mai based Migrant Assistance Program.

(Reference from IMNA News July 2, 2008)

## Report

# Suppressed: Freedom of Speech in Burma

## History of Restriction against Freedom of Speech

To look at the smiling faces of the people of Burma, one could be forgiven for believing the Junta's claim that their people are content. But it isn't true; more like the Junta's propaganda machines, the smiling faces do not tell you the full story. From the time a person in Burma wakes up in the morning they face conflict and uncertainty. There are no permanent jobs in Burma, no real ownership of anything and very high poverty. Added to all this is the lack of some fundamental human rights; there is no freedom of speech or freedom of press in Burma.

Burma's military government severely restricts all forms of information gathering and dissemination. To protect themselves from dissention, they have enforced jail sentences on anyone who publishes any unauthorized materials and has restricted access to the internet. Currently, Burma has about 100 weekly monthly journals and magazines which all operate using publishing licenses issued by police, intelligence officers and ministries. All media groups have to go through the Press Scrutiny Board (PSB), which is controlled by SPDC intelligence officers.

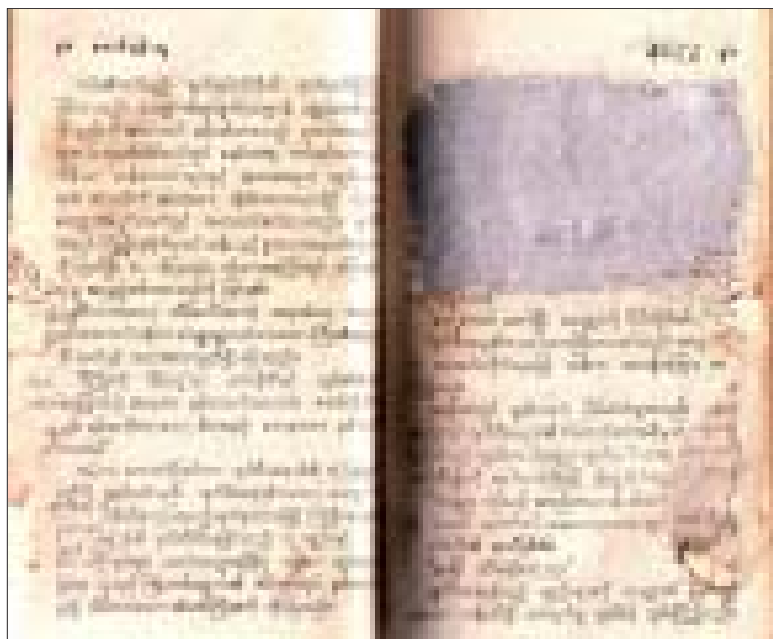
A time of relative freedom of press and media existed during the Parliamentary Democracy period between 1948 and 1962, but promptly ceased with the military coup in 1962 led by General Ne Win. Since then, as the country has floundered and sunk under military rule, free expression and the right to criticize government policy have been all but eradicated. Beginning in 1962, the country has been torn apart by civil war, as the military regime restricts the media, with no freedom of the press; the people live in fear and there is little trust between anyone.

Over 68% of Burma's population belongs to the heavily oppressed ethnic minorities. While the military regime attempts to build a unitary state many ethnic people don't trust the Burmese, largely because they have been subjected the to military's spies for years, as the Junta attempts to break down any ethnic strength. Despite this high proportion of ethnic people, Burma doesn't have any official media owned by an ethnic minority.

Following any civil unrest the Junta often blames the largely ethnic-run media in exile and any individuals for providing them with news. They accuse any non-state-run media of being anti-Junta, and frequently arrest people inside Burma found to be providing exiled groups with news stories. Some ethnic groups are permitted to publish magazines and calendars, however they must be approved by the Burmese censorship board in an approval process that can last over six months. This convoluted process is made all the more frustrating by the seemingly inadequate board which sometimes fails to reply to applications at all.

Privately owned journals and magazines are permitted to publish regional news, and government development projects, but are prohibited from writing about the 'West'. All media publications must include a page for a Junta opinion piece, which more often than not serves as a platform for an attack on Western countries or Burmese in exile.

Only a few people have been brave enough to speak out against the



**A book inked by the regime's Press Scrutiny Board (PSB)**

regime to promote democracy in Burma. Most of them are members of the pro-democracy group National League for Democracy (NLD). At times these people walked on the street and called for reform of Burma's political situation. Although protesting peacefully, the regime attacked protesters violently, killing some and detaining others indefinitely without charge.

The country's state-run media is often biased, and publishes the opinions of Junta officials as fact, alongside propaganda campaigns relentlessly railing against any opposition groups. Opposition groups and individuals are not allowed their right of reply. In keeping with its usual pro-Junta stance, after Nargis state-run media only reported positive news, detailing how much the Junta was doing for the country; building roads and bridges, and helping the people – as demonstrated when footage emerged of the Generals walking among the survivors offering them food. In truth, these visits were only for publicity.

The people of Burma are isolated from the world, with little knowledge of what is happening outside their country, or within it. If dependent on state-run media, the people would have no knowledge of the long-running human rights abuses occurring daily across their nation.

Many Burmese people have left for neighboring countries such as Thailand, India and Bangladesh, in search of employment and a better life. Some Burmese human rights activists escaped to Thailand and formed the Burmese exile media groups, reporting on news about Burma from the inside, and without being subjected to the stringent rules governing their Burma-based colleagues.

## Media in Exile

Thus the onus for free and fair publishing falls to the Burmese media in exile, which is so often accused of being nothing more than western puppets who present groundless news stories designed to create unrest in the otherwise peaceful nation of Burma. The Junta denounces all Burmese media in exile, and all those who work with them, as traitors of Burma, greedy people who exploit the country for their own purposes and fail to offer any real news.



**Burmese exile media has more capacity to cover news in Burma**

There are many different media groups along the Thai-Burma and India-Burma borders. These media groups intend to promote justice, freedom and democracy in Burma. They also seek to inform the wider international community about the situation inside Burma in an effort to put pressure on the Junta for political change.

These groups were established by Burmese opposition groups and ethnic minorities. UN agencies, international agencies, NGOs and resettled Burmese refugees have to rely on information from these groups if they are to learn anything about the real situation inside Burma. Particularly in the wake of large-scale events like Cyclone Nargis in May, or the Saffron Revolution last September, foreign journalists are denied visas into Burma, so they too must rely on the media in exile, who have sources and field reporters inside who risk their lives every day to get their news out of the country.

The Junta heavily restricts the movement of foreigners into and around the country. Although permitted to visit towns, foreigners are watched, followed and prohibited to enter any rural areas. Although the reason given is safety, it is widely understood that the Junta doesn't want any words or images to emerge that may enlighten the global community about the appalling conditions in the rural areas of Burma. It is for this reason also that so-called 'ethnic areas' are off-limits to foreigners. Even when adhering to the 'towns-only' requirement there are exceptions; a Korean freelance journalist was deported from the country after she visited the main opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD).

Upon entry to Burma every foreigner must agree that they will visit only certain places, and that they understand they are not permitted in some places. One of these conditions is that they will not visit to any building or organization that belongs to a political party.

This type of movement restriction is not confined to foreign journalists; when the Junta relocated to their new capital Naypyitaw, very few people were aware the move was to take place. In breaking news stories around

the world, the global community discovered this news only when the Junta announced the new capital city had been constructed. This drew criticism of Burmese and foreign journalists, as many people asked how such a move could have escaped everyone's attention. It is now known the Junta controlled movement to this area, and did not allow any reports regarding the construction to be published.

## Journalists Inside

Some Burmese writers still try to publish the truth, so submit their stories in the hope they will be published. After Nargis, one writer saw an old woman eating green bananas to stay alive, after waiting for days for the government assistance that would never arrive. Although the reporter wrote about what they saw and submitted it for publication, the press scrutiny board omitted this section of the story. Another Burmese reporter in Rangoon said words such as "refugees" and "people are starving" are automatically deleted from their stories. The press scrutiny board is also very sensitive to photographs from the affected area. "They only allow pictures that show minor damage and people cleaning up," said one reporter.

This same reporter told HURFOM that pictures taken from the air showing the destruction of entire villages were cut, along with images of long lines of people waiting for food or relief supplies. According to the Burma Media Association (BMA), an exile-run press freedom group, at least four Burmese journalists have been detained by authorities this year for publishing material considered harmful to the regime.

Working as a true journalist in Burma is a risky job and if your family knows, they will not allow you to do it. Burmese journalists pretend to hold other jobs all the while reporting news to their friends in exiled media.

Most news stories carried out of Burma leave the country via the phone, as this is still the hardest medium for the Junta to control. Many local businessmen set up mobile phones to transfer currency into their country, with hundreds of thousands of Burmese workers in neighboring countries use this system to transfer funds. Local mobile phones have to register with the Junta, who instruct phone owners not to allow people to transmit news to exiled groups via the telephone and sometimes request usage reports.

## Internet Use in Burma

Burma is one of only a handful of countries with such strict governance over access to the World Wide Web. Only a few hundred elites are granted full access to the Internet and email communication is stringently monitored by the government. Recently, those who understand the importance of participating in the global community have opened a few Internet cafes in the country. These however are carefully scrutinized by the military regime.

Inside Burma all internet use is heavily monitored and many sites blocked. The military leaders remain highly paranoid about the Internet, and any sites accessed first pass through the Burmese censorship board. The Junta control and monitor every internet user who may be suspected of transporting news to the media in exile. According to some internet shop-owners, the Junta instructed them to forbid internet users sending photos and large files, and in recent months has increased their internet restrictions further.

Many Burmese university students are keen to use the internet for their studies, but find this potentially useful resource frustrating. Sometimes, they may spend one hour at an internet cafe and due to low speeds, high traffic and heavy censors, in this time they can only download their email login.

Further, computer courses are costly and many people cannot afford to pay. Using the internet, even without restrictions, is not easy for many people inside Burma, with a widely held misconception of the internet somehow being 'ghost air'.

There are only two internet cafes in the Mon State capital of Moulmein, the third biggest city in Burma. Internet shop-owners are required to erect signs warning users not to attempt to access prohibited websites, and not to attempt to write anything political in emails. Owners are also required to report their shop's activity monthly to the Junta. They have to record and report who used the internet on a daily basis.

Some internet bloggers were detained in Insein prison after posting photos of the monks' protests last September. The bloggers avoided using the usual internet proxy servers and were able to inform their media in exile. Many news stories were updated on Burmese blogs during the protests, and it was often through these means

that the world learned of the situation; hence bloggers were targeted by the paranoid and power-hungry Junta.

Laws have been written to legitimate the government's stance: in 1996 unapproved possession of a fax or modem was prohibited, use of the internet to "undermine the state, law and order, national unity, national culture or the economy" were deemed punishable, and in January of 2000 all online political material was made subject to government approval. Those who dare to break these laws face up to 15 years in prison. The country's sole internet provider, Bagan Cybertech, has been nationalized and is under the control of the Ministry of Telecommunication, Post and Telegraphs. Some of Burma's independent media that functions outside the country (with their network inside Burma) has been banned inside Burma. **Burma's Press Scrutiny and Registration Board was renamed in April 2005 and called 'Press Scrutiny and Registration Division' and operates under the Ministry of Information.** Myanmar authorities have stepped up their surveillance of the Internet in recent months, pressuring Internet cafe owners to register personal details of all users and to program screen captures every five minutes on each computer, with this data then sent to the Ministry of Communications. The only blog platform that had been accessible within Myanmar, Google-owned Blogger, has been blocked by the regime since January 23<sup>rd</sup>, effectively preventing non-hacker bloggers from posting entries.

## Media Inside

The Junta cracks down on both Burmese and non-Burmese media. For the non-Burmese, the Junta accuses them of supporting the ethnic rebels or political armed groups. For the Burmese media groups, the Junta accuses them of supporting the NLD. **One sports newspaper receives widespread coverage from the towns and cities to the villages and discussions of football are encouraged across the country. The Junta would prefer its people, from the youth to the elderly, to be more concerned with world football than politics at home, so allows tea shop discussions on Arsenal or Manchester United, but not the NLD or Nargis.**

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**Case Study, Reporter for Exiled Media Group:** One time I remember I visited my village and I ordered a copy of the 'Myanmar Times' in Moulmein. It was the first time the vendor had heard of this paper, but promised to try and get it for the next time I was in town. He did, and gave it to me proudly when I returned to Moulmein and sat at the tea shop. But it wasn't the newspaper I requested, it was a magazine about Kung Fu. He had misunderstood my request, and not only had not heard of Myanmar Times, but at the market he said no one knew of it either. State-run newspapers, no problem, but something else? It made me realize that living in exile I take a lot for granted, I have access to so much information while the people inside Burma are living in the dark. To be a citizen of Burma is to have many different experiences than others. But many Burmese people don't want to be Burmese citizen because their experience is living with fear under the threats of the Junta.

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There are several TV stations allowed in Burma, all controlled and censored by the Junta. Many Burmese watch state-run TV, and are unable to decipher what is true news and what is a fabrication of the Junta's propaganda machine; they rely heavily on the media in exile.

## Foreign Media and Nargis

Sometimes the Junta bans the import of foreign magazines, usually if they cover any stories about Burma and in particular anything to do with opposition leader Daw Aung Sang Suu Kyi. Recently, the Junta prohibited the import of any journals covering Cyclone Nargis, including any that had published any photographs of the devastation in the Irrawaddy delta. Some Burmese magazine and journals were banned from taking and publishing any photos of the devastation. According to the Burmese media inside, the censorship board had a heavy focus on prohibiting any aerial shots of the affected areas. It's been two months since the tropical cyclone slashed through the Irrawaddy delta, yet still there are refugees who have never received any relief assistance from the government or private relief organizations. Many people in Burma are unaware of this.

Like foreign aid workers, journalists from the international media were prevented from entering the areas hardest hit by the cyclone. Some, like BBC journalist Andrew Harding, were not even able to get into the country. Harding was deported on arrival at Rangoon International Airport for ‘visa violations’—or, as an official Burmese news presenter put it, possessing a ‘disguising tourist visa.’ “Tens of thousands are dead, millions may be in need, and foreign aid workers are still waiting impatiently for visas, but the presenter put all that aside and spent several minutes solemnly describing my crimes and my expulsion,” Harding said of his experience and the subsequent coverage in Burma’s state-run media. For those who did get in, such as Dan Rivers of CNN, the experience was not merely bizarre, but frightening. After dodging the authorities for days, Rivers said he began to fear for his life. “We’re in the middle of nowhere. No one knows where we are, exactly. They could just shoot us and throw us into the river and say we had an accident,” he said. The fact that the regime had not committed the carnage Rivers witnessed in the delta hardly mattered. When his crew videotaped government workers throwing dead bodies into a river, he knew that he was dealing with a regime that was obsessed with concealing the truth. “Why should they be trying to hide a natural disaster? It’s not their fault,” he said. “It just illustrates the mentality of the regime. It’s so suspicious of the outside world.”

Although Rivers went through a lot to come out of Burma with his story, local reporters face an even more dangerous situation. If they are caught reporting the disaster without official sanctions, they won’t be deported to Thailand—they’ll be arrested and could face a lengthy sentence in the infamous Insein Prison. Whether they work for local publications or major international news outlets such as CNN or Al Jazeera, or as undercover reporters for exiled Burmese media such as the Democratic Voice of Burma or The Irrawaddy, Burmese journalists took considerable risks to report from the scene of the disaster.



**Foreign media is also reliable source for international community to know about Burma**

On May 19<sup>th</sup>, eight Burmese journalists were taken into custody by soldiers and detained overnight for trying to report on the impact of the cyclone in Laputta Township, which suffered some of the worst effects of the disaster. Most Burmese journalists have a sense of guilt because they are allowed to report only one side of the story, giving positive accounts where they can be found while ignoring the other side of the story in which people are still suffering great hardship because of the regime’s lack of concern, organizational ability and distrust of Western governments and non-governmental agencies. An editor on the privately-run Rangoon magazine Cherry was fired and three censorship board employees were reportedly suspended from duty after the monthly carried a poem that displeased government officials. The censors of the Press Scrutiny and Registration Division ordered the publishers of Cherry to withdraw the May issue of the magazine in which the offending poem appeared.

But the magazine had already sold out. The offending poem, “De Pa Yin Ga”, referred to the events in Depayin town in Sagaing Division in May 2003, when Burma’s democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her convoy were ambushed by Junta-backed thugs. The poem relates that throughout Burmese history many heroic figures were lost because of unfaithful people. It isn’t known what so upset the censors, although they have fallen prey in the past to schemes to outwit them with hidden messages; last January, poet Saw Wai was arrested after authorities deciphered a piece of his work in the Rangoon magazine *The Love Journal* that contained a hidden message criticizing Junta leader Than Shwe. In his poem, titled ‘February the Fourteenth’, the first letters of each line added up to the message: “General Than Shwe is crazy with power.” In an earlier ploy to embarrass the censors, a Danish travel company managed to place an advertisement in the weekly *Myanmar Times* containing the hidden message “Killer Than Shwe.”

## Restrictions on Comedy and Music

Most Burmese comedians have a prison experience they can recount, as an increasingly paranoid Junta continues to lose its sense of humor. One comedian, Zarganar Lay, is well known among Burmese people for his political comedy. He has been arrested and imprisoned several times for his stand up comedy routine; one joke that led to his arrest saw him call the Prime Minister a TV star, referring to his frequent propaganda appearances on state-run TV. Most recently, Zarganar was arrested for talking to the media in exile about the lack of aid reaching the Irrawaddy delta.

Hip-hop performers inside Burma found themselves on the hit list of authorities, who have grown increasingly nervous about their activities since the September 2007 demonstrations. In April popular rap and hip-hop artist Yan Yan Chan was arrested in April, two months after the detention of his friend and fellow member of the ACID group, Zayar Thaw, who is being held in Rangoon's Insein Prison. A singer who is a friend of Yan Yan Chan said the pop star had been under observation by the authorities since the arrest of Zayar Thaw. Both are outspoken supporters of the pro-democracy opposition. In December 2007, rapper G-Tone was arrested for revealing a tattoo on his back during a performance that depicted images of a devotional wai and prayer beads. The authorities interpreted the tattoo as a symbol of support for the demonstrating monks. G-Tone was released but banned from performing for one year.

The Junta also restricts community's celebrations; if a play is held as part of a festival or celebration the community must seek permission from another censorship board. When granted, authorities watch the play closely and if they don't like something that is said the community will not be permitted to hold celebrations or festivals the following year.

## Moving Forward?

In May this year, the Junta held a constitutional referendum, and announced a 99% voter turnout resulting in a 92.5% positive vote. This result means any further talks between them and the NLD are unlikely, as they are now one step closer to legitimizing their rule in the planned 2010 elections. The last election in 1990 was deemed illegal, and the results ignored after the NLD overwhelmingly won.

In recent years the international community placed sanctions on Burma for the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and started national reconciliation between the Junta and the NLD. Many analysts said the Junta didn't want to participate in the talks, but did want to avoid the international pressure and so put on the facade of moving toward reform and democracy, but all the while continually stalled the proposed talks.

During last year's September protests, the Junta talked with the NLD after the UN special envoy negotiated between the two groups. However, the pro-democracy leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi claimed that the talk was a fruitless effort.

There are two main issues in Burma that must be resolved in order to end the political conflict in Burma. One is equal rights for the ethnic people and another is democracy. The ethnic minorities have fought the Junta in a civil war for so long it is running itself into the ground. This is a no-win situation between the two groups. Burma is in the midst of one of the longest running civil wars in Southeast Asia, as the Junta continues to refuse to grant equal rights for ethnic minorities.

Many Burmese people have asked the Junta to reform their political situation and form a democratic government; for decades the Junta has refused the people's urges, and continued to arrest people who call for democracy. Thousands of monks led the Saffron Revolution last September, and many of them were detained in Prison, adding to the approximately 2,000 political prisoners already languishing in Burma's prisons.

Initially many critics of the Junta thought some good may come of Nargis, in that it may expose the Junta to the world. One Burmese political analyst said cyclone Nargis' furious winds had, "...swept away all veils of pretence from the rulers of Burma." In truth however, even if exposed, the Junta can continue their reign of oppression of all basic civil liberties, including freedom of press, unabated, and in full world view.



## Special Report

# Isolated Islands and Assistance Needs for Nargis Victims

## Cyclone Nargis and Delay and Lack of Relief Responses

During the Cyclone Nargis struck into Irrawaddy Division and Rangoon Division, on May 2 and 3, over 130,000 people died, 80,000 disappeared, and about the 2.5 millions of people lost their houses and livelihoods as described in many sources and from UN Agencies.

Since the regime, State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) responded for the relief and other efforts to the local Nargis victims lately, and restriction against the International Aid Agencies, doubled up the suffering of the people. The cyclone victims for over one week to one month never received any assistance from International Aid Agencies including the UN Agencies.

As in the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June, only about 230 UN staff received the visa from the SPDC to help hundreds of thousands of victims reported by UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). It means the number of the relief workers and relief efforts are very limited if compared with the number of victims in effected area. Especially, the cyclone victims those live very far from the heart of cities and Rangoon are always isolated in obtaining assistance.

The relief workers from international agencies and UN agencies always tried to provide assistance to the communities to which they can get access to easily, those are close to Rangoon and other cities. Normally, the communities in southwestern part of Irrawaddy Division, are always isolated these relief agencies, the communities themselves have to help each other.



**A fishing near in Nga-puu-taw Township was totally destroyed**

**Recently in order to know about the situation of the cyclone victims in islands, in which the communities are hardly hit by the front Nargis Cyclone, HURFOM Human Rights Workers traveled to southwestern part of delta area.** There are too many island communities in the area and some communities never received any assistance from International Aid or UN agencies.

## Isolated Cyclone Nargis Affected Islands in Bassein District

In southern part of Bassein (Pa-thein in Burmese term), there are two main islands, one is Hein-gyi Island and another one is Pyin-kha-yaing Island. (*See in the Map*) Hein-gyi island has navy base, and the movement

of outside people are somehow restricted. A few aid agencies reached to this Island. Therefore, HURFOM HR Workers traveled into Pyin-kha-yaing Island and found that there has been no sufficient assistance for over 20 communities in this Island.

Geographically, Pyin-kha-yaing Island locates on the edge of Irrawaddy Delta area to which Nga-wun river is flowing into. It is between Hein-kyi Island and Luputta Township area, but all villages or communities are in Nga-puu-taw Township. The island was rounded with sea water and the land roads in the island are bad. There is no boat ferry transports for the passengers after Cyclone Nargis. The villagers had to rely on the transport of boat ferry transports from one village to another, because many communities situates on the beaches of the island. But in dry season, the people use local made vehicles and motor bikes in their travelling.

Accordingly to the local villagers, the cyclone Nargis strike to the Island about 10: 00 a. m. in the morning of May 2. They said the cyclone came from different directions: southwest, southeast, east and northeast and took for an hour and they never met like this cyclone and strong wind like that in the past. Many of them could not estimate how many miles per hour of that wind. Since the island was the first location which cyclone stuck, after an hour time, it stopped for 20 minutes. And, another round of strong wind came again and passed through all villages.

They have said that along with the strong cyclone, lots of trees fell down, a lot of houses destroyed, all their belongings were thrown away and they could not have time to help each other. The villages and villagers those close to the Sea found that the water level has increased and thrown into villages with rubbishes of fallen trees and branches, and others. When the wind stopped all water went down and thrown always trees, houses, humans and household materials.

All villages along the seacoast faced a very similar tragedy, but the villages inside the island faced strong winds but less flood. Trees were fallen, houses destroyed, materials thrown by the winds, and others. In all villages, all houses in the villages were destroyed and at least the roofs of even strong houses were thrown away. **About 80% of the buildings in the island were totally destroyed. Some dying or dead people in the seacoast were thrown away from villages into the Sea. 322 people from the Island died because of this Cyclone.**

After the cyclone hit, the people in the Island not only lost their houses and sheltering, their family members disappeared, their livelihoods – salt farms, shrimp farms, fishing boats, and paddy farms – were totally destroyed. Many cattle – water buffaloes, oxen and cows – died, fishing boats and fishing nets were destroyed and their paddy seedlings were also destroyed. Many service buildings like schools, hospitals and clinics, and monasteries were also destroyed. Some fruit or orchard gardens which comprised of cashew-nut, coconut, and mango trees were totally destroyed.

### **Information Restriction in Hein-gyi Island**

Although there has been thousands of people died and missing due to this Cyclone Nargis, the SPDC authorities information village tract leaders, and village leaders to not report the number of real death and missing. HURFOM HR Workers also founded some evidence of this information restriction in the fields.

The Burmese navy authorities in Hein-gyi Island has instructed the village communities in the Island following Cyclone Nargis lashing the country, to not report all death number of the victims. The Cyclone Nargis was totally hit in the Island, according the residents in Hein-gyi Sub-township, over 1,000 villagers including a lot of children died in the Island. The residents knew well about the death number because it was their communities. A villager from the Island said “the Village Peace and Development Council (VPDC) registered about 280 deaths in the village.” But the villagers said that the VPDC called Ya-ya-ka in Burmese recorded a lesser death toll because of orders from higher authorities.

The VPDC members told survivors that the Burmese authorities ordered recording only about 200 deaths in the villages where the death toll was between 500 and 600. The authorities did not record the death toll systematically and the VPDC’s also reported according to orders.

### **Self-Help in the Aftermath of Cyclone**

Accordingly to the local villagers, the small amounts of assistance, ONLY plastic sheets were provided to 2 village communities in Chaung-wa Village Tract. Other remaining about 20 communities in the island never had received the plastic sheets.

In the aftermath of Cyclone, after almost the communities, livestock, foods and livelihood were totally destroyed, the community people who faced the same problems, found their own copying strategies in solving the problems.

- After almost the houses and huts were totally destroyed, the community Buddhist monks organized the villagers to have repairing temporarily monastery first and provided sheltering to all victim families in the monasteries. The monasteries in these communities have provided sheltering to 50 to 100 families in each building.
- The monks and community leaders traveled to Bassein city and other communities which less suffered from the Cyclone hit and asked for food donations. With the assistance, that they have received, to all cyclone victim families in their communities. The foods in the communities were wet and destroyed. So some families tried to put their paddy to be drought under sun heat, and shared each others.
- The villagers tried to get clean water from higher area and so that they also cleaned some water ponds in the higher area, which were filled with salt water. In some communities, they also tried to store rain water to use as drinking water. But rain water are almost insufficient for their use.
- The community people have to find their building materials, thatches, woods, bamboo, and others, which are available in the communities and repair their houses temporarily. Some also build new huts and stayed unsafely in there.
- The communication from one village to another was cut. But later, the community people tried to clean foot paths roads and so that they can travel from one village to another, to help each other.

In the situation when almost the people are facing the same difficulties and problems, they have very limited time and resources to help each other. But HURFOM has founded that the Buddhist monks and monasteries have played a vital role in coordinating copying strategies in urgent responses to cyclone disasters and suffering, providing sheltering and seeking assistance.

Therefore, the local people has said, they have relied much on monks and monasteries that the State authorities and international aid agencies.



**Some limited assistance like this sheltering reached to a few number of victims**

### Order to Reconstruct the Devastated Communities

Amid the villagers are facing hopeless and helpless situation, the local authorities ordered the victim families to reconstruct their communities. Victims of Cyclone Nargis in a village in Nga-puu-taw Township are facing an uphill task in rebuilding their lives. The trail of destruction left many dead and swept away belongings.

As an instance:

Shwe Tauk village in the Township was founded 45 years ago with salt and prawn industry being set up. But after the May 3 cyclone all the farms were destroyed and a majority of workers killed. The village had eight large salt farms, six prawn units with at least 90 workers in each salt farms and 60 in the prawn farms. The villagers have been unable to restart work as the salt farm investors moved to other villages and many villagers did not return to the village after they moved to town to access aid.

Accordingly to the villagers, many villagers tried to Bassein and other areas, where the Aid agencies and the government authorities are setting up refugee shelters and they tried to live there even they received a very limited amount of foods.

However, the authorities and camp supervisors have checked their names and their villages. And, they said, the victims would be not allowed to stay in the camp more than one week. They must go back their home villages and rebuild their houses and their communities.

**A villager from Chaung-wa village said:**

“Now, I lost my houses and all my fishing materials. I am struggling to have foods for remaining family (*one of his children died*). I have to travel to some villages where I heard the people can get foods. I could not restart my new life. I am not familiar with working in rice farms and other types of works except from fishing.”

The authorities have failed to assess the situation of people’s livelihood in the area, and they have failed to support cattle and rice cultivation equipment, fishing boats and equipments for fishermen, etc. However, the authorities just ordered to return their communities and start the construction activities, without supports by government and UN Agencies.

## Situation Update and Needs in Pyin-kha-yaing Island

### Foods, Water, Sheltering, and Relocation

**Food:**

At the beginning of Cyclone hit, the villagers lost every thing and they had to find foods. They just got only wet paddy and pounded them for eating and drink just coconut water. All roads were destroyed and they could not travel to various locations in order to find foods and water. Only 4 days after Cyclone hit, some assistance from other communities from Bassein, those have less suffered, started to reach into the Island in a small amount by the demands of Buddhist monks in Island. They have to share each other for the foods they received and all of faced food-shortage problems while many of them each rice soups, vegetables and fruits.

**Access to Food:**

Even the current situation, the victims received one or one and a half month rice assistance, these cyclone victims still need more assistance because of all of them could not engage in their livelihood and could not reconstruct their lives at the moment due to rainy season.

**Sheltering:**

The villagers in Chaung-wa are has received some sheltering assistance from outside communities especially plastic sheets and a few iron roofing sheets. There are four types of housing were repaired and built after Cyclone hits and they are:

- a. Some houses (who has some small money) repaired and roofed with iron sheets and made well with coconut leaves
- b. Some houses were built with bamboo, wood and made walls and roofs with leaves



**The community people are finding for foods in dirty rivers**

- c. Some built long houses with roof and walls by plastics sheets
- d. Some built small huts with thatches and woods (totally unsafe)

### Relocation:

There are 3 types of relocation happened after Cyclone Nargis hit and they are:

- a. Some villages those situates on the river bank and seacoast were thrown away by flood and the displaced villagers moved to a slightly higher area and resettled their families with many small huts
- b. The villagers who lives near the sea are very afraid of another cyclone and all of them decided to move to the locations where they felt more safe
- c. The villagers from some villages agreed to live in the locations set by the authorities and they moved into there. They lived in the long temporary shelters. But many of them cannot decide where they have to move



**The cyclone victims try drinking water from salt water**

### Water and Sanitation:

All of water ponds in the lower part of the Island were filled with salty water and they were useless. Therefore, they have to pick the water from the ponds in higher area. Some villagers used water pumps and took out the salty water, but they said the water are still not good. Some communities have to carry water from very far places.

### Availability of Foods

**International aid** can come via INGOs and local NGOs and the community people. The amounts of foods received from outside communities will be little amount and they are not sure that they could receive foods from INGOs and NGOs, because they are the most distant communities.

The people can **purchase** from Bassein city if they have money. Traders who bring the rice and other types of foods came into area and sell to them. The families who have money can buy from traders. But the majority of poor families have to chance to buy rice and other foods.

The price of rice in Bassein is very expensive. It is about 25, 000 Kyat for 50 Kilogram sack and the victims paid 26, 000 Kyat in Pyin-kha-yaing Island. Therefore, many families could not afford this expensive cost for foods, because they left nothing.

## **Needs Assessment of Victims**

### Food Assessment:

There is a need to provide another round of relief assistance especially foods to this Island's victims. In June, the victims in the Island received some rice assistance from a community to community direct assistance and

when it was totally eaten in the Island, they still need another food assistance for another one or two months because now is totally in rainy season and they could not find foods for them.

Sheltering Assessment:

Accordingly to the news from the victims, they said that the authorities will take all plastic sheets and temporary tents in the Island very soon and all of them might need to build a temporary hut for their families. The authorities or NGOs should plan to support them to build temporary houses in which the family members can stay safely, which means these houses should protect from winds and rain water. Similarly, in the relocation sites, the people needed to build houses.

More problematic in the area was, many monasteries those could provide sheltering to hundreds of people, were ruin about 80%, and so that they could not prove safe sheltering for them.

School Building Assessment:

The Primary Schools of in Tha-pyay-nguu, Gone-gyi, Than-baya-gone, Poe-kalar-gone, Kyin-kaw, Gway-tauk-gyi, Ale-taung village/ward; a High School in Chaung-wa were destroyed. The communities without any outside supports had to repair these schools temporarily and started schools in early June, accordingly to the order. But many children could not join, because their parents moved or disappeared and some of them moved to orphan centers.

In Kan-seik village, a made-shift school was built for the children from Kyin-kaw village who moved close into Kan-seik village by the community supports and labour. The community people also found 2 teachers for the school. Save the Children also provided plastic sheets for that school. But there is no furniture. A

school in Chaung-wa High School was totally destroyed and only temporarily re-built. Since there are too many students for this school, no sufficient classes and so that the students in each class can learn only 2 hours per day.



**The children are planning to go to school, but many schools were entirely or partly de**

Health Care Assessment:

The State's health care system is still operating. There are Pyin-kha-yaing Hospital, and other clinics in Chaung-wa, War-gone, Si-laung, and Ale-taung in operation and they have taken the patients. In Chaung-wa, there are two private clinics and they have provided medical care on a daily basis for many hours. These hospitals and clinics also received medicines and medical equipment from some NGOs.

However, many communities do not receive any good system of getting clean water, safe toilets and keeping rubbishes. The victims also have to set it up in building community's toilets and help each other in getting clean water. The community people made awareness of drinking boil water and used community toilets.

Children Education's Assessment:

Majority of the schools in the Island already re-opened and some number of kids attended the school while some of their friends disappeared. Some made-shift schools in the relocated areas are built, because of the

### Information on HURFOM and Invitation for Feedbacks from Readers

Dear Readers,

The Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) was founded in 1995 by a group of young Mon people. The main objectives of HURFOM are:

- monitoring the human rights situations in Mon territory and other areas Southern Burma,
- protecting and promoting internationally recognized human rights in Burma

In order to implement these objectives, HURFOM produces the monthly "Mon Forum" newsletter. If publication is delayed it is because we are waiting to confirm information, and it comes with our heartfelt apologies.

We encourage you to write to us if you have feedback or if you know someone who you think would like to receive the newsletter. Please email or mail a name and address to:

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Bangkok 10501, THAILAND  
E-mail: [hurfomcontact@yahoo.com](mailto:hurfomcontact@yahoo.com)  
Website: <http://www.rehmonnya.org>

With regards,

Director  
Human Rights Foundation of Monland

order, but the community people could not find teachers. In some community established schools, the community teachers voluntarily involve in teaching the kids. Good school building and teachers are required by all communities.

#### Livelihood Assessment:

In order to start the paddy cultivation in this rainy season, the people in Island demand for cattle (especially water buffaloes), ploughing machines, paddy seeds or seedlings, fertilizers, and invested money. No farmers can start paddy cultivation yet, because they left nothing and some of them relocated in the new places which are far from their farms. Many cattle died and there is a scarcity of the animals to help the farmers in farming. The authorities in the area have announced that they would provide cattle and seedling for the farmers. But no farmers received any assistance to start paddy cultivation.

Fishermen in the coastal communities lost all of their fishing equipment – fishing nets, boats, propeller engines, etc. – when the Cyclone Nargis wasted away. Fishermen became jobless. Most farmers could not afford to buy new boats and other fishing equipment. They also could not change the livelihood that they did not familiar with. They demands for fishing equipment and boats.

Most gardens in the area which includes orchid plantations of coconut, mango and cashew-nut



**A devastated village in Pyin-kha-yaing Island**

were destroyed. Some gardeners cleared out all fallen trees and branches in the gardens and prepared to create new orchid plantations, however, they need seedlings of orchid plants. They said, even they tried to find the seedlings in Bassein, many are not available. Many of them, they will have any opportunity to re-create the plantations this year.



The head of a boy was hit by trees during Cyclone disaster

### Conclusion:

Amid helpless and hopeless situation among the Cyclone victims which was added with isolation imposed by the military authorities, it has been a highest hope for the victims **the community to community** assistance has been taken place. First the communities, which less suffered from disaster from Bassein and northern area people provided helping hands to the victims in Nga-puu-taw and Laputta Township area. But their assistance is limited and not a big amount. The victims demand enormous food, sheltering and other assistance.

While the people in Pyin-kha-yaing Island were in a serious need for emergency assistance, they got a few assistance from outside communities which support with rice, blankets and mosquito nets. Totally the victims from 21 communities received this Community to Community Direct Assistance.

From talking with victims, HURFOM concluded that:

- The Cyclone victims in Nga-puu-taw and Lapputa Townships area need 2 to 3 months assistance especially rice until they can well establish their lives and have new livelihoods for income.
- Sheltering assistance, especially some roofing materials, cements, iron sheets, iron nails and other building materials should be provided.
- All schools in the whole area need to be re-built with wooden, cemented walls and roofed with iron sheets. Teachers should be employed in all schools and salaries must be supported by government or NGOs for the moment until every thing is set up.
- Since the agriculture and fishing are the main livelihoods of the local people, they also need assistance from the government's department concerned.

However, Mon community's only 25% of the assistance of the total requirement are reached to the cyclone victims communities in Islands and along the seacoast. The communities in island still need the continuous relief and reconstruction assistance from other communities, aid agencies and UN Agencies.

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