

Figure 2 Aid to Burma, May 2008 – while some countries brought in aid, much of the West was waiting to help



- targeted interference with relief operations on the basis of ethnicity and religion;
- forced labour;
- forced relocation affecting women and children; and
- the use of forced child labour.

The report went on to state that each is evidence of the junta's violation of its legal obligations to uphold the provisions set forth in the CRC (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1991) and CEDAW (Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, 1997).

The report identified a number of other key points.

- The Burmese army actually obstructed private cyclone relief efforts even among its own concerned citizens, setting up checkpoints and then arresting some of those trying to provide help.
- Supplies of overseas relief materials that were eventually allowed into Burma were confiscated by the military and subsequently sold in local markets, the packaging easily identifiable: 'I went to some of the markets run by the military authorities and saw supplies that had been donated being sold there,' a former Burmese soldier who fled to Mae Sot across the border in Thailand told the researchers. He added: 'The materials were supposed to go to the victims. I could recognise them in the market.'

- The surviving men, women and even children were used as forced labour on reconstruction projects for the military: '[The army] did not help us, they threatened us,' said one survivor from the town of Labutta. 'Everyone in the village was required to work for five days, morning and evening, without compensation. Children were required to work too. A boy got injured on his leg and got a fever. After two or three days he was taken to [Rangoon], but after a few days he died.'

- Discrimination existed in the distribution of aid to cyclone victims, particularly in the Irrawaddy Delta, which had significant non-Burman and non-Buddhist populations: 'At first the government only supported the Burmese [Burmans]. Not Karen people. My friend told me. He said that when the government came to help the people, they came by boat, they took the Burmese [Burman] people in the boat. But... the Karen people, they kicked them down. They didn't let them on the boat...'

- Conditions in which adults and children were forced to work were unsafe and no medical care was provided for injured workers.

We will have to wait and see whether the world decides to do anything about the report. The impact of Cyclone Nargis at the time quickly disappeared from the headlines. Two weeks after the cyclone, the world's attention switched from Burma to China as a result of the Sichuan earthquake (see article on pp. 6–9). **TE**

REVIEW

Key points

- In May 2008 Cyclone Nargis had a significant effect on the area of the Irrawaddy Delta.
- On such occasions it is usual for the United Nations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to organise relief operations.
- For a variety of reasons the relief effort did not happen on the scale that is normal. The Burmese government was accused of interfering with it.
- One year later an independent report concluded that the Burmese government should be charged with crimes against humanity.
- A number of specific allegations against the Burmese government have been made.
- The response, if any, to these allegations is the remit of the United Nations.

Pause for thought

- Should early warning systems that are available in the developed world be made available to governments of the developing world?
- To what extent can, or should, international groupings and NGOs be granted automatic access to sovereign countries in times of crisis?
- Is it possible for international groupings to take punitive action against sovereign governments when they appear to disregard global conventions and laws?
- If international conventions (such as on Human Rights) are purely voluntary agreements that are not binding under international law, what is the point of having them in the first place?

Context

This article examines a contemporary natural hazard event – a tropical storm – in the context of a developing country. It also examines the way in which a national government responded and managed the impact of that hazard. However, there are several other overlapping issues:

- the nature of development and its impact on a country's ability to respond to a natural hazard;
- the role of decision makers in managing that hazard; and
- the importance of geopolitics and the perception of one country of itself and by others.

RESPONSE

Assimilation

- 1 Describe the main impacts of Cyclone Nargis on the population of the area affected.
- 2 Using the satellite images, describe the impact of the storm on the physical landscape of the area affected.
- 3 Why was the initial relief effort slow?
- 4 In your own words, summarise the main charges made against the Burmese government by Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, USA.
- 5 Outline the ways in which it is alleged that the army interfered with the relief effort.

Evaluation

- 1 Explain the causes of tropical storms in an area such as the Bay of Bengal.

ANSWER PLAN

The causes of all tropical storms are due to a combination of factors:

- an oceanic location with sea temperatures over 27°C – this provides a continuous source of heat to maintain rising air currents;
- an ocean depth of at least 70 m – this moisture gives latent heat, rising air causes moisture to be released by condensation and the continuation of this process drives the system;
- a location of at least 5° north or south of the equator in order that the Coriolis force can bring about the maximum rotation of air;
- a low-level convergence of air in the lower atmospheric circulation system – winds need to be coming together near the centre of the low pressure;
- a rapid outflow of air in the upper atmospheric circulation that helps to push away the warm air, which has risen close to the centre of the storm.

- 2 Why do the effects of tropical storms vary around the world?
- 3 Evaluate the role of NGOs in providing emergency relief for a range of natural hazards around the world.
- 4 Assess the role of supranational organisations such as the United Nations in ensuring a global response during times of crisis.

Extension

- 1 'Nature does not respect international boundaries, so why should humans?' Discuss this question.
- 2 'Each nation in the world has an enshrined right of self-determination.' To what extent do you agree with this statement?
- 3 Visit <http://www.imd.gov.in>. Here you can investigate a wide range of meteorological information concerning the weather over India and the Bay of Bengal region, including cyclones when they occur.