



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

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Manzullo, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today to testify about the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Burma and our efforts to assist the victims of Tropical Cyclone Nargis.

On May 2-3, Tropical Cyclone Nargis struck Burma with 130 mile per hour winds and torrential rain. More than 95 percent of structures in some communities in the Irrawaddy Delta, the region hit hardest by the cyclone, were demolished in the storm. Twelve foot storm surges inundated countless villages. Downed trees and power lines and washed-out roads and bridges complicated transportation and communication in Rangoon and beyond. The storm left 2.4 million in urgent need of assistance. The UN estimates cyclone-related deaths at between 78,000 and 125,000. The suffering of the victims of this natural disaster has been compounded by continuing bad weather and heavy rains.

After Cyclone Nargis struck Burma, the United States responded rapidly to offer its assistance to the people affected by the storm. My colleague from USAID will speak in detail to this issue, but I will note that to date USAID has made available more than \$17.5 million in humanitarian assistance, over \$16 million of which has gone directly to United Nations programs and trusted non-governmental organizations. We have also offered a Disaster Assistance Response Team and military assets to augment the Burmese regime's limited capacity to provide disaster relief. Defense has provided additional commodities. On May 12, Director for Foreign Assistance Henrietta Fore, the Commander of U.S. Pacific Command, Admiral Timothy Keating, and I accompanied the first C-130 carrying U.S. relief supplies into Burma. Meeting with a senior Burmese military delegation, we explained our offer of technical and logistical assistance and conveyed our desire to help avoid needless loss of life in the wake of this natural disaster.

The United States is not alone in offering assistance. The international community has responded by offering over \$100 million in assistance to Burma. Many nations have offered to send doctors and disaster relief teams. Non-governmental organizations and the private sector also have responded generously with cash and in-kind assistance.

Sadly, the Burmese regime's response to this disaster has fallen far short of what was required. Frankly, it has been appalling. Rather than dedicating its full attention to the humanitarian disaster inflicted by Cyclone Nargis, the Burmese regime gave priority to conducting a deeply flawed referendum on its draft constitution on May 10 in all states and divisions outside of those declared disaster areas in the wake of the storm. The fact that the regime proceeded with the referendum in the midst of a humanitarian disaster speaks volumes to its indifference to the welfare of the Burmese people.

Even more disturbing has been the regime's refusal to date to accept offers of outside expertise and its insistence that it is capable of managing the logistics of the aid distribution operation. It clearly is not. Critical shortages abound – helicopters and helicopter pilots to ferry supplies to inaccessible areas; doctors to treat the sick and prevent infection; and public health experts to provide sanitation facilities. We and the international community remain ready to provide this kind of help, as we did after the 2004 tsunami and as we are doing now for China in the aftermath of its devastating earthquake last week.

We have seen some positive news in recent days, such as an increase in the flow of relief goods into the Delta region. The regime has also apparently agreed to grant visas to health workers from neighboring countries and some additional UN and European aid personnel have gotten in. International NGOs and UN relief agencies seem to be expanding their footprint in the affected areas. The regime said it would grant blanket flight clearances for relief flights, and transport networks are improving slowly, with the bulk of supplies being transported by truck and boat to the affected area.

Still, the situation is increasingly desperate, and the regime's failure to provide greater access for the international community to the affected area is putting hundreds of thousands of lives at risk. More than two weeks after the cyclone hit, the UN estimates that, at best, only one in four people have been reached. The door must be opened far wider – and rapidly -- to prevent a second catastrophe. Let me be clear: if assistance is not allowed in, and thousands of Burmese perish, the responsibility for this catastrophe will fall squarely on the shoulders of Senior General Than Shwe and other Burmese leaders. We call on those leaders to work with their neighbors and the broader international community to help save lives by accepting the offers of logistical support and technical expertise, and by allowing full, unfettered access to the affected areas.

The United States Government has engaged in intensive diplomatic efforts over the past two weeks to convince the regime to accept the outside assistance that the people of Burma desperately need. President Bush spoke with Chinese President Hu on May 13, and Secretary Rice has reached out to her counterparts, including in China and India. Deputy Secretary Negroponte raised this issue during his recent travel to South Korea, Japan, and China. Secretary of Health and Human Services Leavitt discussed Burma with his counterpart in China and other senior government officials during his trip to Beijing last week, and has held two conversations on the matter in recent days with the Director-General of the World Health Organization. Our Chargé in Rangoon, Shari Villarosa, has engaged directly with senior representatives of the regime as well. I was in the region when the storm struck and took advantage of my meetings there, including at the ASEAN Regional Forum Senior Officials Meeting and the U.S.-ASEAN Dialogue to reiterate our call for urgent access for humanitarian aid experts. Our ambassadors throughout the region and beyond echoed this message in conversations with senior government officials.

Others have pressed a similar message. China, India and the ASEAN countries have responded, some helpfully sharing their own experiences with humanitarian disaster relief. ASEAN Member States, including Burma, convened in Singapore on Monday to discuss disaster relief efforts and the establishment of a possible UN-ASEAN coordination mechanism.

We are also actively engaging in the UN. Secretary-General Ban and Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes have spoken out strongly on this issue. Burmese authorities over the weekend invited UN Secretary General Ban to Burma and he has accepted. We hope this is the beginning of a new approach by the regime. Separately, France has suggested that the UN Security Council invoke the "responsibility to protect" principle, to authorize international humanitarian assistance efforts if the Burmese regime continues its refusal to grant access. We will continue to exhaust all diplomatic channels and opportunities to persuade the regime to grant access to the experts and assets that can expedite the flow of humanitarian assistance to those in need.

The UN and ASEAN have announced plans to host a pledging conference in Rangoon on May 25, which UN Secretary-General Ban will attend. We are now reviewing possible U.S. participation in this conference. However, we still believe that the key to saving more lives is to increase access urgently to the disaster areas for international relief teams who can provide the expertise and logistical resources that the Burmese regime lacks. Without an adequate and independent assessment of the situation and current needs, as well as a commitment by the regime to provide the necessary access, a pledging conference is unlikely to produce the results we seek.

Given the regime's resistance to grant access for international relief teams to the affected areas of the Delta, our initial contributions of relief supplies were handed over to Burmese authorities for transportation to the disaster areas. Recognizing that this is a calculated risk, and given the regime's track record, we have made every possible effort to monitor the disposition of those supplies. U.S. Embassy staff are stationed at the airport in Rangoon to monitor the offloading of relief supplies. The Embassy is in frequent contact with UN and non-governmental partners operating in the disaster areas and also monitors markets in Rangoon and outside the city for indications that relief supplies are being diverted and sold. So far, we have been unable to confirm any such reports. Since May 16, we have been able to consign the contents of two relief flights daily directly to international NGOs, and hope we will be able to increasingly operate that way in the future. Our UN and NGO partners indicate that relief supplies are increasingly getting through to the disaster areas, although much more is still needed.

While the United States is focused at the moment on preventing further needless loss of life, our fundamental policy toward the Burmese regime and its self-described "roadmap to democracy" has not changed. We continue to maintain that the regime's referendum has not been free, fair, or credible. The regime's claims that 99 percent of eligible voters turned out on May 10, and that 92 percent of voters supported the draft constitution, lack any credibility. These results obviously cannot be considered representative of the will of the Burmese people.

The United States, along with many in the international community, remains convinced that the only hope for a peaceful transition to a genuinely democratic government in Burma is through a substantive, time-bound dialogue between the Burmese regime and Aung San Suu Kyi and other democratic and ethnic minority leaders. Promoting such a dialogue and transition to democratic rule remains our primary, over-arching foreign policy objective in Burma.

At this moment, however, we are focused on the humanitarian disaster and doing whatever we can to minimize the needless loss of life in the wake of this terrible tragedy, while recognizing that the best hope for a successful intervention lies in a decision by the Burmese regime to permit the international community to provide the help that is so desperately needed.

Thank you for extending this opportunity to me to testify today on these most serious issues in Burma. I welcome your questions.

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