

BURMA AFTER THE CYCLONE Ashley South RECENTLY SPOKE TO THE ASIA PROGRAMME AT CHATHAM HOUSE, HE LIVED IN BURMA 1992-2002, HIS BOOK, ETHNIC POLITICS IN BURMA: STATES OF CONFLICT, WAS PUBLISHED BY ROUTLEDGE LAST MONTH



Making a Disaster Out of a Cyclone

The death and destruction in Burma as a result of Cyclone Nargis may yet come close to the Asian Tsunami in impact: some 120,000 dead and 2.5 million needing help now, compared to 190,000 deaths and three million displaced in 2004. The level of devastation might have been less in Burma, but for the government's decision to control the international response. The impact of this on the global policy community, and the country's fractured opposition, has been extensive.

tHE BURMESE MILITARY GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE to the cyclone presented the international community with an acute dilemma: whether, and how, to intervene, when the authorities in a sovereign state refuse to cooperate. Unfortunately, international and regional actors have yet to respond adequately to this challenge.

In the weeks following the cyclone, international aid began to trickle in. However, the regime insisted on strictly controlling the operation, limiting access for international agencies and Burmese citizens wishing to help.

At the time of the cyclone, approximately 48 international non-governmental organisations and ten United Nations agencies were already operating in Burma. These responded quickly, providing much-needed relief. Their Burmese staff deserve particular credit for selfless, life-saving actions.

However, during the crucial early weeks, the international staff of officially-registered organisations were denied access to the Delta, as the army moved to cordon off the area. The government seemed unwilling to expose to international scrutiny its paltry relief efforts – and more generally the repressive and brutal nature of militarised rule.

Following UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon's visit to Burma in late May, the government announced that foreign

aid workers would be allowed into cyclone-affected areas. While this was obviously welcome, for many thousands of people the delay was probably deadly. Restrictions on humanitarian access remain, leading many international actors and observers to criticise the government strongly.

ENFORCED AID

The internationalisation of what the military regime considers Burma's internal affairs was illustrated by western condemnation of the government's inadequate response. Debate crystallised around the principle of the responsibility to protect.

In international law, the primary responsibility for protecting civilians lies with their governments. However, during the 1990s, a new protection doctrine emerged, with the international community recognising an obligation to act in situations of extreme crisis. At the UN's sixtieth anniversary world summit in 2005, a hundred-and-fifty world leaders decided to embrace the responsibility to protect vulnerable people facing genocide and other mass atrocities.

This doctrine challenges the principle of state sovereignty as absolute and inviolable. However, there are serious questions about international willingness to take concrete action to live-up to the language of protection.

In the case of Burma, some powerful figures – such as French Foreign Minister, Bernard Kouchner – argued for a moral duty to persuade the government to accept aid, and prevent further suffering.

If the government should refuse to accept this responsibility, it was proposed aid should be imposed unilaterally.

By talking-up the prospect of humanitarian intervention – with or without the backing of the UN Security Council – the advocates of such action dramatically raised the stakes. If the international community did not follow-through with concrete action, there was a danger that the doctrine of humanitarian intervention, and the responsibility to protect, might be significantly damaged, undermining the prospect of future initiatives.

It is unclear whether the UN Secretary-General has rescued the international community from this dilemma, through his intervention with the Burmese Head of State, Than Shwe. However, in early June, American and other warships which had been waiting off the coast steamed off to Thailand, to unload their aid supplies. It seemed the military regime had successfully called the international community's bluff.

Some advocates of humanitarian intervention went so far as to argue for a military 'solution' to the crisis. Others called for air drops, to supply desperately needy populations with aid. However, such suggestions have not come from within the professional humanitarian community, which realises this would be a highly ineffective way of reaching vulnerable

people, and could expose cyclone survivors to further victimisation at the hands of a brutal and xenophobic regime.

AID WITH ASIAN VALUES

Efforts have also focused on engaging the government's allies, to persuade the regime to co-operate with the international community. Over the past decade – and especially since Burma was put on the UN Security Council agenda in January last year – permanent members, China and Russia, together with India, the other major regional power, have shielded the military regime from international censure.

Burma's generals have become adept at playing regional powers against each other, buying patronage with their



extensive natural gas and oil reserves. Economic sanctions imposed by western governments have driven the country further into the spheres of influence of China and the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN). As most American and European oil companies have been forced to withdraw, they have been replaced by less socially-aware Asian counterparts.

The military government seems willing to accept assistance, and possibly advice, from its powerful patrons. Several Asian governments have donated relief supplies, and in some cases also specialist personnel. One way forward may be to cooperate with Asian powers, to improve and professionalise their capacity to respond.

In mid-May, ASEAN announced a task force to coordinate assistance for cyclone-affected areas. Such a regionalised intervention might set precedents for future international action – breaking the pattern of disaster response as an exclusively western-led enterprise.

However, a relief effort led by Asian states – many of which are characterised by authoritarian political cultures – is unlikely to focus on the human rights-based principles which underpin the global humanitarian approach developed since the end of the Cold War. The aftermath of Cyclone

Nargis might therefore herald a new era of localised 'humanitarianism with Asian values'.

DOMESTIC DEBRIS

In the absence of an adequate government or international response, local communities have taken the initiative. A broad array of civil society networks and local community groups, including church and other organisations, have delivered what assistance they can, and made impact assessments in the Delta.

Monks have helped to clear the streets of debris, and been involved in rescues and repairs. This is politically significant, given the government's violent suppression of the saffron revolution they led in August and September last year.

As those protests indicated, the military regime is deeply unpopular, despite the fraudulent results of the constitutional referendum which went ahead in the wake of the cyclone. The government announced that an incredible 92.4 percent of voters had endorsed a Charter drafted by the military.

The cyclone crisis has resulted in food and fuel shortages, and rising prices, which might ignite further anti-government protests. But the prospect of a popular uprising toppling the regime seems distant. Therefore, internal disputes within the military have been seen by some as a vehicle for regime change.

While Than Shwe remains in power, major changes are unlikely. However, the massive humanitarian, social and political effects of the cyclone might encourage ambitious but frustrated second-line military leaders to move against the dictator and his cronies.

Burma-watchers have long anticipated splits in the army, although, since independence in 1948, the military has remained the most powerful and cohesive force in the country. Recent events might yet precipitate the downfall of the ruling clique – if not necessarily the end of military rule.

OPPOSITION AGENDAS

The current crisis is an opportunity to review unhelpful and outmoded strategies on social and political transition in Burma and the role of the opposition. It consists of three sectors: the urban-based democracy movement, a disparate collection of exiled activist groups, and representatives of ethnic nationality communities, which make up one third of the country's population.

There has been an ethnic dimension to the government's response to the cyclone. The majority of the affected population are ethnic Karen. In a bungled 1991 operation, the main Karen insurgent group, the Karen National Union, tried to infiltrate forces into the Delta region. The Burma army responded with extreme brutality, and has since suspected the local population of being insurgent sympathisers, who are therefore unlikely to receive sympathetic treatment.

The predominantly urban-based National League for Democracy (NLD), and its allies, derives its legitimacy from victory in the 1990 general election, the results of which were ignored by the government. Although the NLD General

Secretary and Nobel laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi, remains hugely popular, both domestically and abroad, she has spent thirteen of the last nineteen years under house arrest. Other opposition leaders are also in jail, or have been driven into exile.

The prospect of new elections in 2010, which will be tightly controlled by the government, threatens to weaken the NLD further. Therefore, the ageing party leadership needs to reconnect with more vibrant elements of Burmese political and civil society – including members of the 1988 Generation of student activists, who initiated last August's protests.

Most members of the opposition-in-exile fled between 1988 and 1990, and are out-of-touch with life in Burma. Nevertheless, many groups are well-funded by the United States and other western governments, and tend to dominate debate on Burma in a manner disproportionate to their limited relevance inside the country.

Exiled politicians have argued for the military government's international isolation, through economic sanctions. However, such policies have achieved little in terms of 'regime change'. They should be persuaded to cease their unproductive campaign to isolate Burma, and deny its people development assistance. More authority and legitimacy should be ceded to political actors on the ground – such as representatives of the ethnic nationality groups.

These ethnic minority communities include several dozen armed groups. For decades following independence they were in conflict with central government, sometimes in uneasy alliance with the Communist Party of Burma, which collapsed in 1989. While some are little more than warlord organisations, involved in narcotics trafficking and extra-legal activities, others enjoy varying degrees of legitimacy, and popular support. Most – but not all – have agreed ceasefires with the government.

These truces have led to some improvements for the long-suffering ethnic nationality communities. In particular, the re-emergence over the past two decades of civil society networks, within and between conflict-affected communities has been one of the most significant, but least well-appreciated, developments in Burmese politics.

The international community has done little to support such peace-building; much more could have – and still might be – done to promote community development. The armed ethnic groups should move away from political strategies based on a simplistic mapping of ethnicity and homeland territory, towards a more sophisticated, rights-based approach to self-determination.

These opposition networks have found themselves increasingly marginalised, and out-manoeuvred by the military government. Their strategic and ideological weakness, and general lack of capacity, is among the most worrying aspects of the country's sad situation.

The cyclone and its consequences have presented opposition elites with a chance to reassess their positions on a range of issues. Even if Burma's opposition networks do not become more effective, the widely-reviled military regime might yet fall. However, any such development would occur despite – not because of – their activities.

