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Cyclone Giri: Two Years On

Voices from the Arakan State of Western Burma (Myanmar)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 22 October 2010, a category four cyclone named Giri hit Arakan State and made its way along the west coast of Burma (Myanmar). Cyclone Giri was the worst natural disaster Burma suffered since Cyclone Nargis, occurring a little more than two years after Nargis left some 140,000 dead and impacted the lives of at least 3.4 million people. Mraybon, Pauktaw, Kyaukphru, and Marmbra townships were the worst hit by Giri, while Manaung, Rambray and Ann townships were also severely affected by winds of between 120-160 mph. The impact of Giri left at least 259 people dead, and affected approximately 1 million people, causing catastrophic damage to homes, agriculture, fisheries and infrastructure in a community still struggling to recover from the previous Cyclone.

Disaster struck Arakan state just 16 days before the general election of 7 November 2010. The Junta's response to cyclone Giri was characteristically marred by a failure to issue appropriate warnings, acknowledge the situation, or to even respond promptly. They prioritized the election over humanitarian needs, and interfered with and misappropriated humanitarian assistance provided by international and local NGOs. The government instructed the UN to keep the relief operation low profile and advised that increased international engagement was uncalled for despite the fact that the damage was high. At the international level there was no UN Flash Appeal for funding, and the Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS) told the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) not to make an international appeal. The decisions to underplay the cyclone caused considerable funding delays, possibly leading to less funding overall.

Concern and response to the Giri disaster, both inside and outside Burma, was fairly muted, certainly when compared to Nargis. Arakanese organisations did respond, but few other organisations within Burma did. And compared the widespread coverage of Nargis, Giri was largely ignored by the international media and unofficial media outlets in other states of Burma. Although Daw Aung San Suu Kyi spoke out against the response, and some appeals for the victims were launched, they were largely ignored by the media.

Two years later, the people of southern Arakan State are still struggling to rebuild their livelihoods and the infrastructure damage caused by Giri has still not been fully repaired. In 2011 the vulnerable population was hit again by torrential rains and flooding, causing deaths as well as the destruction of tens of thousands of acres of farm land, all of which exacerbated the damage left by Giri's impact. The accumulative effect of both disasters has led to serious problems such as starvation and a general degradation of health and education systems. As a

consequence, hundreds of South Arakanese youths have been migrating, predominantly to Kachin State or Thailand, in search of job opportunities. However the jobs available are usually dangerous, the living conditions deplorable and few people take interest in their circumstances.

Presently little is mentioned about the on-going humanitarian crisis two years after the initial impact of Giri, with almost all but those directly affected, forgetting or ignoring the aftermath. Of the INGOs that arrived and assisted victims in the wake of the cyclone few are left and even fewer are able to offer assistance to the local population who are still in need of food and shelter and living in deplorable conditions since 2010. South Arakan state falls within the international communities 'food poverty' parameters, and whilst this warrants assistance the region remains ignored. This area is frequently forgotten: Between 2007-09 aprox. $350 million was spent in Burma by INGOs, however Southern Arakan state was the only place in Burma where the total expenditure amounted to $0.

An independent assessment of the response to Cyclone Giri has proven a considerable challenge. The evaluations given by international NGOs and UN Agencies, including the reports of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), were supervised by the military junta. Those evaluations differ significantly from those provided by survivors, local relief workers, and local NGO staff. The discrepancy relates to serious issues such as the death toll, relief supply efforts and the occurrence of human rights abuses. It is from the accounts of those directly affected that have formed the basis for our fieldwork and information documented in this report. Over two years have now passed, but problems for the Giri survivors are far from over.

Why write this report and what makes it relevant two years on after the cyclone struck?

- To catch international attention and highlight the fact that official cyclone loss and damage figures from the government and INGOs are too conservative.
- To show that not enough support is given to the victims and that two years on the misery caused by Cyclone Giri is far from over.
- To give a voice to the aid recipients, and to offer information as a guide for future relief operations: what are their real needs?
- To document the extent of the loss and damage of the affected people and their families.
- To show the views of the community leaders and local donors.
- To record the role of the local population and relief groups in the relief effort.
- To document the human rights violations perpetrated in the course of the relief effort as a first step to hold the perpetrators accountable, and
- To counter the marginalisation of Arakan State, by informing the world of the reality on the ground, and to highlight Cyclone Giri's repercussions for the state and its people.

Current situation in areas affected by Cyclone Giri: Two Years On….

Almost all local and international NGOs had left the communities affected by cyclone Giri after the first three months, or when the first phase of the emergency relief was completed.

Generally the victims received little or no support for rebuilding income, from the government or international NGOs. The relief supplies were not equally or fairly distributed among the victims, as most of the relief items from INGOs were distributed through the government authorities and Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), creating a lot of problems among the villagers.

One or two days after the cyclone, the authorities assigned soldiers from a local artillery corps, from No. 9 Regional Central Training School, to wards and villages of the most affected townships. They inspected strangers and relief donors and also demanded to deliver assistance through their units.

Some of the relief items, particularly rice from local Arakanese community, had to be shared with the army troops or navy bases that served as check points along the waterways. Local donors who did not provide relief items to the soldiers were intimidated and threatened.

Victims in the affected community were also intimidated and threatened by the USDP, if they refused to vote for the government party in the imminent elections. Many cyclone victims were angry with the authorities including USDP members who created news stories for propaganda purposes, by pretending to deliver assistance to the victims. The authorities videotaped and photographed their organized events where they delivered assistance, and later confiscated those items when the cameras were off.

Most of the Giri affected people still live hand to mouth, as they cannot rebuild their broken livelihoods. To do so, they would require a certain amount of capital investment to buy fishing boats, nets, agricultural equipment, and the like. This means that it is difficult to rehabilitate their livelihoods without support from the government or (I)NGOs.

This has caused a lot of youth from the affected areas to increasingly migrate to Rangoon, Kachin State and Thailand where they believe they may find job opportunities in gold mines, construction sites, garment factories or fishing industries. The fighting between government and Kachin troops has severely affected those youths who now live in Kachin state. There are hundreds of young migrants in Rangoon, Kachin State and Thailand now.

Two years after Cyclone Giri, schools that were partially or fully damaged have not been renovated or rebuilt yet, due to inadequate support from the government or (I)NGOs. There are not enough teachers and learning materials for these rural primary schools. Most of the families in the affected areas are still unable to send their children to school because those children need to work to support their parents.

There are very few, even a total lack of, clinics that are able to provide medical support to the affected villagers, especially in the rural areas.

CONCLUSIONS AND FINDINGS

> "What is important is to continuously advocate for humanitarian access to all populations in need"
> Delbreuve, OCHA Burma head.[i]

This independent assessment and report has been written to raise awareness of the on-going impact cyclone Giri has had on Arakan state and its citizens. Victims and witnesses have had the opportunity to speak out and reach a wider audience and we wish to spread their voices and the situation to the international community, but also to the rest of Burma who seem to have forgotten about their people in the west who are still dealing with the impact of cyclone Giri two years on. The damage and the role of the local population in the relief and recovery effort has been recorded so that these stories are not forgotten. More details are needed, and this report should be the beginning of internal and external enquiries into the on-going state of the situation there.

Since its demise as a sovereign and powerful kingdom, Arakan state has become a great unknown to the international community. A deliberate policy of socio-economic impoverishment by successive regimes has relegated Arakan to Burma's second poorest state with many of the "*worst*" development indicator rankings of an already underdeveloped country. Human rights violations are ubiquitous, as repeatedly confirmed by rights groups inside and outside Arakan, such as *Amnesty International* and *Human Rights Watch*. An increased militarisation and multi-billion dollar multinational projects have only exacerbated a situation that warrants much more international attention.

We have demonstrated that the regime in Burma, both in the guise of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and the new "*civilian*" USDP government, continue to show a callous indifference toward their citizens.

There were few "*Lessons Learned*" from previous cyclones: in Burma there is no legislation, no policy framework, no Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) competence of states, no allocation of resources, no implementation of international binding agreements and no comprehensive early warning system. The government has still not purchased the necessary radar equipment to provide proper early warning of approaching cyclones and storm surges. Impacts of natural disasters have been censored and forecasts of Giri landfall and wind speeds were misleading, resulting in 259 deaths. Arakan is Burma's most vulnerable state to natural disasters, and 34% of the population is at risk of coastal flooding, but still there has been no full repair or reinforcement of storm surge embankments in high risk areas. The military rather spends on itself and not on a comprehensive DRR programme: there is a lack of mitigation measures, no cyclone shelters, no community preparedness, no flood control and draining programme, there is no reforestation of mangrove forests - or even maintenance of existing ones – because of army businesses, and coral reefs have been dynamited for harbour and pipeline construction.

Comparative Table of Interview Findings of Cyclone Nargis and Giri Survivors and Relief Workers

Relief Operation Issues	**NARGIS**	**GIRI**
BASIC NECESSITIES		
Survivors lacked clean water and food	X	X
Distance and cost of obtaining and transporting were challenges that had to be met, often at the sacrifice of meeting other needs	X	X
Shelters and new homes were inadequate; many residents were still homeless or in	X	X

temporary housing		
Concerned with the stability and protection provided by the new structures	X	X
HEALTH		
Diarrhoea and illnesses related to water shortages	X	X
Psychological disorders associated with traumatic event of the storm and loss	X	X
Basic health services remained insufficient (a reality even before the cyclone)	X	X
GOVERNMENT INTERFERENCE (DIRECT AND INDIRECT)		
Check-points were in place along routes during the early phases of response	X	X
"*Fees*" were charged to access disaster areas	X	X
Travel restrictions occurred	X	X
Aid workers were extensively monitored	X	X
Relief workers were required to give aid directly to the authorities	X	X
Relief and reconstruction materials were misappropriated	X	X
SECURITY CONCERNS		
Intimidation, abuse, and fear of arrest of relief workers	X	X
Security concerns further obstructed the delivery of aid to cyclone victims	X	X
INFORMATION		
Challenges and security concerns were associated with collecting information	X	X
Needs assessments and coordination of relief activities particularly were hampered by inability to independently collect data and communicate	X	X
Information released through the state-controlled media outlets minimized the extent of the disaster and needs of the victims	X	X

However there are still many gaps and things that could have been done better. The following summary shows that many lessons have not been learned from the Nargis operation[ii] as far as the Giri relief operation is concerned, specifically or additionally:

The authorities

The first responsibility of the authorities is to protect their population. The Burmese government continues to refuse to acknowledge the magnitude of the Giri disaster and no official assistance amount or its effectiveness has been publicised. They blocked access to the worst affected areas, including for the media, because they were reluctant to reveal the true extent of damages and the death toll of minimum 259 in 4 townships alone. They limited the access by foreign relief workers to the victims, and refused aid workers from agencies that were not already present in Arakan, thereby violating their own citizens' rights to food, shelter, health, and to life. *The Government told the UN to keep the relief operation "low profile"* with deleterious effects for the victim - meaning an '*informal*' UN cluster system for 2 weeks, less operational transparency, delays in information and delivery, and impact on the clusters' roles and responsibilities.

Authorities, soldiers and village headmen have diverted donated relief goods (or confiscated after handing them out in front of the media) for their own use or for resale. Citizens in other parts of Burma were forced to donate for the Cyclone Giri victims and it is not certain whether

the donations ended up with those victims. The army cannot be held responsible and accountable according to the 2008 Constitution as the military remains outside civilian law.

The international community

To date there is little or no international pressure on the regime to give full humanitarian access to Arakan, and the media essentially chose the official death toll and damage figures without investigating.

Giri disaster funding was deliberately weakened. The MRCS asked the IFRC not to appeal for funds and neither was a UN *Flash Appeal* nor a *Consolidated Appeal* launched. Donor funding was insufficient and monitoring and evaluation was limited. International agencies were aware in advance of food and water shortages, but did not manage to resolve them. Moreover, they inadequately rebuilt shelter, dykes and livelihoods, and constructed substandard housing despite Arakan State having record rainfall (16.4 ft/5m annually) and being the state most prone to cyclones.

There was an acknowledged improvement in co-operation between INGOs and the authorities as compared to the Nargis response, but to date Giri related gaps in protection have not been addressed (including by the erstwhile protection cluster) such as "*unpaid*" labour for reconstruction or army underage recruitment.

Much of the cyclone threat is caused or compounded by climate change to which the Arakanese population has contributed very little. The *Climate Change Vulnerability Index* ranks Myanmar 10th globally in terms of the countries most vulnerable to extreme weather-related events.[iii] The vulnerable people in Arakan deserve more support from the international community to reduce disaster risk - especially as developed countries were most responsible for man-made climate change.[iv]

The general election

16 days after Cyclone Giri, continued power was prioritised by the government over assisting their own citizens, by diverting resources away from relief toward holding a rigged election. The junta violated its own election law by not postponing the elections in the worst hit areas. The visiting PM canvassed for USDP instead of mentioning or directing the relief operation. The election was the pretext to keep foreign aid workers and media out. The USDP ordered people to vote for them in return for aid and there was withholding of aid and destruction of (collective) property of those who did not.

The media

The international media continues to pay little attention to the cyclone and its aftermath, which initially impacted fundraising efforts and due to lack of awareness and pressure on the junta, it allowed for the manipulation of the assistance. Foreign journalists were barred from covering the elections and the cyclone affected areas. The official media did not show the real extent of the death toll and damages and was mainly used to highlight officials handing out aid.

The Burmese opposition

Burmese opposition groups outside Arakan did not respond to the Giri disaster as the election was clouding their vision. Arakanese opposition parties asked questions in parliament to the ministers regarding the authorities' corruption in post-Giri rice assistance, but they were stonewalled and the publication of the answers was censored. The opposition is still restricted from holding meetings with the survivors in Arakan. Exiled groups were not able to draw enough attention to the Giri victims' plight.

2011 torrential rains and flooding

Cyclone survivors were hit with a record rainfall in over 10 years, but there were no flood warnings issued by the authorities. By monsoon time the houses and livelihoods, embankments, and dykes were either not repaired, or a poor job was done. Again, survivors lost their crops. Authorities were stalling over relief efforts, there was a lack of media exposure inside and outside Burma. This time there was no international flood relief as there was in 2010 for floods in North Arakan State.

Starvation and water shortages:

Hundreds of families starved between June and August, mainly because INGOs stopped food aid, including the same INGOs that had predicted the shortages.

Healthcare and education

There is open defecation in nearly all rural cyclone affected rural areas and over 60% in the towns. **For 2011/12,** 1.3 % of government budget is for healthcare, which is an estimated $2 per capita. 39% of children did not go to school because it was cyclone damaged. 4.57 % of the 2011/12 budget was for education, or about ± $8 per capita).

Migration

Arakanese migrate for the following reasons: food insecurity (87.20%), economic motive (78.20%), other Human Rights violations (69.20%), *louq a pay* (forced labour) (66.70%), extortion/heavy taxation (66.70%), land confiscation (53.80%), and restriction of movement (34.60%). Post-Giri around 10,000 people from the 4 hardest hit townships migrated. Most are now migrant workers in Kachin State, Thailand or Malaysia where they are exploited by their employers and authorities.

What's happening now?

The survivors still have not been able to return to pre-Giri living conditions. Funding shortfalls are in all categories: Nutrition (100%), Protection (100%), Education (97%), Shelter (86%), Livelihood (83%), Food (81%), and water/sanitation/hygiene (45%). Giri survivors suffer from famine, lack of housing and livelihoods. No one seems to be stepping into assist them and at present no one has been held accountable for abuses that occured during the Giri assistance operation.

"*This* [Giri] *disaster was in danger of being forgotten, ignored and unseen by the international community*."

Andrew Mitchell, UK Secretary of State for International Development[v]

So, was he right? The head of the Burma Office UK gave the answer six months later:

"*Cyclone Giri - and the suffering it caused to a quarter of a million people in Burma - went largely unnoticed by the outside world*.

Paul Whittingham, head of the UK Department for International Development's Burma office[vi]

Now two years on this report hopes to re-raise some awareness and show the victims of cyclone Giri that they are not forgotten. Memorial ceremonies are held yearly for the Cyclone Giri victims in Arakan state, Rangoon and in Phuket and Mae Sot (Thailand)[vii] – *lest we forget…*

RECOMMENDATIONS

We acknowledge and appreciate the assessments, relief and recovery efforts already made for the Arakanese cyclone and flood victims. For the parties involved that have made little or no effort we have some recommendations for them. And these recommendations are applicable to both the ongoing Giri recovery operation and future natural disasters that need to be planned for.

To the Burmese (Myanmar) Government

The Central Government should:

- end all unnecessary interference with the media, opposition parties and the relief and recovery operations and restriction of movement of (I)NGO's;
- encourage use of INGO/UN Immediate Income Generating Activities (IIGA) programmes, for all rebuilding efforts in Giri affected areas - there must be an end to "unpaid" labour for reconstruction;
- conduct relief and recovery efforts in a transparent fashion, including maintaining accurate records of monetary and material donations, stop misappropriation of relief goods and hold those responsible for the policy decisions and their implementation that resulted in avoidable harm and theft of aid, accountable;
- allocate, effectively spend and provide public information about a sufficient disaster management budget (cf. Constitution, Schedule I, Union Legislative List, 9(m));
- inform the victims of their rights, and take their needs and complaints into account;
- recognise that communities are the first responders, engage community groups in DRR policies, promote DRR education while taking into account community-based approaches and traditional knowledge, and utilise the local expertise of the State Government in the ongoing recovery efforts in Giri affected townships;
- invest in Doppler radar equipment to monitor meteorological conditions (cf. Constitution, Schedule I, Union Legislative List, 5 (f)), replant mangrove forests (cf. Constitution, Schedule I, Union Legislative List, 6 (g)) and install emergency community address systems;

- ❖ implement all signed and ratified UN, ASEAN and other international DRR agreements on "Lessons Learned"; and the NDPCC should draft a DRR bill based on the IFRC Model Act for the Facilitation and Regulation of IDRL Guidelines and integrate DRR in all development sectors.

The Local Government should:

- ❖ invest in early warning systems and mitigation measures (cf. Constitution, Schedule II, Region or State Legislative List, 7 (e)) as part of a systematic contingency and development programme;
- ❖ include flood and storm surge embankments (cf. Constitution, Schedule II, 3. (e));
- ❖ widely disseminate warnings via all available media, build cyclone shelters, and organise community preparedness; and
- ❖ rebuild all the damaged schools, religious buildings and cultural heritage destroyed (cf. Constitution, Schedule II, 7. (e)(i)).

To the Donors

- ❖ Provide the required funding for shelter, livelihood and reconstruction;
- ❖ Use the threat of further sanctions to pressure the Government to fulfil its human rights obligations and to ensure access of the media and (I)NGOs to the Giri affected areas;
- ❖ Conduct a thorough human rights assessment of the relief and recovery efforts;
- ❖ No aid should be provided directly to the government as it encourages a lack of accountability and transparency, corruption and human rights violations – closely monitoring projects deters abuses;
- ❖ No contracts with any company known for corruption and/or human rights abuses; and
- ❖ Provide appropriate co-operation and funding for Disaster Risk Reduction programmes and Arakan State should get a fairer share of international funding to tackle climate change and its consequences.

To the United Natons

- ❖ Put in place an independent system to monitor and evaluate the efficiency of aid distribution, including an independent complaints mechanism;
- ❖ The Humanitarian Co-ordinator should remedy protection gaps;
- ❖ The UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Burma should fully investigate the reports of human rights violations in the Cyclone Giri affected areas including those documented in this report; and
- ❖ Strengthen the UN Rangoon mission's activities in human rights protection, monitoring and reporting – especially in the ethnic states.

To local NGOs and INGOs:

- ❖ Continue to evaluate and support the ongoing needs of Cyclone Giri affected communities;
- ❖ Continue to monitor and document to ensure that aid programmes are beneficial to the survivors and do not involve human rights abuses;

- ❖ Increase the co-operation between local inhabitants, NGOs and INGOs in assessment, emergency relief and recovery phases using extensive local networks and information sources;
- ❖ Give more prominence to local efforts in public communications;
- ❖ Improve co-ordination mechanisms and structures by resolving cultural constraints e.g. agenda setting, Arakanese/Burmese language to communicate; and
- ❖ More international support for capacity building of national staff in INGOs and of local partners.

To local and international media

- ❖ Expose the crimes of the local authorities, such as corruption, uneven aid distribution and theft, based on first-hand accounts of survivors and relief workers; and
- ❖ Highlight the ongoing difficulties faced by the Cyclone Giri affected communities.

To Burmese opposition groups

- ❖ Lobby and urge the international community to give more support to the Cyclone Giri affected communities; and
- ❖ Place political pressure on the Burmese Government to be more accountable and transparent in terms of disaster expenditure, urging them to spend more on rebuilding and rehabilitation efforts in Giri affected areas.

To ASEAN

- ❖ Monitor rights violations and prepare a study on the thematic issue of human rights violations during disasters in Myanmar (Art. 4.12, Terms of Reference, ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR)); and
- ❖ See to it that Burma implements all signed and ratified ASEAN DRR agreements.
- ❖ Offer aid and supplies to ensure those affected by Giri can finally rebuild their communities.

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[i] "MYANMAR: Carving out humanitarian space post-Nargis", *IRIN*, 24 May 2010, http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=89230 accessed on 4 Nov. 2011.

[ii] For reasons of comparability, the summary is taken from Voravit Suwanvanichkij *et al*., *Community-based assessment of human rights in a complex humanitarian emergency: the Emergency Assistance Teams-Burma and Cyclone Nargis*, *Conflict and Health* 2010, Vol. 4, No. 8, http://www.conflictandhealth.com/content/4/1/8 accessed on 17 Oct. 2011.

[iii] "Climate Change Vulnerability Index 2011", *Maplecroft*, http://maplecroft.com/about/news/ccvi.html accessed on 17 Oct. 2011.

[iv] Than Htike Oo, "Experts see green shoots in disaster preparation efforts", *MMT*, 1-7 Nov. 2010, http://www.mmtimes.com/2010/news/547/news54723.html accessed on 24 Oct. 2011.

[v] "Mitchell: UK emergency aid to forgotten disaster in Burma", *UK Department for International Development*, 15 Nov. 2010, http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Media-Room/Press-releases/2010/Mitchell-UK-emergency-aid-to-forgotten-disaster-in-Burma/ accessed on 5 Nov. 2011.

[vi] "Burma - six months after Cyclone Giri: Rebuilding lives in Ohn Taw village", *UK Department for International Development*, http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Stories/Case-Studies/2011/Burma-six-months-after-cyclone-giri-merlin-case-study/ accessed on 5 Nov. 2011.

[vii] Peter, "Cyclone Giri Victims Memorial Ceremony", 23 Oct. 2011, http://arakanhrdo.org/2011/10/23/cyclone-giri-victims-memorial-ceremony accessed on 9 Nov. 2011.