

Myanmar Cyclone. U.S. hostility hampers relief

By [Sara Flounders](#)

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Missing from the media's lecturing is mention of the disastrous U.S. record in Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans

Is the Bush administration really trying to help the people of Myanmar recover from the natural disaster that struck there? Then why is it insisting that the Pentagon be in charge of its aid? And why did it impose SANCTIONS on the country when it knew the cyclone was about to hit?

One of the severest storms of the century slammed into the low-lying, densely farmed Irrawaddy Delta of Myanmar on the Gulf of Bengal on May 2. It is a fertile but underdeveloped region, especially susceptible to flooding. The Delta is home to one fourth of Myanmar's 57 million people. The last tropical cyclone to make coastal landfall was 40 years ago.

Meteorologists had been following Tropical Cyclone Nargis for a week. But when the cyclone hit land it brought with it an unpredicted tidal wave of epic proportions. A wall of water 12 feet high surged seven miles inland.

Over a million people have been left homeless and tens of thousands are missing. The estimates of deaths range from 20,000 to 100,000. Yangon, the former capital and major commercial port city, was left in shambles.

The U.S. corporate media are full of stories on the scale of the disaster and the inability of the government to cope with the relief effort. Completely omitted is any mention of the U.S. government's own abysmal track record in providing disaster relief.

Each news article repeats the demand that Washington be given full military access to Myanmar to deliver emergency supplies. There is outrage and shock that Myanmar will not permit U.S. military planes to land or Navy ships to dock. The charge that the Myanmar government cannot possibly be trusted to deliver the supplies is repeated again and again.

What is not reported is that the Bush administration, with criminal calculation and planning, consciously made the relief efforts far more difficult. The day before Cyclone Nargis actually hit Myanmar, but when the approach of the monster storm had already been announced and tracked for a week, President George W. Bush signed a harsh new level of economic sanctions on Myanmar. Sanctions are an act of aggression, a form of economic warfare that specifically targets the poorest and most desperate.

Sanctions imposed as cyclone hit

With all its spy satellites, Washington was far more aware than the people of Myanmar of

what was coming. The sanctions made direct U.S. and international donations of emergency funds and aid almost impossible. Xinhua News on May 2 reported that Bush's executive order was worded to "block all property and interests in property of designated individuals and entities determined to be owned or controlled by the government of Burma (Myanmar)."

This criminal executive order decreeing expanded sanctions was followed within days by expressions of deep concern for the devastated population. The cynicism and hypocrisy could not be greater.

The new sanctions prevent U.S. humanitarian organizations and individuals from donating money directly to causes within impoverished Myanmar. U.S. aid organizations, such as the American Red Cross, found they could provide only supplies—not personnel or money—to the relief effort under the sanctions rules. While the U.S. corporate media have carried hundreds of reports arrogantly lecturing Myanmar on what is not being done, they are not even mentioning the impact of the new U.S. sanctions that were imposed as the storm barreled toward the country.

Based on weather satellite monitoring, many scientists had tracked the storm as it gained momentum. Nearly a week before it struck land, the Indian Meteorology Department was releasing detailed warnings of route, speed and locations. The Myanmar government, while it received text messages of warning from India starting on April 26, and announced storm warnings on state radio, does not have coastal radars to detect a cyclone's path, nor did this impoverished country have an evacuation plan.

The U.S. government has been insisting that the Pentagon be given the right to deliver assistance with its own personnel and equipment. Evidently, this rich imperialist country has no other way to deliver humanitarian relief except at the end of a bayonet.

Many other countries, however, have found non-military ways to provide immediate assistance. The Myanmar state radio has reported that international humanitarian aid has poured in from China, India, Japan, Singapore, Italy, Bangladesh, Laos and Thailand. Arriving at the Yangon International Airport with their respective aircraft were tents, mosquito nets, power generators, medicines, water purifiers, dry potato and pork, instant noodles, biscuits, cloth, zinc sheets, hammers and nails, and candles.

The U.S. government expresses outrage that Myanmar, while it accepts aid, will not allow foreign personnel to oversee its distribution. The government-run newspaper New Light of Myanmar on May 9 explained why this is so: "The Pentagon is desperate to station their military bases in our country."

This is not wild paranoia on the part of the military junta that rules Myanmar. The Pentagon has hardly hidden its interest in overthrowing the regime. This comes as pressure is put on the country to open up and allow the leasing of U.S. bases and U.S. corporate access to Myanmar's vast nationalized oil and gas deposits.

Here's how Shawn W. Crispin put it in an article entitled "The case for invading Myanmar."

"With United States warships and air force planes at the ready, and over 1 million of Myanmar's citizens left bedraggled, homeless and susceptible to water-borne diseases by Cyclone Nargis, the natural disaster presents an opportunity in crisis for the U.S.

“A unilateral—and potentially United Nations-approved—U.S. military intervention in the name of humanitarianism could easily turn the tide against the impoverished country’s unpopular military leaders, and simultaneously rehabilitate the legacy of lame-duck U.S. President George W. Bush’s controversial pre-emptive military policies.

“U.S. Air Force and naval vessels, including the US C-130 military aircraft now in neighboring Thailand, and the USS Kitty Hawk and USS Nimitz naval warships, are currently on standby in nearby waters. ... Policymakers in Washington are now no doubt weighing the potential pros and cons of a pre-emptive humanitarian mission in a geo-strategically pivotal and suddenly weakened country.” (Asia Times Online, May 10)

Shock doctrine

Many countries even in the midst of a disaster fear U.S. and Western assistance because it so often comes with strings attached, including onerous debt conditions and demands to reorganize their economy and privatize nationally owned resources.

Naomi Klein’s book, “The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism,” describes in great detail how U.S. aid, the IMF and World Bank are used to take advantage of a country in shock, even when it is faced with a devastated infrastructure from a natural calamity of a hurricane, tsunami, drought or flood. Such crises are seen as an opportunity to push through unpopular economic “shock therapy” such as selling state assets and privatizing resources. It’s therapy, all right—for the international bankers, not the affected countries.

U.S. record in New Orleans and Iraq

Missing from all the corporate media’s lecturing on what Myanmar should and could do is any mention of the U.S. ruling class’s own disastrous record in emergency planning, evacuation and relief during and after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.

The whole world watched the criminal neglect, racism, lack of planning and total confusion as floods and broken levees drowned the city of New Orleans on Aug. 28, 2005.

This was followed by an arrogant refusal to accept assistance from organizations and individuals seeking to volunteer and an outrageous rejection of international aid. Offers of help from Cuba and Venezuela, which had fully provisioned teams of doctors on standby and offered tons of food, water and a million barrels of extra petroleum, were refused. Even French aircraft and a hospital ship standing ready in the Caribbean, along with German and Russian help, were put on hold.

International camera crews flew overhead filming desperate people clinging to rooftops. More than 20,000 people without potable water, food or sanitation packed into the Superdome and tens of thousands of others spent days at the Convention Center in blistering heat. Emergency crews from around the U.S. were prevented from reaching New Orleans.

Air Force helicopters at a base close by were ordered grounded, although pilots volunteered and pleaded to use them to evacuate people. FEMA and Homeland Security actually blocked aid and volunteers, according to many media reports. Truckloads of water and tons of material sent from around the country were never released.

Two and a half years later, tens of thousands of evacuees are still not able to return to their homes.

Pentagon in Iraq and Somalia

The Pentagon's record in Iraq is far worse. More than five years after smashing their way into an Iraq crippled and weakened by sanctions, the U.S. military has proved unable to provide the most basic human survival needs of potable water, basic nutrition, electricity, emergency health care or education.

If more than 160,000 U.S. troops, 100,000 private contractors and the largest collection of military equipment on the planet won't provide reliable electricity or potable water in Baghdad, should anyone expect they would do better in Yangon?

Using the excuse of a humanitarian mission in famine-stricken Somalia, the U.S. pushed through a U.N. resolution allowing Marines to occupy the capital of Mogadishu in December 1992. The outraged population drove the Marines out by the following year. The Pentagon had totally miscalculated the popular anti-imperialist sentiment, even among a desperate population.

In Myanmar, mass opposition to British and then U.S. domination is a strong current in the population. Any intervention could meet with stiff resistance, despite the suffering caused by the cyclone.

In all the U.S. media attacks on the government of Myanmar as a dictatorship, it is important to remember that the Pentagon has propped up, armed and financed brutal military dictatorships around the world—from Saudi Arabia and Indonesia to Pakistan, Chile and Congo. Their opposition to the dictatorship in Myanmar is not due to its repressive measures but that it has not undone the nationalization of the natural resources forced through by anti-colonial mass sentiment decades ago. This is what U.S. corporations are determined to reverse.

The anti-war and progressive movement should be wary of the reactionary media campaign around Myanmar. The people there have a right to immediate international assistance free of U.S. demands or sanctions.

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