

Extra Feature Story

Myanmar Allows First U.S. Aid Shipment Following Horrific Cyclone

May 12, 2008

The first shipment of U.S. aid landed in Myanmar (formerly called Burma) nearly 10 days after a devastating cyclone killed up to 100,000 people and impacted 2 million others in the isolated South Asian nation.

An unarmed U.S. C-130 cargo plane landed in the capital Yangon (formally called Rangoon) carrying 25,000 pounds of supplies including mosquito nets, blankets and water.

This first shipment had been held up by the Myanmar government, which is highly suspicious of outside help, especially from Western countries like the United States.

"We're limited only by the permission from the authorities in Burma," Adm. Timothy Keating, head of the U.S. Pacific Command, told reporters at the launching airbase in Thailand where more planes are waiting for permission to transport supplies.

The cyclone

The destructive Category 3 cyclone struck the low-lying Irrawaddy delta region of the country on May 3, destroying villages and wiping out electrical lines. It also slammed the country's largest city, Yangon, in the south.

The Myanmar government estimates 31,938 people died and 29,770 are missing but international aid organizations say the number of those killed is much higher, closer to 100,000 and that nearly 2 million people are impacted in some manner.

Survivors are packed into Buddhist temples and schools on the outskirts of the storm's path of destruction. But these makeshift gathering places lack sufficient food, water, shelter and medicine.

"It's grim and getting grimmer," a Western diplomat in Yangon told the New York Times. "The vast majority of people out there haven't been reached. It's a challenge to get stuff there anyway. Now it's a double challenge."

Hindering outside help

Getting relief aid to the affected region is difficult enough but the Myanmar government has thus far said it will only accept packets of food, not the skilled relief workers to distribute it.

Aid workers, experts in the distribution of relief following massive disasters such as the cyclone, are pressing on the government to change their policy.

"The regime simply can't cope on its own, and they mustn't imagine they can. That's why we need these people in there," United Nations Under Secretary John Holmes told the NewsHour.

"We're trying to make the point privately and publicly that these are international aid workers. They have nothing to do with politics; they're not interested in regime change or anything else. They're just interested in helping people," Holmes also said.

International aid organizations are hoping to prevent a second catastrophe – the outbreak of disease and starvation caused by a lack of relief for those who initially survived the cyclone.

"We are afraid there is a real risk of a massive public catastrophe waiting to happen in Myanmar," British aid group Oxfam's regional chief Sarah Ireland told reporters Sunday.

Myanmar's government

Myanmar was a British colony called Burma until 1948. Since 1962, Myanmar has been ruled by a small group of socialist military generals (a "junta"). The rulers changed the name from Burma to Myanmar, which is similar to the country's official name in the local language.

The period since then has been marked by severe economic decline and erosion of political rights. The junta has refused to recognize democratic elections, and dissenters face arrest and torture. The government has disabled the Internet and other communications to the outside world, and media reports suggest they are passing off the international food and fresh water supplies as their own.

The country was in the international spotlight last fall when the military regime violently put down anti-government protests by Buddhist monks and other civilians.

The government has also faced criticism for holding a referendum vote on a new constitution despite the devastating cyclone.

The new constitution guarantees 25 percent of parliamentary seats to the military and allows unelected leaders to take control of executive and legislative powers in a state of emergency. It also bars the famous reformer Aung San Suu Kyi, whose party won elections in 1990 before the military junta nullified the results, from seeking office, but does call for general elections in 2010.

The vote was delayed by two weeks in areas hardest-hit by the cyclone.

-- Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra

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