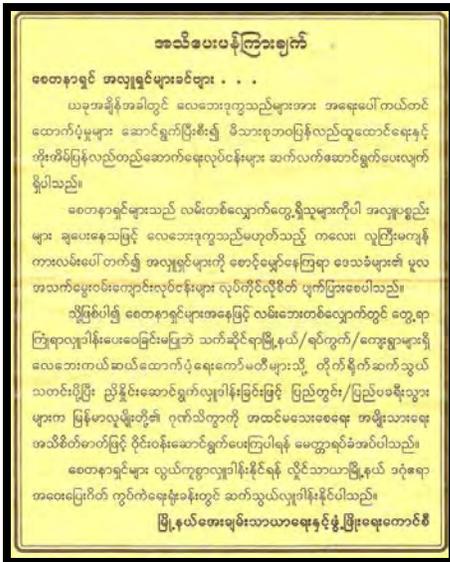


Burma Cyclone Update

(16-27 May 2008)

National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma

Junta's Official Line: Relief Phase Is Over



A "Notice" (left) distributed to private donors by the Township Peace and Development Councils and obtained by the Cyclone Update team in Burma, says: "Dear donors and benefactors: Emergency relief efforts for the cyclone victims have now been completed and reconstruction and rehabilitation work have now begun.

Since benefactors have been distributing relief goods to people they see along their route, children as well as adults who are not cyclone victims are now waiting for these supplies on the roadsides and the practice has ruined the will of the people to engage in their customary forms of livelihood.

Hence, benefactors are requested to not distribute their relief aid randomly and to report directly to the township / ward / village cyclone

relief and assistance committees to coordinate relief distribution with them with a national spirit so as to prevent tarnishing the prestige of the Myanmar people in the eyes of the local and foreign visitors. Signed: Township Peace and Development Council"

The notice being distributed clearly shows that the Burmese generals are more concerned about their "prestige" than the suffering of the cyclone victims. They view ragged cyclone victims running after passing relief trucks with outstretched hands begging for food are a disgrace to the country. They did not even consider the fact that and the poverty-stricken victims may have been setting up lean-tos and makeshift shelters along roads and in temples and monasteries because those are the only places where they can receive relief aid to survive.

To officially claim that relief work is over at this stage is when even the United Nations is stating that less than half of the 2.4 million cyclone victims have received any official aid is, to say the least, absurd.

Meanwhile, cyclone victims as well as volunteers from relief aid groups who are working in the field are confirming that no relief aid is reaching remote villages. A volunteer from a private group (name of person and group are intentionally omitted) visiting Pyapon said nearby villages suffered more cyclone damage than Pyapon. She said, "Villagers say official relief teams have not visited their areas".

The same is also true in Ma-ubin Township. A villager from Maletto village, in an interview with Democratic Voice of Burma, said no relief aid has reached the villages.

"I don't even know where to begin. People are in deep trouble. Those who lived in big houses are now staying in smaller ones and those in smaller ones before are now living in huts. There is no one to help us. We did receive some rice -- four milk cans of rice per family. That rice aid came from the residents of Ma-ubin and no other relief groups have been here yet. No one visited the areas up the Maletto Creek. I have, however, seen cyclone victims being fed in Ma-ubin. I am from Maletto Village. Villages were destroyed or are in ruins and some people remain and some have left. The difficulty for us is not being able to replant rice."



A temple, now a temporary shelter for the homeless cyclone victims

U Ohn Kyaing, chairman of the National League for Democracy Humanitarian Relief Committee, "cyclone victims from Kyaiklat, Pyapon, Dedaye, and Kungyangon regions have been contacting the NLD about not receiving any relief aid" and his committee "has been collecting data and making preparations to reach cyclone refugees in emergency areas through NLD township organizers".

Daw Leh Leh of the committee also said new refugees were coming in large numbers to Bogale ... and there are more refugees there now. Maha Visuddha Rama and Maggin Monasteries have to take in about 2,000 more refugees."

She said, "It will still be very difficult for the refugees to return to their villages now even if their food problems are taken care of."

Forcing Out Cyclone Victims

John Holmes, the United Nations emergency relief coordinator, addressing a recent press conference on the cyclone situation in Burma said that forced returns of cyclone refugees are unacceptable.

The message, however, has not deterred the Burmese generals from driving out the cyclone victims taking refuge in makeshift shelters and monasteries in nearby towns or from creating problems for private donors who are helping the refugees.

As an extension of the generals' official policy of leaping ahead to the reconstruction phase by short-circuiting the relief phase, refugees are being evicted from towns and public view by the authorities so that people being impoverished and suffering in Burma can be hidden from the international community.

Dedaye

A news agency report said police were seen clearing the roads of thousands of cyclone survivors begging for food from passing cars belonging to private donors from cities not affected by the cyclone. Police, soldiers and immigration officers have put up roadblocks to question foreigners on the main route from Rangoon into the devastated town of Dedaye. The report said "thousands of people -- breastfeeding mothers, children, elderly men and women -- wait under the tropical sun and daily monsoon showers, hoping for someone to give them food or clean water".

"The people should learn to feed themselves. They should return to their homes," an officer said. "We do not want foreigners to think we are a country of beggars".

Police are also warning volunteers against making donations, threatening to suspend their driving licenses.

Trucks Impounded, Licenses Seized

Meanwhile, DVB reported that 42 trucks on their way back from taking private donations to cyclone victims in Dedaye and Pyapon townships on 25 May were seized on arrival at Hlaingthaya Township's Pan Hlaing bridge by police. The truck drivers were released at around midnight that night and trucks were given back at around 1400 the following day, but the authorities refused to return the drivers' licenses, according to sources close to the drivers.

A private donor said the Pan Hlaing bridge crossing, which was the main route used by donors to travel to disaster zones, has been shut down by the authorities, causing a delay to the flow of relief supplies to victims.

"Now it is impossible for any helpers to reach to the victims," he said.

Bogale

When women volunteers from the NLD Humanitarian Relief Committee went to Bogale to give help on 25 May, only one tenth of the cyclone victims who came seeking refuge remain, the rest having been forcibly relocated to other areas.

A villager from Poppa village in Kungyangon Township was reportedly beaten by police with iron bars when he and a friend went to receive aid.

Bassein

In Bassein, cyclone refugees and police clashed outside the general hospital when the authorities tried to return the storm victims to their villages, according to a local resident.

The police threatened to shoot the people but the people refused to go home and responded that it was all the same to them if they lived or died, and said that they were being fed by the public and the international community," he said.

About-Turn Decision

Apparently contradicting efforts to stop private deliveries, the Burmese generals, in an about-turn decision, announced that "Donors may go right down to storm-hit areas of their choice" (see box).

Donors may go right down to storm-hit areas of their choice

NAY PYI TAW, 27 May— The National Disaster Preparedness Central Committee today issued the News Release No. 8 dated 27 May 2008.

The full text of the news release is as follows:

News Release No. 8

1. Well-wishers from the states and divisions have made donations in cash and kind out of generosity to storm victims individually or in groups, and provided them with all the necessary assistance. The National Disaster Preparedness Central Committee accepted the donations with thanks and delivered them to the storm victims in a speedy and systematic manner.

2. It is learnt that some donors wish to make donations personally to specific persons and regions. Individuals and organizations wishing to do so may go right down to the storm-hit towns, wards and villages of their choice so that the donation operation can be carried out more effectively. In that regard, assistance may be sought from the National Disaster Preparedness Committees at different levels.

Date: 27-5-2008

Place: Nay Pyi Taw

The National Disaster Preparedness
Central Committee

After facing problems with authorities in delivering aid, local private donors were surprised to suddenly discover that they are free to travel directly to cyclone areas. They welcomed the announcement carried by the state-run media on 27 May.

Foreign relief officials are, however, not including in the free passage to cyclone-affected areas.

Observation

Even after the whole world is cautioning them about the problems surviving cyclone victims are facing, the Burmese generals were too arrogant to acknowledge that they cannot overcome the challenges brought on by Cyclone Nargis. They even went to the extent of ludicrously boasting that the relief phase for the cyclone victims is over and that reconstruction and rehabilitation process had already started.

They then went on to accuse people begging for food on the roadside as pretending to be cyclone victims and blaming them of tarnishing the image of the country in the eyes of tourists,

The authorities then went on to force out cyclone refugees from public view -- the roadside, monasteries and makeshift shelters -- and prevented private donors from giving relief aid to the cyclone victims threatening them that their licenses will be revoked for a year if they were seen distributing supplies from their cars. The authorities even impounded trucks after they were used to send relief goods to the victims and later seized the licenses of the truck drivers.

Suddenly, in an about-turn move, the state-run media on 27 May reported that local private donors can now deliver relief supplies to the cyclone victims. The decision can also be seen as a preemptive move to keep foreign relief officials from those areas.

In sum, the inconsistencies in policies and making decisions in an ad hoc manner clearly indicate that the Burmese generals are finding themselves in a most awkward

predicament. They are clearly having problems on how to deal with the entry of foreign aid experts into the country. Unfortunately, it is the cyclone victims who are paying the price of the generals' inaptitude and xenophobic attitude.

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