

THE IRRAWADDY

Covering Burma and Southeast Asia

New Report Slams Junta for Nargis 'Crimes'

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In stark contrast to an earlier assessment of the Cyclone Nargis relief effort by Burma's ruling junta and its international partners, a new report released today accuses the regime of widespread rights abuses that "may constitute crimes against humanity."

The report, "After the Storm: Voices from the Delta," is the first independent inquiry into the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, which struck Burma on May 2-3 last year, killing as many as 140,000 people.



A new report says that the Burmese junta's response to Cyclone Nargis could constitute crimes against humanity. (Photo: www.allmyanmar.com)

Unlike the Post-Nargis Joint Assessment (PONJA) report released last July by the Tripartite Core Group (TCG), consisting of the junta, the United Nations and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), the new report does not shy away from the issue of human rights abuses by the Burmese regime.

"We did not prompt this. We asked a number of questions about relief efforts and agencies, and what kept coming out was people trying to struggle and negotiate their communities' relationships with the junta," said Dr Chris Beyrer, director of the Center for Public Health and Human Rights at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, which released the report.

The report is based on interviews with 90 private relief workers and cyclone survivors conducted between June and November 2008. The interviews were carried out by the Emergency Assistance Team—Burma (EAT), a social organization based on the Thai-

Burmese border and staffed by community aid workers from cyclone-affected areas.

The interviews detail a pattern of abuses by the military authorities, including the misappropriation of relief supplies, forced labor and harassment and arrest of local aid workers.

“After one month, they came to the village, saw my supplies and started asking—they sent my information to Yangon [Rangoon] to investigate me. They were asking why there were so many supplies. They think it was anti-government. So I left; I don’t like prison,” recounted one relief worker who was interviewed for the report.

The authors of the report say that such abuses “may constitute crimes against humanity through the creation of conditions whereby the basic survival needs of victims cannot be adequately met,” in violation of Article 7(1)(k) of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

“These allegations, taken together, may amount to crimes against humanity and may need to be investigated,” said Beyrer, adding that the case could be referred to the UN Security Council for consideration.

The report also highlights the international relief effort’s failure to engage community-based groups, and calls for a more thorough assessment of the situation in the cyclone-stricken Irrawaddy delta, including the junta’s role in obstructing aid.

“There are some [international] groups working directly with community organizations, but they have to be very careful about how they work together. It is very risky. That is why we want the UN and Asean to tell the government to allow the community-based organizations to work freely to do their humanitarian work,” said Dr Cynthia Maung, who serves as the chairperson of EAT.

“We would also like to recommend that the UN or the international community do a more thorough assessment,” she added. “Unless we get a proper assessment or report, it may be very hard to continue working to improve the situation [in the cyclone-affected area].”

The report was released as Thai Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya, speaking at the annual Asean summit being held in the Thai resort town of Hua Hin, revealed that the Burmese regime was set to extend the TCG’s role in the delta.

It is unclear how the regional grouping, which has generally closed ranks in defense of the Burmese junta in the past, will respond to the report.

“We hope that there is a positive and constructive response, not a response of denial or obfuscation, but rather that people will say, all right, these kinds of practices must cease and desist,” said Beyrer.

“These kinds of allegations simply cannot be ignored. The people of the Irrawaddy delta deserve to have a reconstruction effort that’s free of rights abuses,” he added.

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