



## **Burma in the Aftermath of Cyclone Nargis: Death, Displacement, and Humanitarian Aid**

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Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and the Global Environment

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Thank you for holding a hearing on Cyclone Nargis and its impact. The International Rescue Committee is submitting this short testimony for the record in order to provide information to the subcommittee from the vantage point of an aid agency operating on the ground. I can report that IRC emergency personnel are succeeding in delivering life-saving health and shelter supplies to cyclone victims as are other aid organizations, but the amount of assistance reaching survivors does not come close to what is needed to address a crisis of this scale. Access to impacted communities remains extremely limited and I would like to share this and other concerns in this testimony.

### **Dimensions of the Catastrophe**

Cyclone Nargis pummeled Myanmar over two weeks ago, on May 2 and 3. The low-lying Irrawaddy delta region was devastated by the cyclone. The official death toll now stands at 78,000 with 56,000 missing. Unofficial estimates are considerably higher. More than half a million people are estimated to have gathered in improvised camps scattered across the delta region. The UN now estimates that as many as 2.5 million people have been severely affected.

The government has declared 45 townships *disaster areas* and formally requested support from the international relief community. The cyclone devastated much of what was in its path, flattening and flooding villages, knocking out power lines, polluting fresh water sources and farm land with salt water, blocking roads and destroying infrastructure.

Many of the homeless are migrating away from the worst affected areas towards higher and drier ground or the larger towns. The government has established some camps in the main townships, but many more makeshift settlements have formed in monasteries, schools, empty buildings or open spaces. Some receive assistance from local authorities and monasteries and many have received no aid at all. More and more local groups and citizen volunteers are out on the roads distributing supplies and caring for the desperate.

## **IRC's Response**

A small number of aid agencies had a presence in Myanmar before the cyclone. The IRC was among the aid groups that rushed to the scene in its wake, with a team of international IRC emergency specialists dispatched to the region within days of the cyclone hitting. So far, only one has been able to obtain a business visa to enter the country. The rest are providing intensive technical support from Thailand, while working round the clock to procure emergency supplies.

In spite of the hurdles, the IRC decided not to wait for additional staff and supplies to arrive. The IRC's emergency coordinator, Gordon Bacon, was able to conduct a rapid assessment upon arrival in Myanmar, assemble a team of local staff and volunteers, forge a partnership with a local aid agency, identify a local supplier and two trucks, and begin emergency distributions to a cyclone-ravaged district on the southeastern edge of the Irrawaddy Delta.

Over three days last week, the team delivered critical emergency supplies to hundreds of families, some 1,500 people, who had yet to receive any aid in Kunyangon Township. The materials included all locally-purchased mosquito nets, blankets, tarps, clothing, water containers, cooking supplies and candles. In one settlement, there were 300 survivors who had lost their homes and were clustered in a structure that gave them no protection at all because the roof was torn off by the cyclone.

Gordon Bacon has reported to us about the sheer misery and desperation these people are suffering. "They wait for help – homeless, cold, sick and hungry – and get lashed by more rain. So the sick get sicker when they need to stay dry and warm and get proper care. We are providing blankets and tarps in order to give some measure of protection from the elements. Frankly, it's modest assistance compared to what is needed in a crisis of this magnitude," Gordon reported.

IRC staff and volunteers also conducted an assessment in Wakema Township just north of the delta – a district that was lashed by the cyclone, flooding 25 villages, and is now struggling to absorb thousands of homeless survivors from other impacted areas. A first IRC distribution was conducted here yesterday, in advance of planned health, sanitation and shelter programs.

The IRC is also poised to receive 40 tons of donated and purchased medical, water treatment and shelter supplies. The emergency stocks are arriving in Myanmar on international flights, the first being a generous USAID shipment of plastic sheeting, hygiene kits and water containers that arrived Saturday and is being readied for distribution in conjunction with local partners. Additional contributions of supplies are coming from the Spanish Government (supplies for prevention of waterborne diseases) and Muslim Aid and Global Medics (medicine and water purification equipment). The IRC is also sending pre-positioned emergency supplies from its warehouse in Dubai. In all, the supplies will benefit an estimated 80,000 people.

As always, we are also seeking financial support from varied donors, including foundations and the concerned public.

### **Improvements, Challenges and Concerns**

This week has already brought some encouraging news. While monsoon rains are making aid deliveries all the more difficult, “a new cyclone” that had been forecasted to hit Myanmar did not come to pass. In the meantime, the number of flights arriving in Yangon with crucial supplies has picked up and aid is gradually reaching devastated communities. Myanmar also agreed to receive assistance from the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) and invited a cadre of Asian medics from India, Thailand, China and elsewhere to provide health assistance.

Nevertheless, we remain extremely concerned that this external assistance will come too late for thousands of people who now suffer from malnutrition and disease, conditions that could have been preventable had the international aid community been granted full access to cyclone survivors in a timely manner.

The disaster in Myanmar requires a tsunami-like international relief effort. In that emergency response, a massive influx of international health professionals arrived quickly and joined forces with local expertise to treat the wounded, provide clean drinking water and sanitation, and prevent outbreaks of contagious diseases.

The exact opposite has taken place in Myanmar. Two weeks into the disaster, the UN provided the sobering statistic that little more than 20% of people gravely impacted by the crisis are receiving aid.

Most survivors have no access to clean drinking water, as virtually all water sources have been contaminated by human waste and decaying animal carcasses, and containers to collect rain water were washed away. It takes less than a spoonful of contaminated water for a person to come down with dysentery or cholera -- highly infectious diseases that can quickly kill in the tens of thousands. It's no wonder that reports of both disease are on the rise. The threat of a second wave of deaths from a public health crisis is upon us.

The pace of the response has not been fast enough and not enough aid has arrived in the country. Aid to date is far below what is required to begin to meet the needs in an emergency of this scale. Aid should be allowed to reach areas beyond Yangon and we would like to see more international relief workers let into the country.

In light of the magnitude of this crisis, a massive infusion of aid and experienced disaster response experts is needed to prevent a public health catastrophe. We ask that the Congress include increased aid to the cyclone's survivors as one part of the supplemental appropriations bill now under consideration. We are well aware of competing needs – the IRC runs humanitarian aid programs in 25 conflict zones, including Iraq and Afghanistan, and we are also asking you to address problems caused by the global increase in food prices and the erosion in funding for humanitarian needs in neglected crisis areas such as the horn of Africa. We ask for a great deal, but only because many, many lives are at stake and the United States can make a difference and save tens of thousands of lives.

In conclusion, the IRC and other operational aid groups are getting supplies and materials directly and safely to the cyclone's victims and saving lives. We and other aid groups can do much more if sufficient funding is provided and emergency professionals have the access and equipment they need to help people quickly and efficiently. We appeal to you for help. Time is of the essence.

Thank you very much.