IN THE FIELD of disaster relief studies it is a truism that the first responders, whether in an earthquake or a cyclone, are generally ordinary people in the affected area who have survived. They are the first to start digging out the rubble or tending the wounded. Civilian volunteers are the backbone of the later phases of emergency responses too - people who bring food and water, volunteer at shelters, give what they can. Only in a system as profoundly inhumane as Burma would such good Samaritans be punished for their compassion. But that is precisely what happened last week.

At least four civilian volunteers who tried to help the victims of Burma's ferocious Cyclone Nargis were sentenced to 15- to 59-year prison terms for their efforts. Among those jailed was the beloved comedian and satirist Zarganar, who was sentenced to 59 years in some of the world's most deadly prisons. Burmese journalists reporting on the cyclone were also sentenced.

These sentences have come among a wave of others, including decades-long sentences for monks who led last year's Saffron Revolution demonstrations; members of the National League for Democracy, the party that won Burma's last elections but was never allowed to govern; and the leaders of the 88 Generation, the students who supported Aung San Suu Kyi in her nonviolent struggle for social change.

Why imprison civilian volunteers in the midst of a humanitarian crisis? Before his arrest, Zarganar said, "I want to save my own people. 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."

Perhaps the clearest indication of the junta's priorities was its insistence on holding a national referendum on the new constitution in the still-devastated Delta region less than three weeks after the storm. The ruling generals placed survival of military rule over saving Burmese lives. This is tragically consistent with their past behavior: Burma has among the lowest levels of public funding in healthcare worldwide, less than $1 per person in 2006, according to the World Health Organization. The people of Burma are impoverished, but the junta is rich and richly armed.

Despite these harsh realities and the extraordinary price Burmese citizens who oppose the generals must pay, many in the international community have called for expansion of aid to Burma. The International Crisis Group said last month, "Aid should rather be seen by international policymakers as valuable in its own right as well as a way of alleviating suffering, but also as a potential means of opening up a closed country, improving governance and empowering people to take control of their own lives." But with their show trials and these latest brutal prison terms, the generals have made it clear that improving governance and empowering the people of Burma is precisely what they are most unwilling to do.

Of course aid should be increased to the people of Burma, but not on the generals' terms, which include tight control on information, the denial of Burmese citizen participation in the response, and markedly limited access to the rest of the impoverished country not affected by the cyclone.

Those arguing that stepped-up international aid can deliver on political change have precious little evidence for this, especially since the political space has just abruptly narrowed. The incoming Obama administration may well increase assistance to Burma, but this should be coupled with more pressure on the junta and its allies, especially the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, China, and Russia, for political reform.

The longer-term development and well-being of the Burmese people is not simply dependent on levels of foreign aid, but on true political development and a return to democratic rule. There can be no "apolitical"
humanitarian aid in places like Burma, however much we'd wish to see it. Just ask Zarganar.

Chris Beyrer is director of the Center for Public Health and Rights at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. Frank Donaghue is CEO for Physicians for Human Rights.

© Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company