



Burma's Suffering: Will a Horrific Tragedy Become a Change-Forcing Event? by Richard P. Cronin

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Tragedies brought about by natural disasters sometimes become powerful forces for change in countries marked by political strife and repression. Cyclone Nargis, a powerful tropical storm that inundated the Irrawaddy River Delta region of Burma May 3, could mark the beginning of the end for a military regime that has brutally misgoverned one of the world's poorest countries, which they call Myanmar, for almost two decades.

The Dec. 26, 2004, Indian Ocean tsunami that swept across Indonesia's conflict-ridden province of Aceh provides the best recent example of how a terrible natural disaster can bring about reconciliation and positive political change. The scale of devastation was such that both the Indonesian government and the GAM rebels put relief and recovery ahead of politics, welcomed massive U.S. and other international assistance, and subsequently concluded a peace accord that ended a bitter and seemingly irresolvable civil conflict.

The Aceh example clearly is not in the minds of Gen. Than Shwe and his junta colleagues despite more than 150,000 killed or missing and upward of 2 million still without adequate water, food, shelter, or medical supplies more than two weeks after the cyclone struck. Instead of bending all efforts to provide critically needed relief, the junta gave priority to forcing citizens in all but the most stricken areas to participate in farcical May 10 referendum on a new constitution that is intended to extend its rule indefinitely.

The political consequences of a catastrophic cyclone that devastated then East Pakistan on Nov. 12, 1970 may provide a closer parallel to the situation in Burma. The most powerful storm ever to strike what was then the eastern wing of a geographically divided Pakistan, cyclone *Bhola* killed upward of half a million ethnic Bengalis and left 4-5 million homeless. As in the current situation in Burma, an already loathed military regime reacted with callous indifference and utterly failed to provide effective relief, making a manmade disaster out of a natural one.

In the East Pakistan case the military regime paid a huge political price for its indifference and mishandling of the relief effort when a pro-autonomy party swept the East wing in a national election held a month after waters receded. Ironically, the election had been scheduled well before the cyclone as a means of national reconciliation following unprecedented political demonstrations calling for an end to

military rule and the restoration of constitutional government in both wings the year before. A brutal crackdown on riots that ensued after Pakistan's military president blocked the leader of the victorious ethnic-Bengali party from becoming the prime minister led to intervention by the Indian Army and the creation of the new independent state of Bangladesh

Of course no one expects the Burmese junta to be so hard pressed or so foolish as to hold another election like the one whose results they disallowed in 1990, but with Burmese citizens left largely to fend for themselves, civil society could grow more cohesive, self-confident, and bold. Perhaps with this in mind, army units in some areas reportedly have forbidden well-to-do Burmese citizens to provide private relief assistance and have seized relief-destined rice and other desperately needed supplies for their own consumption

For the country's neighbors in the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), putting pressure on the regime is no longer a diplomatic choice but a matter of both humanitarian obligation and compelling national self-interest. The new ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan quickly overcame the organization's "non-interference" principle to publicly urge the junta to grant immediate access to international relief teams. Unfortunately, pleas by Surin and several ASEAN political leaders and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon had little apparent effect until May 19, when the government agreed to allow foreign assistance to be delivered on the ground by relief workers from ASEAN on a case-by-case basis.

China, the junta's main source of foreign support, finds itself in a particularly difficult position. Given their alarm about rising anti-China feeling in Tibet and international calls to boycott the Beijing Olympics, Chinese leaders must be publicly circumspect about any criticism of the junta even while privately urging dialogue with the democratic opposition. Moreover, China is unable to provide timely and meaningful logistical assistance for reasons of geography and insufficient capability, which has been compounded by the urgent need to respond to the massive earthquake which struck Sichuan Province May 12.

The Bush administration's effort to provide disaster assistance got off to a bad start when First Lady Laura Bush, at a May 5 press conference, lambasted the junta for allegedly failing to provide timely warning of the approaching storm and called it "a friendless regime" that "should step aside." The circumstances of the First Lady's Oval Office briefing have been the subject of curiosity and her remarks were widely criticized as unwise and counterproductive, not only by U.S. friends and allies in the region, but also by some Burmese democracy activists.

The administration soon adopted a softer and wiser approach, and has moved military units and relief supplies into

the region to provide, if allowed, the kind of large scale logistical aid that only the United States can supply. U.S. officials were mainly leaving it to neighboring countries and international organizations to keep pressure on the regime to allow U.S. and Western aid deliveries, though the senior U.S. diplomat in Burma, charge d'affaires Shari Villarosa, has kept up a running commentary with the media on the dire nature of the situation and the urgent need for large scale international assistance.

Moreover, as of May 19, some 31 U.S. C-130 military transports had landed in Rangoon (Yangon). Though only half of the 90 tons the relief supplies that U.S. forces are capable of delivering daily, the situation already is unprecedented. On the other hand, transport ships of the U.S., French, and other international navies standing by in the region have not been allowed to deliver their life-saving cargoes to the riverine parts of the disaster area that are inaccessible by road.

As for its future political consequences, the crisis will find its own course. All that matters at the moment is for foreign countries, NGOs, and other providers of international disaster assistance to provide as much assistance as possible to the increasingly desperate survivors.

After so many years of iron-fisted military rule, observers see no sign of any popular reaction besides the desperation to survive. Still, the country has become more open than any time since the beginning of military rule four decades ago. The cracks continue to widen in light of the new role being accorded to ASEAN and the vast remaining needs for relief, including seed for a new rice crop. Even Gen. Than Shwe has, in the words of one diplomat, "come out of his lair" in his remote new capital at Naypyidaw to make a show of handing over relief supplies in Rangoon. Whatever else can be said, the façade of this Potemkin country has been swept away by the cyclone and the ugly reality is there for all to see.