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Burma's next wave of dying

By Chris Beyrer and Jared Genser | May 21, 2008

THE UNITED NATIONS estimates that more than 100,000 people may have been killed in the devastating cyclone in Burma and that some 220,000 are reported missing. But approaching three weeks after the storm, some 75 percent of the 3 million or more severely affected have yet to receive any food, water, shelter, medication for the sick, or means of escape from flooded regions. The Burmese junta has denied access for the delivery of humanitarian aid to all but a handful of outsiders.

The next wave of dying is already underway, from thirst, starvation, untreated injuries, and infectious diseases. Major health threats for survivors include water-borne diseases such as typhoid, dysentery, cholera, and e. coli; food-borne diseases from eating poor or rotten food, compounded by the lack of cooking fuel and equipment; and the mosquito-borne diseases malaria and dengue fever, now compounded by the huge numbers of people sleeping outside and surrounded by water.

The international community is at a crucial moment of choice: Should the sovereignty of a regime bent on self-preservation trump the lives of those hundreds of thousands of civilians who are in serious peril because of its life-threatening actions?

Under the new doctrine of the "responsibility to protect," unanimously adopted by the General Assembly and Security Council, inherent in each state's sovereignty is a corresponding duty to protect one's own citizens from the most serious of human-rights abuses, including crimes against humanity. If a state is either unwilling or unable to protect its own citizens, the international community has an obligation to step in.

By its policy choices, the Burmese junta is magnifying the extent of the tragedy in a manner that is designed to sacrifice its own people on the altar of its very survival. Such conduct presents a prima facie case of crimes against humanity, under the category of so-called "other inhumane acts" intentionally causing great suffering or death. So far, Burma's allies on the Security Council, including China, Russia, and South Africa, have protected the junta from a robust international response.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon travels to Burma tomorrow to press the regime for greater access. Nevertheless, he has yet to receive any response from General Than Shwe to his calls and letters. ASEAN foreign ministers met Monday and issued a statement claiming that Burma agreed to allow swift access. But the international community should not be fooled by symbolic gestures from the junta such as approving nine helicopters from the World Food Program to fly

in relief or granting visas to dozens of aid workers from surrounding countries. Progress is being made at a snail's pace in comparison to the massive need. What is required now is both a massive inflow of supplies and the expert aid workers needed to deliver relief on the scale this storm demands.

While these political discussions drag on and millions suffer, the junta is using the tragedy to its every advantage. ASEAN is now hosting what the Burmese have described as a "reconstruction" conference in Rangoon on Sunday. Yet how can one talk about reconstruction before the most basic needs of the people have yet to be met? And holding this conference on the same day that the house arrest of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi must be extended will no doubt be spun in junta propaganda as expressions of international approval for their policies.

If Ban and ASEAN cannot persuade the junta to yield in swift and meaningful ways then the United States, United Kingdom, and France need to press for a multilateral intervention supporting countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore in delivering massive quantities of aid, which Burma has purportedly agreed to allow. Such an Asian intervention should be less threatening than a Western one. But an intervention with or without the support of the junta is desperately needed.

While the Burmese junta has no qualms about sacrificing its own people, to stand idly by as thousands suffer and die would leave all of us with blood on our hands.

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