



Last Updated: May 22, 2008, 23:48 GMT

International aid allowed into Myanmar weeks after Cyclone Nargis



Image of a young boy in Myanmar, left orphaned by Cyclone Nargis. A/P ©

YANGON, MYANMAR – Nearly three weeks after the treacherous Cyclone Nargis hit on May 2, international aid is finally being allowed into the country, with some minor restrictions. The international community, finally allowed to contribute resources to the hardest-hit Delta region, is not permitted to distribute aid directly to the people of Myanmar. Instead, the military government in Myanmar, the junta, will issue the aid to its people.

After the Cyclone raged from the Indian Ocean into the southern and then eastern borders of the country, estimates now say that 135,000 people are either dead or missing, a number immensely greater than the government's initial estimate of only 350 people. Cyclone

Nargis has been called the world's worst natural disaster since the tsunami in Southeast Asia in 2004.

Nearly one million people are estimated to be homeless due to the cyclone. "What is clear," said United Nations disaster response spokesman Richard Horsey, "is that we are dealing with a major emergency situation, and the priority needs now are shelter and clean drinking water."

Until now, the junta has not allowed any form of needed food, water, or even medical supplies into the country following the cyclone. Many countries willing to assist Myanmar have been prevented by the junta from sending assistance in any way, be it in the form of volunteers, or any sort of independent foreign monitors.

Information has been very scarce on the cyclone because the country has been closed off from the rest of the world. The international community is now thankful to finally be allowed to help those who have been most affected by Nargis.

The junta, in an attempt to gain the approval of the people, has claimed that the international aid being distributed is not from outside sources. "The junta's main goal seems to be to establish Myanmar as self-sufficient, a task which is foolish in a time when people are still left in devastation nearly three weeks after a cyclone," said one politician from Yangon who witnessed his government's propaganda efforts.

There is much concern that because the Burmese government waited three weeks to allow independent aid into the area, there have been preventable deaths. The junta refused aid for three weeks, while thousands more suffered and died, leaving behind orphaned children and starving babies. Because the junta did not even inform the Burmese people that there would be an approaching cyclone, many consider the government's actions violations of human rights. Had the people prepared for the coming storm, many of the deaths from Nargis could have been avoided.

"Many of the villages remain flooded, making it difficult to rebuild. There is also a real risk that once the people are resettled, they will be invisible to aid workers," said Myanmar's UNICEF director Anupama Rao Singh. "Without support and continued service to those affected, there is a risk of a second wave of disease and devastation."

The junta has presumably been giving out its own aid during the three week period following the hurricane, but without great results. "The efforts of the junta are not enough, and hardly effective. They are not circulating food and water well, causing many cyclone victims preventable suffering," said one taxi driver who asked not to be identified for fear of punishment.

Electricity is down, notably in the largest city, Yangon, even three weeks after the disaster. In addition, the 120 mile per hour winds that accompanied the storm have blown the roofs off of hospitals and destroyed just over 4,000 schools administering to 1.1 million children, causing UNICEF to become very concerned.

With the admission of international aid, the country should be able to assist more of its desperate citizens, although the government is accepting not all forms of aid. Several countries have offered Myanmar military aid but have been denied. The United States offered four Navy ships to Myanmar, packed with resources, but the government refused. Defense ministers around the world are responding in concern over the military junta's "criminal neglect of its people," as American Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates called it.

An estimated quarter of a million citizens are still without any sort of assistance, as the junta is distributing the aid very slowly and inefficiently. The international community is responding with urgency and with outrage at the humanitarian violations.