

# The untold story of Cyclone Nargis



David Redfern looks at the impact of Cyclone Nargis and how its devastating effect was compounded by the reaction of the Burmese government.

Cyclone Nargis began as an intense tropical depression on April 27th 2008 in the Bay of Bengal. Meteorologists initially thought that the storm would track over Bangladesh and farmers there were advised to speed up the harvest of their rice crop. However, the storm changed direction and headed towards Burma, where it made landfall over the Irrawaddy Delta in the south of the country on May 2nd. By this time it had intensified into a borderline category 3/4 storm on the Saffir-Simpson scale, with wind speeds gusting up to 215 km/hr as it passed close to the city of Yangon (formerly Rangoon). At its peak, air pressure dropped to 962 mb. In some places 600 mm of rain fell as the cyclone passed over and a storm surge was blown inland, further inundating the low-lying rice paddies of the Irrawaddy Delta. Around 146,000 people were killed or reported missing and an estimated \$US 10 million-worth of damage occurred. However, it was the Burmese

government's response – or lack of it – that caused widespread disbelief and condemnation around the world.

The government identified several coastal regions, all of which were in the Irrawaddy Delta, as having suffered the worst (Figure 1). The entire coastal plain was flooded, as shown in the May 5th satellite image. The agricultural areas appear to have been especially hard hit. For example, Yangon (population over 4 million) was almost completely surrounded by floods. Several large cities (population 100,000–500,000) were in the affected area. They were declared disaster zones. Some towns lost 90% of their homes, with 70% of their population dead or missing. The delta contains 7 million of the country's 53 million people, with nearly 2 million of these living on land that is less than 5 m above sea level, leaving them extremely vulnerable. The United Nations (UN) and Red Cross estimated that as many as 2.5 million were made homeless and were in urgent need of assistance, food, water and shelter. Some agencies stated that these figures were underestimates. As well as the cost in lives and homes, the agricultural land is very fertile, being regarded

as the nation's 'rice bowl', and hence damage here affected the whole country.

Initial relief efforts were slow for political reasons. Burma's military government (referred to as a junta) declined international aid for several days, believing that it was capable of handling the situation on its own. On May 6th aid was finally requested, but the government accepted it only from a small number of countries such as India and Bangladesh (Figure 2 overleaf) and only for restricted items. Even Indian search and rescue teams were denied access, and it was not until May 16th that an offer from India to send 50 medical personnel was accepted. Many other nations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) hoping to deliver relief were unable to do so – the Burmese government refused to issue visas to key staff. Burma's junta also barred foreign journalists from entering the country and expelled one BBC reporter. The military leaders stated that the country was not ready to accept foreign aid workers. In response, the World Food Programme (WFP) stated that the delays were 'unprecedented in modern humanitarian relief efforts'.

Many Burmese people were displeased with the government because it had not provided an appropriate warning system for the cyclone, despite having been informed by Indian meteorologists 48 hours prior to its arrival. In addition, the mayhem caused by the cyclone and associated flooding was exacerbated by the junta's uncooperative response. More than two weeks after the storm, relief had only reached 25% of the population. Some press reports stated that foreign aid provided to disaster victims was modified to make it look like it came from the military regime, and state-run television continuously ran images of General Than Shwe ceremonially handing out food and other items of disaster relief. Despite objections raised by the Burmese opposition parties and foreign nations in the wake of the disaster, the junta proceeded with a scheduled constitutional referendum, though in some parts of the affected areas voting was delayed.

## One year later

*After the Storm: Voices from the Delta* was the title of a report published in March 2009 by the Emergency Assistance Team and the Centre for Public Health and Human Rights at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, USA. The report stated that 'the junta's wilful



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*disregard for the welfare of the 3.4 million survivors of Cyclone Nargis which struck the Irrawaddy Delta... killing 140,000 people [and a host of other abuses detailed by the research] may amount to crimes against humanity under international law'. Aid workers from the Emergency Assistance Team (EAT-Burma) and experts from the university spent months interviewing survivors and relief workers about the cyclone's aftermath. Their report urged the UN Security Council to refer the Burmese regime to the international criminal court.*

The report cited the following crimes against humanity:

- intentional disregard of some cyclone victims, including women and children, that could and may have led to mass loss of life;
- failure to address the health needs of rural women, and of women and children generally, in the cyclone-affected areas;

**Figure 1** The impact of Cyclone Nargis captured by NASA's Terra satellite – widespread flooding of the coastal plain