

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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Myanmar: Cooperate with international community to ensure appropriate aid for victims

Following the impact of Cyclone Nargis on Myanmar, which killed tens of thousands of people and displaced around a million more, Amnesty International is calling urgently on the government to open its borders to relief workers and ensure aid is provided on the basis of need without discrimination.

Government red tape in providing visas is costing lives, while some donors are delaying aid in the fear that it will be siphoned off to the army said Benjamin Zawacki, Amnesty International's Myanmar researcher. The government should now provide access and assurances to international relief workers.²

Amnesty International calls on the Government of Myanmar to ease visa restrictions and customs procedures that have hampered access by international relief workers over the past few days and slowed the delivery of desperately needed aid. While some international aid has arrived in Yangon (Rangoon), the government has not yet mobilized the tremendous logistical effort necessary to provide assistance to the hardest hit populations.

Amnesty International recognizes that at this point the situation in southern Myanmar is primarily a humanitarian and rehabilitation crisis. Experience after other natural disasters of this scale, for instance the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, has proven that protecting human rights is essential for effective relief and a sustainable recovery.

Amnesty International therefore calls on the government of Myanmar to cooperate closely with international relief efforts and establish clear and transparent mechanisms for delivering aid. The government should provide aid according to need, without discrimination based on race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status of recipients. In post-disaster situations, women are often particularly vulnerable to sexual violence, and frequently receive less aid.

The Myanmar government must also ensure that the nearly one million people believed to have been displaced by the cyclone urgently receive adequate rehabilitation and assistance, including essential shelter, food, water and health care. Given the government's record of forcibly relocating its own citizens, Amnesty International calls on the government to avoid using excessive force against understandably distraught displaced populations.

The Myanmar government's history of corruption and abusive behaviour raises concerns that it would misuse relief efforts as cover to forcibly relocate populations in order to clamp down on or undermine support for opposition groups. Any relocation of internally displaced persons from camps or disaster areas must be voluntary, unless the safety and health of those affected requires evacuation. They should not be coerced in any way, including through the suspension of assistance to those persons. The right of internally displaced persons to return voluntarily to their former homes or lands in safety and with dignity should be respected and the authorities should assist them in either returning or resettling in another part of the country.

Human rights are most in jeopardy in situations of crisis and emergency said Benjamin Zawacki. So it is critical that the Myanmar government and other actors recognize and support the central role of human rights defenders, including those engaged in humanitarian work and those monitoring violations, in the relief and reconstruction process.