



ALTERNATIVE ASEAN NETWORK ON BURMA
campaigns, advocacy & capacity-building for human rights & democracy

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UPDATE: SPDC TURNS CYCLONE SURVIVORS INTO HOSTAGES¹

As of 23 June, a total of US\$241.3 million was committed to relief operations.² Donors pledged a further US\$66.4 million but expressed concern about restrictions and corruption.³ The UN and other agencies reached an estimated 1.3 million of the 2.4 million people affected by cyclone Nargis.⁴ However, aid deliveries were inconsistent and only 729,000 had received a food ration.⁵

- As of 19 June, SPDC authorities granted more than 230 visas to UN international staff for the response to cyclone Nargis and more than 200 operational UN staff had been granted limited access to affected areas.⁶ However, the SPDC has not extended clearance to foreign specialists working for other NGOs, including the ICRC and Save the Children.⁷
- On 10 June, the SPDC's Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development announced an extra layer of restrictions on approval process for the work and travel of humanitarian agents.⁸ The SPDC accused foreign aid agencies and the UN of having "deviated from the normal procedures."⁹ However, by 20 June the SPDC backtracked and agreed to revert to previous procedures.¹⁰
- The SPDC's refusal to allow the WFP to use military helicopters to assist in access in isolated areas has forced the WFP to charter helicopters, with each helicopter costing US\$2,000 per hour to keep in the air.¹¹
- By early June, Chinese and Thai medics treated 8,000 people in Rangoon and the Irrawaddy delta.¹² However, by mid-June, the SPDC closed down many of the camps and cancelled Thailand's third Thai medical team mission.¹³ Visas for medical teams from India, Japan, and the Philippines expired, and the medics left.¹⁴
- As of 18 June, the US made 176 airlifts to Rangoon, but then ended its Joint Task Force Caring Response.¹⁵ On 4 June, the group of US ships departed carrying tons of aid supplies and logistics equipment, after failing to convince the junta to allow access to cyclone survivors.¹⁶
- Telecoms Sans Frontieres (TSF) left Burma after SPDC authorities blocked attempts to reach affected areas. TSF believed SPDC authorities did not want affected areas supplied with telecommunications equipment.¹⁷

¹ This updates Altsean-Burma's previous briefers "DISASTER" (BN 2008/1042) available at <http://www.altsean.org/Reports/Disaster.php> and "SPDC TURNS DISASTER INTO CATASTROPHE" (BN 2008/1043) available at <http://www.altsean.org/Reports/Disasterintocatastrophe.php>

² OCHA (23 Jun 08) Cyclone Nargis - Myanmar - OCHA Situation Report No. 34

³ OCHA (23 Jun 08) Cyclone Nargis - Myanmar - OCHA Situation Report No. 34

⁴ OCHA (23 Jun 08) Cyclone Nargis - Myanmar - OCHA Situation Report No. 34

⁵ AFP (11 Jun 08) Aid agencies facing shortages in Myanmar cyclone effort

⁶ OCHA (23 Jun 08) Cyclone Nargis - Myanmar - OCHA Situation Report No. 34

⁷ VOA (03 Jun 08) UN: Nearly half of Burmese cyclone victims don't receive aid

⁸ DVB (12 Jun 08) Junta lays out guidelines for relief workers

⁹ NYT (18 Jun 08) Junta's Delays in Myanmar Are Less Costly Than Feared

¹⁰ OCHA (23 Jun 08) Cyclone Nargis - Myanmar - OCHA Situation Report No. 34

¹¹ AP (04 Jun 08) UN: Burma Aid Costs Soar as Junta Plays Hard Ball; AFP (02 Jun 08) UN warns of 'urgent work' to help Myanmar cyclone victims

¹² Irrawaddy (03 Jun 08) Burmese volunteers struggle to bring aid to cyclone survivors

¹³ Reuters (13 Jun 08) Foreign doctors leave cyclone-hit Myanmar

¹⁴ Reuters (13 Jun 08) Foreign doctors leave cyclone-hit Myanmar

¹⁵ DMHA (20 Jun 08) Cyclone Nargis Update¹⁶ Mizzima (05 Jun 08) Burma allows another five UN choppers to fly in

Local officials and SPDC soldiers have prevented aid from reaching survivors and attempted to benefit from donor generosity.

- Despite SPDC's assurances of free access for private donors to cyclone-hit areas,¹⁸ in June the SPDC arrested 17 activists for taking aid to affected communities in the Irrawaddy delta.¹⁹
- Reports continue of SPDC officials misappropriating aid, or charging survivors for relief supplies, including rice and diesel.²⁰ One survivor reported that SPDC soldiers held a lottery in his village to determine who would receive aid packages of one egg, six cans of milk, and one potato.²¹
- SPDC authorities continued to extort money, rice, paddy seeds, and cattle from farmers throughout the country, allegedly to help cyclone-affected communities.²²

ASEAN assesses needs

Over a month after the cyclone, ASEAN announced it would begin its Post-Nargis Joint Assessment (PONJA) work. Between 9 and 20 June, its team moved around the cyclone-affected areas "assessing humanitarian needs".²³ Some 350 people, including officials and volunteers from the SPDC, ASEAN, UN, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and local and international NGOs completed data collection in 30 Townships.²⁴ ASEAN's assessment will form the basis of a revised humanitarian appeal to be presented in July.²⁵

Human Rights Council condemns SPDC

On 18 June, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution that condemned the SPDC's "ongoing systematic violations of human rights."²⁶ It was the 18th resolution passed by the Geneva-based body against the military regime since 1992. As well as calling for dialogue and democratization, the resolution called on the SPDC to honor its promise to allow relief workers "immediate, full and unhindered access" to cyclone-affected communities and to stop sending cyclone survivors back to areas where they would not have access to emergency relief.

Conditions for survivors

Health: Cyclone survivors are suffering acute respiratory infections, diarrhea and shock.²⁷ The SPDC's forced eviction of survivors from camps cut them off from medical assistance, as well as increasing the threat of exposure and respiratory infection.²⁸ Ninety percent of the people in Aye Yar, Bogale Township, are reportedly suffering from dysentery.²⁹ As of 10 June, the UN recorded 781 cases of dengue fever in Rangoon, and 481 in the delta May.³⁰

¹⁷ BBC (25 Jun 08) Burma blocks emergency telecoms

¹⁸ Irrawaddy (16 Jun 08) More Aid Workers Arrested

¹⁹ AP (05 Jun 08) Top Myanmar comedian, social activist detained; Mizzima News (05 Jun 08) Burmese police arrest prominent comedian & director Zarganar; DVB (05 Jun 08) Zarganar taken in for police questioning; Mizzima News (16 Jun 08) Student activists helping Nargis victims arrested; Irrawaddy (16 Jun 08) More Aid Workers Arrested; Mizzima News (17 Jun 08) Volunteers for cyclone relief work arrested yet again AFP (16 Jun 08) Sports writer arrested after aiding Myanmar cyclone victims; Mizzima News (15 Jun 08) Editor aiding cyclone victims arrested by Junta; DVB (16 Jun 08) Writer Zaw Thet Htway arrested; AP (15 Jun 08) Police arrest Myanmar activist who ferried aid to cyclone survivors; Mizzima News (18 Jun 08) Volunteers burying storm victims arrested; Irrawaddy (19 Jun 08) Arrested: Volunteers who bury the dead

²⁰ DVB (05 Jun 08) Bogalay residents accuse authorities of selling aid

²¹ Al Jazeera (03 Jun 08) Aid 'lottery' for Myanmar survivors

²² DVB (04 Jun 08) Authorities demand money and goods from farmers; Kaladan News (14 Jun 08) Burmese force collects paddy seeds for cyclone victims; IMNA (20 Jun 08) Mon state told to send 70 water buffaloes and 27 men to cyclone hit delta; DVB (26 Jun 08) Authorities collect money and paddy for rice cultivation; Narinjara News (07 Jun 08) Arakanese People Suffer for Nargis Victims; Kachin News Group (10 Jun 08) Junta collects cyclone funds from jade miners in Phakant; IMNA (03 Jun 08) Villagers forced to donate for cyclone victims in Irrawaddy delta; IMNA (19 Jun 08) USDA donates funds to school in Mon state; Irrawaddy (09 Jun 08) 1,000 Karen villagers flee attacks

²³ OCHA (23 Jun 08) Cyclone Nargis - Myanmar - OCHA Situation Report No. 34

²⁴ Xinhua (24 Jun 08) Tripartite core group completes joint assessment on cyclone impact on Myanmar

²⁵ IRIN (23 Jun 08) MYANMAR: Funding crunch could ground cyclone helicopters

²⁶ UN News Center (18 Jun 08) Myanmar: UN Human Rights Council condemns 'ongoing systematic violations'

²⁷ WHO (16 Jun 08) WHO releases first disease surveillance reports in Myanmar

²⁸ AP (08 Jun 08) Myanmar: Monsoon season brings more suffering; AP (07 Jun 08) 1.5 million survivors in Myanmar without shelter

²⁹ DVB (06 Jun 08) Labutta and Bogalay struggle with dysentery outbreak

³⁰ AP (16 Jun 08) UN plans Myanmar anti-dengue operation; Xinhua (21 Jun 08) UN anti-dengue-fever campaign to start in Myanmar

Food shortages: The WFP's appeal has only been 45% met, providing only sufficient funding for one month's ration of rice for 750,000 people.³¹ Local volunteers have warned that cyclone survivors who had been surviving on rotten rice and coconut shoots would run out of food in a month because private donations were drying up.³²

Bodies in the water: Survivors continue to report bodies floating in waterways.³³ Bodies have decomposed and could not be identified, making the process of grieving and accounting for missing persons even more difficult.³⁴

Return to farming: The UN warned that farmers had until the end of June to replant their seedlings for the 2008 rice crop.³⁵ They estimated 700,000 hectares of paddy would need rehabilitation, and 200,000 hectares were seriously damaged and would not be able to be used in the coming season.³⁶ Farmers still faced basic problems including a lack of shelter for themselves, rice seeds, fertilizer and plowing animals.³⁷

Schools reopen: On 2 June, the SPDC reopened most schools. By 1 June the UN had patched up 408 of the 4,100 estimated damaged or destroyed schools, in some places with tarpaulin sheeting. Other schools opened in monsoon rain, some without sanitization, others missing roofing, or with holes for windows or walls.³⁸ On 17 June, two children were hospitalized and others injured when a corridor collapsed in a middle school in Tharkayta Township.³⁹

Survivor evictions: By mid June, the SPDC had closed down all survivor camps, except in Labutta Township, where about 10,000 remained.⁴⁰ Survivors were forced out with varying degrees of coercion, some ordered into trucks supplied by private companies with ties with the regime, including Ayer Shwe Wah, Max Myanmar, War War Win, and Zay Kabar.⁴¹ International aid groups pressed the SPDC to stop closing the camps where they had established clinics and logistics centers intended for the distributing relief and managing rehabilitation, education and health programs.⁴²

NOTE:

Cyclone Nargis is the worst natural disaster to hit Burma in recent memory, comparable to the devastation caused by 2004 tsunami in Aceh. The SPDC's official figures as this update goes to print stands at 84,537, dead and 53,836 missing, a toll of 138,373 (unofficial estimate are higher). Between 130,000 are 167,000 people are thought to have been killed by the tsunami in Aceh, Indonesia. Within 2 weeks of the tsunami, there were already 2,000 civilian foreign aid workers in Aceh, a sensitive conflict area, in addition to military aid and personnel from 11 countries.

³¹ DMHA (20 Jun 08) Cyclone Nargis Update

³² DVB (16 Jun 08) Phyar Pon cyclone victims fear food shortage

³³ DVB (09 Jun 08) Bodies of cyclone victims collect in Labutta; DVB (02 Jun 08) Irrawaddy residents fear spread of disease

³⁴ AP (08 Jun 08) Tens of Thousands of Dead From Cyclone Nargis May Never Be Identified; Irrawaddy (09 Jun 08) Thousands of Bodies Still Litter Irrawaddy Delta; Irrawaddy (18 Jun 08) Thousands of Cyclone Victims in Burma Unidentified

³⁵ Asia Times (02 Jun 08) Second wave economic crisis in Myanmar

³⁶ DMHA (20 Jun 08) Cyclone Nargis Update

³⁷ Reuters (04 Jun 08) Burmese stock up on rice

³⁸ AP (03 Jun 08) Back to school in Myanmar; AP (02 Jun 08) Children in classrooms without roofs as schools reopen in Myanmar's cyclone zone; AFP (04 Jun 08) Myanmar evicts cyclone victims from schools, so classes can resume; Irrawaddy (12 Jun 08) Back to School in the Delta

³⁹ Mizzima News (17 Jun 08) Five students injured as school collapses in Tharkayta; DVB (18 Jun 08) School building collapses in Tharkayta

⁴⁰ DMHA (20 Jun 08) Cyclone Nargis Update

⁴¹ AP (01 Jun 08) Myanmar criticized for plan to reopen some schools a month after cyclone; Irrawaddy (04 Jun 08) One month after Cyclone Nargis; DVB (11 Jun 08) Local troops evict cyclone victims in Bogalay; IRIN (03 Jun 08) MYANMAR: Concerns over premature returns; Mizzima News (03 Jun 08) Authorities continue eviction from cyclone shelters

⁴² Reuters (03 Jun 08) Aid groups press Myanmar on camp evictions; DPA (01 Jun 08) Displaced Burmese worry about their future in camps