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A storm of protest over Burma

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On 2 May 2008, Extremely Severe Cyclonic Storm Nargis made landfall in Myanmar, sending a storm surge 40 kilometres up the densely populated Irrawaddy River delta. Causing more than 138,000 fatalities and damage estimated at more than US\$10 billion (A\$16.6 billion), it was the worst recorded natural disaster in Myanmar's history. The military regime's slow and largely ineffectual response to the crisis, and its clear reluctance to accept any foreign aid, prompted a fresh wave of criticism from the international community and even suggestions that it should unilaterally intervene under the 'responsibility to protect' doctrine.

When Tropical Cyclone Nargis cut a swathe through Lower Burma last week, it left more than death and destruction in its wake. The military government's slow response to the disaster, including its reluctance to accept international assistance, has further blackened its name. Yet it can be argued that the international community has also failed to fully appreciate the dire situation in Burma and has unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved in the current circumstances.

Despite its rich natural resources, Burma is in many ways an undeveloped country. Before the cyclone struck, the military government had made an effort to improve the country's civil infrastructure, but it still suffers from woefully inadequate transport and communications systems, unreliable power supplies, very poor health and educational facilities and an inefficient and corrupt bureaucracy. Thanks to the regime's economic mismanagement

and distorted national priorities (since 1988, around 35 per cent of the official budget has been allocated to defence), large numbers of people suffer from poverty, malnutrition and epidemic diseases. Also, 75 per cent of the population lives in small rural villages, with most relying on homegrown agricultural produce to survive. Given this situation, a natural disaster of any magnitude was bound to hit the Burmese population hard and make a rapid national response very difficult.

Also, governments and international agencies calling for immediate action in Burma seem to be overestimating the regime's capacity to respond. It exercises enormous power, but is not quite the efficient, well-organised and well-resourced military machine that some activists claim. All major decisions are referred to the senior leadership in Naypyidaw, which is often shielded from real conditions in the country. Even during periods of relative peace and stability, the regime finds it hard to manage unexpected developments—and this disaster has no precedent in living memory in Burma. Despite their highly privileged position in Burmese society, the armed forces, too, face serious problems. One only has to live in Burma for a few months to realise that, at all levels, there is a lack of modern management systems, administrative expertise, skilled labour and spare parts. The regime has attempted to overcome such problems, but even it finds it difficult to get many things done.

In these circumstances, it is curious that greater allowance has not been made for the enormous problems the military government faces in responding to this disaster. For obvious reasons, Burma has long been one of the West's favourite targets, but if analyses of the situation are to be helpful, they must be objective. It is worth remembering that in 2005 the richest, most powerful and technologically advanced country in the world was unable to respond in a timely and efficient manner after Hurricane Katrina caused widespread flooding around New Orleans. And that disaster was on a smaller scale than the one now facing the Burmese authorities. Also, as the Australian Strategic Policy Institute has recently pointed out, even a country as wealthy, organised and socially cohesive as Australia is still ill-prepared to respond to a large-scale natural disaster entailing mass casualties.¹

1 David Templeman and Anthony Bergin, *Taking a Punch: Building a More Resilient Australia*, Strategic Insights No.39 (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, May 2008), s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/ad-aspi/import/SI39_Taking_a_punch.pdf?vcIJUhU3L9HG1gmbj04jrpjQFW3YIOUj.

It is at the level of the military regime's decision-making that it deserves most criticism. It apparently failed to warn the communities in the cyclone's path.² Given the choice between conspiracy and cockup, it is usually safer to choose the latter, and in any case there are limits to what small rural communities can do to reduce the impact of a cyclone. Even so, if advance notice had been given, better preparations could have been made. There also seems to have been a deliberate slowness in responding with aid after the cyclone struck. Granted, access is very difficult and Burma does not have sufficient supplies to meet everyone's immediate needs, but the regime could have made a much greater effort. For example, it could have mobilised its large army and put soldiers to work administering first aid, providing food and shelter, clearing roads and drains and helping to restore basic services. Indeed, the armed forces is the only organisation in Burma with the command structure, internal communications, expertise and resources able to undertake such a massive task. Yet to date relatively few servicepeople seem to have been called out.

Even more seriously, there seems to be a real reluctance on the part of the Burmese leadership to open up the country to foreign scrutiny and assistance. It is difficult to know exactly what lies behind the regime's thinking on this, as on so many other issues, but it is doubtless concerned that its grip on the population will be loosened. The presence of large numbers of foreign aid workers and officials would be difficult to monitor. Aided by the international news media, they would undermine the regime's efforts to strictly control what Burma's citizens see, hear and, as far as possible, think. Millions could be exposed to what the regime calls 'alien cultural influences', leading in turn to social instability. In addition, the provision of clearly identifiable foreign aid packages would emphasise the regime's own failure to provide assistance and the country's relative lack of development. To the regime's way of thinking, such factors have the potential to encourage renewed political unrest—something that is already threatened by increases in the prices of fuel, food and other staples.

Burma's generals may have even more serious concerns. They have long been aware that the US and its allies wish to see the military regime replaced with an elected civilian government led by someone like opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. After the armed forces crushed a massive prodemocracy uprising and took back direct political power in 1988, the

2 Anna Salleh, 'Burma Could Have Had 72h Warning', *ABC Science*, 8 May 2008, www.abc.net.au/science/articles/2008/05/08/2238754.htm?site=science&topic=latest.

regime feared the US might militarily intervene to restore democracy—as it has done in other countries. At the time, a US fleet deployed off the Burmese coast, in case US citizens needed to be evacuated, was viewed as a possible invasion force. Since then, the regime has been subject to tough economic sanctions and repeated public criticism. These days, it seems more confident that it can resist any pressures applied by the international community, but it remains highly sensitive to any possibility of foreign interference in Burma's internal affairs. This is probably another reason the regime is nervous about letting US military forces and other large foreign contingents into Burma.

The military regime has much to answer for, and its reluctance to permit desperately needed aid and expertise into the country at this critical time cannot be justified. However, any government in Burma, including a democratically elected civilian administration, would face the same challenges in responding to the devastation left by Cyclone Nargis. Even countries far more developed and better resourced to manage such crises have failed to meet the standards that many—both inside and outside Burma—expect of the regime. International aid is now trickling into Burma, but the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami is a useful reminder of how long it takes affected communities to recover.

It remains to be seen whether the international community and the regime can agree on the level of assistance required, and a way to provide it. Burma will need substantial help for years to come, without either side imposing onerous or unrealistic conditions.

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