

Bush administration moves to exploit Burma cyclone disaster

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The Bush administration lost no time in seeking to exploit the devastating tragedy in Burma (Myanmar). It has seized upon the cyclone that struck the country over the weekend, killed at least 20,000 and likely many more, to aggressively push its foreign policy agenda in Asia.

On Tuesday, Bush held a special ceremony at the White House to sign a bill giving Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi a Congressional Gold Medal. He used the occasion to place deliberately provocative conditions on any disbursement of aid to the ravaged country, beyond an initial token sum.

"The United States has made an initial aid contribution, but we want to do a lot more," Bush declared. "We're prepared to move US Navy assets to help find those who've lost their lives, to help find the missing, to help stabilize the situation. But in order to do so, the military junta must allow our disaster assessment teams into the country."

So far, the US embassy has authorized the release of a paltry \$250,000—less than half the cost of a single Tomahawk cruise missile of the type used by the US Navy to kill a Somali rebel last week. Later Tuesday, the administration pledged an additional \$3 million to be allocated by a USAID disaster response team.

The very fact that the US is making aid to Burma conditional upon the satisfaction of certain demands is itself an outrage. Bush did not say why it was necessary for the US to carry out its own assessment in order to release more aid, nor did he elaborate on what was meant by promises that the US military would help "stabilize the situation." US Navy ships are standing by off the coast of Thailand to intervene.

These pledges are certainly not intended as selfless humanitarian gestures. The Bush administration has been seeking to undermine the Burmese military regime for years and seized on protests last year by Buddhist monks to slap economic sanctions on the country and its rulers. There is no doubt that the United States would be happy to exploit the current tragedy to get a military foothold in the country.

The *World Socialist Web Site* holds no brief for the Burmese military junta, a brutal regime that has exercised dictatorial control over a largely impoverished country. However, US and European machinations, including the promotion of Suu Kyi, have nothing to do with concern for the democratic rights or economic well-being of the population. As always, the humanitarian pretensions of the US government are carefully calibrated to coincide with the interests of the American ruling class.

In the case of Burma, the US is interested in countering the influence of China, which has closer ties with the military regime and sees the country as a critical point of access into the Indian Ocean. As far as the Bush administration is concerned, the population of the country is only a bargaining chip in the pursuit of geo-strategic objectives.

US energy giants, including the Chevron oil corporation, also have interests in Burma. While the Bush administration has placed economic sanctions on the country, these have not affected Chevron's multibillion-dollar investments through its subsidiary Unocal. Human rights groups have accused Chevron of complicity in abuses in Burma intended to protect its pipeline routes.

The statements by the Bush administration must also be seen in the context of its treatment of populations around the world, including in the United States itself. On Monday, US First Lady Laura Bush was the first from the White House to respond to the cyclone, using the opportunity to chastise the government for failing to warn the population and adequately prepare for the consequences.

"Although they were aware of the threat," she said, "Burma's state-run media failed to issue a timely warning to citizens in the storm's path. The response to the cyclone is just the most recent example of the junta's failure to meet its people's basic needs."

The hypocrisy and cynicism of this statement are so glaring that one wonders if it is not intentionally provocative. This August 29 will mark the third anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, the massive storm that struck Louisiana and Mississippi, killing at least 1,800 people. The hurricane destroyed and flooded New Orleans, a major American city.

The US and local governments had been aware for decades of the potential for a deadly flood in New Orleans, but there was no evacuation plan in place, and no plan to meet the needs of those trapped or displaced. Tens of thousands remained trapped for days in the Louisiana Superdome. Many thousands who lost their homes were placed in temporary FEMA trailers, and in 2007 it was revealed that these trailers contained extremely high levels of formaldehyde, a toxic chemical.

The devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina was largely preventable, but due to gross governmental indifference and negligence, the levee systems of New Orleans were denied necessary investments and allowed to decay—only one of many examples of the American government's "failure to meet its people's basic needs."

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