



PEOPLE affected by Cyclone Nargis walk past houses damaged in Bogalay on May 17, 2008. Nargis, which barreled into Burma on May 2-3 last year, wiped away entire villages and submerged swathes of land under flood waters. The country's junta stands accused of stealing aid donated by foreign agencies.

BURMESE JUNTA STEALS AID FOR CYCLONE NARGIS VICTIMS

KAVI CHONGKITTAVORN
THE NATION

THE FIRST independent assessment of Cyclone Nargis, to be released today, painted a grim picture of Burma's abuse of human rights and blocking of foreign humanitarian aid.

Dr Voravit Suwanvanichkul of the Centre for Public Health and Human Rights said that this report represented the voices of Burmese people, especially victims and survivors of Cyclone Nargis, which struck Burma last May. As part of the team, he and his colleagues, including Burmese health workers, went inside Burma to assess how the vast foreign resources were used.

"Our report is different from the Tripartite Core Group's reports," Voravit said, referring to the two reports produced by the Tripartite Core Group which were released last November and early this month. The group comprises representatives from Asean, Burma and the UN related agencies.

The assessment was done one month after the cyclone by the Emergency Assistance Team (Burma) in partnership with Johns Hopkins University's Centre for Public Health and Human Rights. The 90 interviews and data obtained by the EAT from June to September, and in October and November 2008 show "systematic obstruction of relief aid, wilful acts of theft and sale of relief supplies and the use forced labour for reconstruction projects, including forced child labour."

The report further pointed out that the slow aid distribution, the push to hold the constitutional referendum vote last May, and the early refusal to accept foreign assistance are evidence of the Burmese junta's primary concerns for regime survival and political control.

Further evidence also included multiple human rights violations and the abrogation of international humanitarian relief norms and international legal frameworks for disaster relief.

According to Dr Voravit, the assessment was done by 44 health staff and volunteers from the Thai-Burma border.

'I went to some of the markets run by the military and authorities and saw supplies that had been donated being sold there... The money from selling these things would go to the shop owners, but they are part of the military. The shopkeepers are all families of the military.'

"They are local people, religious leaders, community leaders, including cyclone survivors, who are not in any way affiliated with the government and formal non-governmental organisations," he said.

Voravit added that most of them were cyclone survivors and were trained in emergency responses, food and water distribution and basic first aid provision. To prepare for the report, they conducted 90 in-depth interviews. Thirty-three were among relief workers and healthcare providers in the storm affected areas, while 57 interviews were among survivors of the cyclone.

The report is part of the effort to invoke the 2006 UN Security Council resolution on the Responsibility to Protect and apply it to the situation in Burma.

The concept advanced in the report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty in 2001 especially stated that it was each sovereign nation's responsibility to protect their citizens from crimes against humanity, genocide and other mass atrocities.

He said that the teams worked "under the radar" and with local community-based organisations which are not part of the government-sponsored civil groups. They also went deep into the affected areas to provide relief to survivors. For instance,

the EAT team interviewed a former SPDC soldier on September 13 2008 in Mae Sot, who said:

"I went to some of the markets run by the military and authorities and saw supplies that had been donated being sold there... The money from selling these things would go to the shop owners, but they are part of the military. The shopkeepers are all families of the military."

Other interviews also showed that the government interfered with the relief, and discriminated in relief delivery. Special cases related to human rights abuses cited by the report included forced relocations, land confiscation, forced labour and child labour.

The team interviewed a survivor in Labutta on November 30, 2008, who had this to say:

"We were required to go two times per day, once in the morning and once in the evening, to rebuild the road and clean up the trees that were felled by Nargis. One person per household was required to go, and children were also forced to work. If we do not work when they ask, we are beaten and tortured."

This independent report shows quite different pictures of the Burmese regime in administering the foreign aid in the post-Nargis rehabilitation effort. Early this month, the TCG launched a three-year recovery plan that would require at least US\$691 million to further help the 2.4 million people severely affected by the cyclone, who need housing grants and other financial assistance.

In the past nine months, foreign donors contributed \$310 million, but more was needed.

The Burmese government has yet to respond to the three-year recovery plan. The issue is scheduled to be discussed this morning when the Asean foreign ministers meet officially.

Voravit said that the EAT findings are evidence of multiple human rights violations and the abrogation of international humanitarian relief norms and international legal frameworks for disaster relief. "They may constitute crimes against humanity," he emphasised.