

Summary and Key Recommendations



A large storm crosses the delta area,
south of Rangoon, 4 weeks after Cyclone
Nargis hit the the delta region of Burma.

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“I WANT TO HELP MY OWN PEOPLE”

State Control and Civil Society in Burma after Cyclone Nargis



Villagers line the roadside between Pyapon and Bogale in a queue for rice and cooking oil from the government.

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I want to save my own people. That's why we go with any donations we can get. But the government doesn't like our work. It is not interested in helping people. It just wants to tell the world and the rest of the country that everything is under control and that it has already saved its people.

—COMEDIAN AND ACTIVIST ZARGANA PRIOR TO HIS ARREST, RANGOON, JUNE 2008

It was Cyclone Nargis which created the space for us to engage in humanitarian work, not the government.

—DIRECTOR OF A BURMESE HUMANITARIAN GROUP, RANGOON, MARCH 2010

One of the most positive accomplishments of the cyclone response was to demonstrate the positive role that NGOs and the UN can play in a humanitarian response.... It is unfortunate that translating this good example from the cyclone response into other parts of the country has not happened yet.

—UN RESIDENT COORDINATOR BISHOW PARAJULI, RANGOON, MARCH 2010

Cyclone Nargis struck southern Burma on May 2-3, 2008, killing at least 140,000 people and bringing devastation to an estimated 2.4 million people in the Irrawaddy Delta and the former capital, Rangoon. The Burmese military government's initial reaction to the cyclone shocked the world: instead of immediately allowing international humanitarian assistance to be delivered to survivors, as did countries affected by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) prevented both foreign disaster relief workers and urgently needed relief supplies from entering the delta during the crucial first weeks after the cyclone.





The military government blocked large-scale international relief efforts by delaying the issuance of visas to aid workers, prohibiting foreign helicopters and boats from making deliveries to support the relief operation, obstructing travel by aid agencies to affected areas, and preventing local and international media from freely reporting from the disaster area. Rather than prioritizing the lives and well-being of the affected population, the military government's actions were dictated by hostility to the international community, participation in the diversion of aid, and an obsession with holding a manipulated referendum on a long-delayed constitution.

This 56-year-old rice farmer lost two daughters and a grandchild to Cyclone Nargis. He spent days after the storm sailing on the Pyapon River and its tributaries searching for the bodies of his three loved ones. He never found them. He borrowed money to rebuild his house and replant his rice fields, but his first attempts at planting failed because the saltwater had ruined his fields. He is now heavily in debt and a moneylender has reported him to the police.

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Many villagers in the Irrawaddy Delta lost their homes and belongings in the wake of the cyclone.

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In the face of the government's callous response, Burmese civil society groups and individuals raised money, collected supplies and traveled to the badly affected parts of the Irrawaddy Delta and around Rangoon to help survivors in shattered villages. Many efforts were spontaneous, but as the relief and recovery efforts gained pace, dozens of community-based organizations and civil society groups organized themselves and gained unprecedented experience in providing humanitarian relief and initiating projects.

Access for United Nations agencies and international humanitarian organizations improved starting in late May 2008 after UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon visited the delta, and the UN and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

brokered a deal with the Burmese government. They established the Tripartite Core Group (TCG), which became the central vehicle for coordinating aid, improving access for humanitarian organizations to the delta, and carrying out the ensuing recovery efforts.

The two years since Cyclone Nargis have seen an unprecedented influx of humanitarian assistance to the delta, with a visible presence of local and international aid workers and improved access to provide humanitarian relief. While this opening has been rightly welcomed, it has not been the unmitigated success that many Burma analysts have portrayed it to be.

Humanitarian access to the delta improved significantly by Burma standards following the establishment of the TCG mechanism, but it has remained far short of international standards. And partly because of the access restrictions imposed by the SPDC, humanitarian funding has not been sufficient to meet the needs of people in the cyclone affected zones. As a result, two years after the cyclone, the recovery of



many communities in the delta remains limited, particularly communities far from the towns where most relief efforts were organized. Such communities face continuing hardships and difficulties obtaining clean water and adequate sanitation, health resources, needed agricultural support, and recovery of livelihoods. Had the SPDC not continued to place unnecessary restrictions on the humanitarian relief effort in the delta, the cyclone-affected population would be much farther down the road to recovery.

The Burmese government has failed to adequately support reconstruction efforts that benefit the population, contributing only paltry levels of aid despite having vast sums at its disposal from lucrative natural gas sales. Although the government has not announced total figures dedicated for cyclone relief and reconstruction, it allocated a mere 5 million kyat (US\$50,000) for an emergency fund immediately after the storm. It is clear that its subsequent spending has also not been commensurate with available resources. Burma's government is estimated to have more than US\$5 billion in

A Burmese soldier watches over a small group of Burmese relief workers who are delivering aid. The aid, supplied by private donors, consisted of one kilogram of rice and cooking oil to each family.

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foreign reserves and receives an estimated US\$150 million in monthly gas export revenues. The Burmese government channels the limited assistance it does provide through its surrogates and contracts awarded to politically connected companies, in an effort to maintain social control. In addition, the government's distribution of aid has been marred by serious allegations of favoritism.

In most areas of Burma outside of the cyclone-affected areas, international humanitarian access is much more limited than in the delta, despite significant levels of preventable disease, malnutrition, and inadequate water and sanitation, particularly in the central dry zone and the ethnic minority areas of the border states. All of the UN staff, Burmese aid providers,



Around 200 ships were either badly damaged or run aground on the banks of the Rangoon River by the Cyclone Nargis storm surge.

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Villagers line the roadside between Didaye and Kungyangon in the Irrawaddy Delta in hope of receiving donations from passing vehicles.

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and international humanitarian organization representatives Human Rights Watch spoke with in Burma in early 2010 praised the humanitarian opening in the delta, but then added that humanitarian space in the rest of Burma remains a major challenge. As one senior aid official told us: “We were all hoping that the Nargis experience would be the wedge to open a lot of things, but this hasn’t happened.”

The statistics speak for themselves: approximately one-third of Burmese citizens live below the poverty line. Most live on one to three US dollars a day, and suffer from inadequate food security. Maternal mortality is the worst in the Asian region after Afghanistan. While the economies of many of its neighbors rapidly develop, the people of Burma continue to suffer. The SPDC fails to invest its own available resources to

address urgent social and economic needs and blocks the humanitarian community from doing all it can to help meet those needs in other parts of the country.

A number of humanitarian aid experts we spoke with were hopeful that after national elections scheduled for the end of 2010 are completed, they will then be able to build on what was achieved in cyclone-affected areas, and expand the delivery of humanitarian aid to other areas in Burma where it is desperately needed. While the record of the Burmese government to date suggests this will be an uphill battle at best, the UN, ASEAN, and other influential international actors in Burma should make it a priority to continue to press for such expanded access.

Natural disasters can sometimes work as a catalyst for peace-building and reform in conflict wracked societies, as occurred in Aceh, Indonesia, following the 2004 tsunami. In Burma, the military government is stronger and more confident two years after the cyclone, but it is no more accountable or respectful of basic rights.



This report is based on extensive interviews with cyclone survivors, local and international aid workers, and other knowledgeable sources. It assesses the human rights impact of Cyclone Nargis and provides an often neglected human rights perspective on what is happening in cyclone-affected areas today. The last chapter of the report looks at the humanitarian situation in other parts of the country and the failure of the humanitarian opening in the Irrawaddy Delta to be replicated elsewhere.

This report is not a critique of humanitarian operations inside Burma, either during the Cyclone Nargis relief and recovery operations, or more generally throughout the country. It has been longstanding Human Rights Watch policy to support an increase in humanitarian assistance to Burma, albeit with recognition of the fraught human rights challenges posed by such operations in so oppressive a political environment as Burma.

A Burmese man carries aid supplied by private donors.

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Finally, this reports details an under-appreciated positive legacy of the cyclone response: the development of a group of new, truly independent and experienced civil society organizations in Burma, which now seek to use their skills to address other humanitarian and development challenges in the country.

Uprooted trees and downed power lines scattered the Irrawaddy Delta after the cyclone tore through on May 2-3, 2008.

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KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE STATE PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL (SPDC)

- Immediately and unconditionally release all of Burma's more than 2,100 political prisoners, including Zargana and 20 other Burmese aid workers arbitrarily arrested for their activities following Cyclone Nargis.
- End unnecessary restrictions on the operations and freedom of movement of Burmese and international nongovernmental organizations and UN agencies in the Irrawaddy Delta and throughout Burma.
- Ensure that scheduled elections in Burma in 2010 are conducted in a free, fair and credible manner. Discipline or prosecute as appropriate officials who engage in politically motivated harassment, intimidation and violence.

TO UNITED NATIONS AGENCIES

- Expand and strengthen the human rights protection, monitoring and reporting activities of the United Nations country team in Rangoon, and formalize existing protection mechanisms with an increased protection working group presence in Burma.

TO INTERNATIONAL DONORS

- Press the Burmese government to ensure unimpeded humanitarian access for local and international humanitarian organizations in cyclone-affected areas and elsewhere throughout Burma.