

Burma and the Political Aftermath of Cyclone Nargis

As evidence mounts that Burma's controversial military leader, General Than Shwe, refuses to allow a meaningful relief effort in the cyclone-stricken Irrawaddy delta, accusations of 'crimes against humanity' have multiplied. An influential report by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) has, however, dampened the debate of whether the UN's 'Responsibility to Protect' mandate – which sanctions international action to prevent mass atrocities such as genocide and crimes against humanity – might apply to Burma. 'Although the junta's foot-dragging over the acceptance of international aid has horrified the UN and many foreign governments, there is no prospect of any outside force intervention,' the EIU said in its recently released report.

Than Shwe recently told a cabinet meeting that the Tatmadaw could handle the crisis in the delta on its own. At least 84,500 people have died, and another 56,000 people are still missing from Cyclone Nargis that struck on May 2. More than 6 weeks after the disaster, the UN estimates that at least 2.4 million people are in need of food, shelter or medical care, and more than a million have yet to receive foreign aid. Huge numbers of people are surviving in appalling conditions, with little or no help. Thousands of dead bodies still lie in the rice paddies, fields and waterways of Burma's Irrawaddy delta. It has been reported that farmers, reluctant to take on the ghastly task of removing decaying corpses from their land, are paying volunteers 1000 kyat (40 pence) for each body they dispose of.

The Burmese-language daily, *Myanmar Ahlin*, recently wrote that cyclone survivors could get by without 'bars of chocolate' from the international community. According to the cyclone rescue committee of Burma's opposition National League for Democracy, when officials give out aid, it is unsurprisingly often below basic standards and the waterlogged rice is unfit for human consumption. There have also been reports that police routinely beat local people caught begging for food. These desperate cyclone survivors are accused by local authorities of damaging Burma's image in the eyes of the outside world.

While the regime's mouthpiece newspapers are telling farmers to be self-reliant by foraging on water cloves and frogs, the UN has warned that Burma's cyclone-devastated Irrawaddy Delta will likely need food assistance for as long as a year. Due to the severe damage and shortage of farming supplies, many farmers will not be able to plant rice for this year's monsoon paddy crop. Because Cyclone Nargis struck Burma's main rice producing area, the economic impact of the disaster will eventually reach every corner of the country. According to the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization), about 16 percent of the delta's total 1.3 million hectares of agricultural land were severely damaged in the cyclone and would 'not be available for planting this season'.

Some senior leaders who were reportedly open to accept more international aid were sidelined by Than Shwe who continues to suppress all dissent. Historically the Tatmadaw has remained remarkably unified by Asian standards. While over the last half century the officer corps in Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines have been periodically torn apart by factionalism, the Burmese military leadership has not yet faced serious challenges from within its ranks. One important factor is the dramatic expansion of military intelligence capabilities since the junta has been in power. These intelligence services are not only operating to eli-

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minate political opposition within the population, but also within the military structure itself.

Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the National League of Democracy and the face of freedom for many, recently spent her 63rd birthday in the home that has been her prison for most of the past 19 years. The regime knows that Suu Kyi's influence is not easily eclipsed. Everytime she has been released in the past, her magnetism has proved to be undiminished and the junta has made sure to put her back under house arrest. After the violent crushing of the Saffron Revolution last September, and the more recent preposterous government response to the devastating cyclone, anger against the military government inside Burma is growing. People are too scared to march, but dissatisfaction bordering on desperation is widespread.

The government is aware of this and is attempting to prevent its people from having any contact to the outside world, including watching foreign broadcasts. The paranoid junta recently banned electronic shop owners from selling satellite dishes and shop owners are being warned that they face prosecution if caught selling them. The Burmese are left with mouthpiece newspapers of the government, in which journalists are busy claiming that foreign news organizations and radio stations are 'more destructive than Nargis'. The departure of US, French and British Navy ships after the continuous refusal of the government to allow them to distribute supplies to victims shows that the generals saw a menace in these ships more ominous than any cyclone. They might have quite rightly believed that foreign forces were to land in Burma, this international presence might embolden the desperate population to rise up again, spelling the end of the regime.

Although the military junta seems to be coherent and strong, the regime is starting to show signs of insecurity. One reason for Burma's slow reaction to the cyclone was that it was too busy pushing ahead with the referendum on the draft constitution. The highly criticized referendum, which unsurprisingly did not meet UN Security Council standards of openness and fairness, was held days after the cyclone ravaged the country. The draft constitution, which was supposedly supported by 92 percent of the population, sets aside 25 percent of parliamentary seats for military appointees ahead of the 2010 elections. The regime knows it will not win a 'democratic' election without intervention and manipulation.

While the international community is bogged down in unfruitful negotiations with the generals, Burma's monks, activists, civil society groups, local NGOs and even celebrities are reaching out to refugees with food, relief supplies and money. Exiled Burmese groups are raising funds to support independent relief groups and temples and churches are working together to help refugees. They are however living dangerously. The arrest

of a well-known comedian, Maung Thura (whose stage name is Zarganar), who was trying to help survivors is just one example.

On the one hand it looks as if the international community, in its efforts to depoliticize the humanitarian crisis still unfolding in Burma, may end up ensuring the ruling regime's political survival while doing little or nothing to save lives. Furthermore, with just giving access to minimal aid, the Burmese regime continues to 'cooperate' with the international community on its own terms. Friendly foreign governments, such as those of fellow members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), are used as intermediaries. Asean has been entrusted with coordinating international relief efforts through an ad hoc 'Asean Emergency Rapid Assessment Team', despite its long-standing failure to exert any positive influence on the regime.

On the other hand signs start to appear that the Tatmadaw's days might be numbered. Although the junta's grip is still very strong, its legitimacy is running thin. Repression, fear and killings might keep a desperate people down for a while, but it is only a matter of time until splits might appear in the ruling structures itself. Change from within might be slower than outside intervention, but as many cases in history have proven it is more constructive in the long term.