

Why the propaganda campaign for international intervention in Burma?

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The catastrophe wrought by Cyclone Nargis on the Burmese people has provoked an extraordinary campaign by the US and allied powers, and in the international media, demanding that the military junta open its borders to aid and aid officials as well as to American military aircraft, troops and warships. Once again an attempt is being made to stampede public opinion with heartrending images of desperate survivors and devastated towns, accompanied by an incessant drumbeat condemning the Burmese regime for its inadequate aid efforts, its insularity, and its failure to accept international, especially American, aid.

One should immediately pause and recall the outcome of similar “humanitarian” exercises. In 1999, the plight of Kosovan refugees was exploited by the US and its allies to wage war against Serbia and transform the province into a NATO protectorate largely “cleansed” of its Serbian minority. In the same year, Australia, with the backing of the US, used the violence of Indonesian-backed militias to justify a military intervention into East Timor to install a regime sympathetic to Canberra’s economic and strategic interests. After nearly a decade the local populations in both countries continue to live in appalling conditions, with none of their fundamental needs having been met.

Undoubtedly a huge social tragedy has taken place over the past week. Official Burmese figures put the number of dead and missing at more than 60,000. UN officials estimate the death toll at 100,000 and the number of people severely affected by the cyclone at nearly 2 million. Much of the huge Irrawaddy delta has been devastated by the storm surges whipped up by Cyclone Nargis, which swamped the low-lying land. Entire towns and villages have been washed away, leaving scenes that recall the destruction produced by the December 2004 tsunami along the coasts of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and Thailand.

It is also true that the Burmese junta is a brutal regime that has repeatedly gunned down anti-government protesters in order to maintain its own power and privileges. Its rescue efforts are certainly hampered not only by the economic backwardness of the country, but also by the regime’s callous indifference to the plight of the Burmese people. Given the current media campaign, one should approach all press reports with considerable caution. But there is little doubt that many cyclone victims are being left to fend for themselves—as indeed were the survivors of the 2004 tsunami by governments of the worst hit countries.

No one, however, should place any credibility in the protestations of concern from the Bush administration and its allies. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice insisted on Wednesday that Washington’s cyclone assistance was “not a matter of politics” but rather “a matter of a humanitarian crisis”. “What remains is for the Burmese government to allow the

international community to help its people," Rice declared.

In reality, all American assistance comes with political strings attached. The Bush administration has offered a paltry \$3.5 million in financial aid and is pushing for the entry of US officials, aid workers and military personnel to handle emergency relief operations rather than allow Burmese authorities to carry them out. At the same time, the US and its European allies continue to maintain sanctions against the Burmese regime that have compounded the country's economic difficulties. In the week prior to the cyclone, the Bush administration strengthened its bans on trade and investment and the freezing of assets, all of which remain in place except for a slight easing of restrictions on financial aid.

French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner suggested on Wednesday that the UN Security Council be convened to invoke its "responsibility to protect" to override Burmese national sovereignty and deliver international aid, with or without the junta's approval. The "responsibility to protect" resolution, which has a history dating back to the 1999 NATO war on Yugoslavia, was passed in 2006 as an instrument for the major powers to justify military aggression on the grounds of preventing "genocide, war, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity". Kouchner's suggestion would extend the scope for such interventions to natural disasters such as Cyclone Nargis.

Kouchner's comments have yet to be publicly supported by Washington, but the suggestion is clearly being discussed within the administration. The US ambassador to the UN, Zalmay Khalilzad, declared that most governments were "outraged" by the slowness of the Burmese regime to accept international aid. Alluding to the UN Security Council powers, he added: "A government has responsibility to protect its own people, to provide for its people.... It should be a no-brainer to accept the offer made by the international community."

Director of the US Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, Ky Luu, was more explicit. He indicated that unilateral air drops by US military aircraft was one of the options being considered if the junta continued to refuse to accept American aid. Four US warships are already heading towards Burma and Navy helicopters and Air Force cargo planes have been stationed in neighbouring Thailand. US Defence Secretary Robert Gates commented that he could not imagine a military intervention without Burmese permission. Defence Department spokesman Bryan Whitman noted: "If you're not asked and it's not requested, it's considered an invasion." Nevertheless, it is clear that the military option and its political ramifications are being actively discussed.

The Asian tsunami

As part of the campaign to pressure the Burmese junta, a new mythology is being created to paint the international response to the Asian tsunami as a model of rapid, efficient and compassionate aid delivery by all involved. Contrasts are increasingly being made between the Burmese regime today and its "democratic" counterparts in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and Thailand in 2004.

Any objective examination of the 2004 tragedy, however, reveals a very different picture. The huge tsunami waves engulfed impoverished villages around the Bay of Bengal on December 26. For days, as the death toll quickly mounted into the tens of thousands, US President Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and other world leaders failed to make any statement on the disaster. When they finally broke their vacations, their collective contempt

for the fate of the victims was revealed in their perfunctory comments and pathetic offers of aid. It was only after an outpouring of sympathy and donations from working people around the world, aghast at the enormity of the disaster, that the US and major powers began to act.

In the worst affected countries, emergency relief efforts were hamstrung by red tape and political agendas, of both the local regimes and the donor countries. The Indonesian and Sri Lankan governments had been waging brutal long-running wars against separatist movements and were extremely reluctant to allow aid organisations, let alone foreign militaries, into the disaster zones. Far from helping the victims, the Indonesian military seized the opportunity to intensify its operations against Achnese rebels. In Sri Lanka, attempts to establish a joint aid body with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) under the auspices of the 2002 ceasefire collapsed, amid bitter communal recriminations over any official recognition of the separatists.

The Indian government insisted that it would control its own relief operations and dismissed any suggestion that foreign militaries should be involved. The Indian military was particularly sensitive to the presence of international aid workers in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which were among the worst hit areas, because of the presence of strategic navy and air force bases there. More than three years later, thousands of tsunami victims on the islands, as well as in other parts of India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, are still living in squalid conditions in temporary accommodation.

No one in ruling circles in the US or Europe suggested at the time that a military operation should be mounted to override Indian sovereignty or to make unilateral air drops over the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. In the case of Sri Lanka and Indonesia, the governments eventually permitted the US military to assist in aid operations on their territories. In both cases, Washington's overriding purpose was political—to forge closer working relations with the militaries of the two countries as well as to set a precedent, which is now being invoked to exert pressure on the Burmese junta.

US Secretary of State Rice bluntly told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in January 2005 that the tsunami constituted “a wonderful opportunity to show not just the US government, but the heart of the American people... And I think it has paid great dividends for us.” Rice now declares that US aid offers to Burma are “not a matter of politics”, but the Bush administration is intent on transforming this latest disaster into a new political “opportunity” to advance its strategic and economic interests in the region.

Strategic interests

The decision of the Burmese junta to selectively accept aid from sympathetic countries such as China, India and Thailand, and not the US, is hardly surprising. The Bush administration has made little secret of the fact that it favours “regime change” in Burma—the removal of the military regime and its replacement by a government, headed by opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, more amenable to Washington's interests and to opening up the country to foreign investors.

The US targetting of the junta has nothing to do with concern for the democratic rights or the welfare of the Burmese people. Washington's hostility towards the Burmese regime is driven above all by the latter's close association with China, regarded by the US as its main potential rival. Over the past eight years, the Bush administration has pursued a strategy of

strengthening military ties and establishing bases in a string of countries around China—from South Korea and Japan to the Philippines, Australia and Indonesia and around to India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Central Asia republics.

Burma is a significant hole in US efforts to “contain” China. The country sits next to the strategic Strait of Malacca—the major sea-lane linking North East Asia, including China, with the energy resources of the Middle East and Africa. Control of such “choke points” has long been central to American naval plans. China has assisted Burma in building various naval facilities and counts on access to Burmese ports as part of its efforts to protect shipping lanes that are vital for its own economy.

The international media is already making criticisms of China for failing to exert more pressure on its ally to open up to international aid. US Secretary of State Rice phoned her counterpart in Beijing this week to push the Chinese government to exert more pressure on Burma. If the Bush administration did decide to press for a UN resolution to intervene, Beijing would quickly become a more direct target of vilification. China has opposed any move to raise the cyclone disaster in the UN Security Council.

There is also a broader economic agenda behind Washington’s hostility to the Burmese junta. For decades, it has maintained a largely shut-in, isolated economy in which military-run enterprises still dominate the key sectors. For American corporations, the country is a new potential source of cheap labour as well as critical resources, including oil and gas. The US administration has quietly allowed the Chevron oil corporation to proceed with its multi-million dollar investments in Burma, but such operations are hindered by bad relations between the two countries.

The Bush administration is no more motivated by humanitarian concerns in Burma than it is in Iraq or Afghanistan. In rejecting the latest lies and hypocrisy from the White House, it is necessary to consider the fundamental issues involved. Why do such catastrophes repeatedly hit the most vulnerable layers of the world’s population? Why do disease, hunger and poverty continue to ravage the masses of Asia, Africa and Latin America?

The resources exist to abolish suffering and want, as well as to minimise the impact of natural disasters such as Cyclone Nargis. Over the past three decades, the globalisation of production has vastly expanded mankind’s economic capacity, establishing the basis for the rational planning and deployment of resources on a world scale to ensure a decent standard of living for people in every part of the globe. Under capitalism, however, this huge economic and scientific capacity is exploited to provide profits for the wealthy few, while the vast majority, including in the major industrialised countries, struggle to survive from day to day.

Poverty and unemployment are no aberration. The vast layers of the world’s urban and rural poor are an essential feature of global capitalism. They form a vast reserve army of labour that is used as a constant downward pressure on the wages and conditions of the working class internationally. The only means for abolishing the immense and deepening chasm between rich and poor is through the revolutionary restructuring of society along socialist lines, so that the burning needs of the overwhelming majority of humanity take precedence over the profit requirements of the few.

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