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Cyclone Nargis And The International Response – Briefing For MPs

The current situation.

It is more than a week since Cyclone Nargis hit Burma, and most victims have still not received any aid. Thousands will have died as a result, and Oxfam estimate that 1.5 million people are at risk unless aid reaches them soon. Aid agencies we have spoken to are saying they are now seeing people die because aid hasn't reached them. Even those operational in the affected areas have only reached people numbering in the low tens of thousands in the delta region. The Burma Campaign UK estimates 1.7 million people lived in the areas flooded by the cyclone.

The rainy season starts within days, making access to the delta region even more challenging. Time is running out.

The aid we have seen being delivered to Burma is barely a fraction of what is needed. In addition, with disease and malnutrition being two of the biggest risk factors, what is needed are trained experts and medics who can save lives. This will need thousands of aid workers, pilots and other experts, not the few dozen allowed in so far. BCUK estimates that around 100 disaster relief teams are stuck waiting for visas.

In the delta region the regime has set up army checkpoints stopping what few aid workers there are from reaching some of the worst affected areas.

The international community is making the same mistake on this humanitarian issue as it makes on the political issue. They are trying to negotiate with the regime and persuade it to behave in a reasonable way. We know from experience that this regime does not care about the population, especially as many of the people in the region are ethnic Karen. Already we have heard unconfirmed reports of Burmans being prioritised over Karen in the delivery of aid.

What The International Community Can Do

Last Wednesday France took the bold step of proposing the Security Council invoke the responsibility to protect doctrine.

China, Russia, Vietnam and South Africa fiercely opposed any formal discussion. On Friday the French government circulated a draft resolution to some Security Council members which we understand did not call for action under responsibility to protect, but did call for aid workers and aid to be allowed in. Discussions at the Security Council took place over the weekend and on Monday but so far there have not been the nine votes needed to get onto the agenda. If we are very lucky we may end up with a statement by the Security Council, but it will be weak, and we know the regime will ignore it as they have ignored previous statements.

Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, Burma's monks and others in the democracy movement have all been saying that the priority is to save lives, and aid should be delivered with or without permission from the regime. We hear the same message from individuals we speak to on the ground.

As China is blocking action at the Security Council, and the regime remains intransigent regarding letting aid and aid workers in, the question now is how the British and other governments should respond. As a last resort, we are calling for those governments that have the capacity to do so to deliver aid unilaterally. France, the USA and UK have ships in the region that have the capacity to deliver large amounts of aid and save thousands of lives.

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The Burma Campaign UK welcomes British government statements that they have not ruled this out. We also welcome support for action to deliver aid with or without regime permission from the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Parties. France, the USA, Australia and other governments with the capacity should act to save lives. Air-drops alone are not enough. They must deploy people on the ground to give medical treatment and other forms of assistance.

We believe that if the international community stands by and lets hundreds of thousands of people die we will look back on this period of inaction with the same regret we look back on the Rwanda genocide where we also failed to intervene to save lives.

The Burma Campaign UK is extremely disappointed with the response of the United Nations Secretary General to this crisis. Despite belated public calls for action, the Secretary General's office has been slow to respond and not given this issue sufficient priority. With so many lives at stake and UN aid shipments being blocked and even seized by the regime, the Secretary General himself should have flown to Burma to deliver the strongest possible message to the generals.

Once again China is protecting the regime in Burma from Security Council action. It is striking to note the differences between the response of Burma's generals to the cyclone and the response of China's government to the earthquake. The Premier Wen Jiabao immediately flew to the area, and 50,000 troops were dispatched to help. China must face increased pressure to use its influence with the generals, and to stop its shameful defence of the regime at the Security Council.

Challenging Restrictions in the Future

The current restrictions on humanitarian assistance in Burma are not new. The Burma Campaign UK has been urging governments and the United Nations to do more to challenge these restrictions. Even before this cyclone Burma faced a humanitarian crisis, with the majority of people living in poverty. In Eastern Burma in Karen, Karenni and Shan States Burma's war of ethnic cleansing has displaced hundreds of thousands of people. In these conflict hit areas up to one hundred thousand people are without proper shelter and access to food and medicine. Millions more live in desperate poverty. The regime has blocked delivery of aid to them, and this has gone virtually unchallenged by the international community. Cyclone victims now are paying the price of the international communities past failure to adequately challenge these aid restrictions. If one positive thing can come from this crisis it must be that these aid restrictions on the basis of ethnicity are no longer accepted. Despite urging by the International Development Committee and NGOs, DFID is still not funding cross-border aid to reach these vulnerable people.

The Public Can Donate Safely

The Burma Campaign UK is concerned that stories of aid being stolen and seized by the generals will put people off donating. This would be punishing the people for the sins of the generals. The aid being stolen is not from British aid agencies, it is from Asian governments who have simply dumped aid with the regime at Rangoon airport and trusted them to distribute it. We call on the British public to give generously to UK charities knowing that their money will reach people in need. We also draw attention to and commend the grassroots Burmese organisations with underground networks that are working to help cyclone victims in areas that international aid agencies cannot reach. Donations to these organisations can be made via the award-winning Mae Tao clinic run by Dr Cynthia on the Thai Burma border. DFID has failed to provide any funding for this type of cyclone relief work.

A Looming Crisis For Refugees On The Thailand Burma Border

Finally we would like to draw Members attention to another looming humanitarian crisis, that of the thousands of mainly Karen refugees in camps on the Thai-Burma border. The spiralling price of rice has led to a \$7million shortfall at the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), which supplies food and shelter to the camps. Such a shortfall will mean that rations at the camps will have to be cut to half the international minimum standard, leading to malnutrition and increased disease in vulnerable members of the population. Even without this current financial crisis DFID was not providing sufficient funding for the refugees. We are calling on DFID to increase its annual grant to TBBC to £1million next year at the very minimum and consider additional emergency grants should other countries not contribute sufficient to make up the shortfall.