Beyond Burma Versus the World

by Ian Holliday

When cyclone nargis tore through Burma's Irrawaddy Delta on May 3, it not only inflicted death and destruction on a scale unseen in Asia since the 2004 tsunami, but also generated pronounced caricatures of poses long struck in the country's largely static political drama. At center stage, the oppressive State Peace and Development Council was unresponsive and utterly self-serving. In the wings, opposition forces in the democratic camp and ethnic minority groups were aghast and totally powerless. Backstage, Asian states scrambled to provoke some element of civility in an unbending regime. Far from the main action, Western states formed a kind of Greek chorus calling insistently for the ruling military clique to adhere to global humanitarian standards.

This phony relief phase lasted for more than two weeks of an emergency in which critical response times were calibrated in days, and even hours. At the end of it, the military junta claimed that 78,000 people had died in the storm and 56,000 were missing. Against this, external agencies estimated that 200,000 lives had been lost, and appealed to the junta to authorize more external assistance for the 2.4 million survivors in the delta, many of whom remained beyond the reach of aid agencies.

One twist critics found notably cynical and cruel during this early phase was the junta's insistence on pressing ahead with a referendum on a new constitution. Citizens in 277 townships not directly affected by the cyclone were required to turn out on May 10. Citizens in 47 townships devastated by the cyclone voted on May 24. In an announcement that was widely derided by critics, the junta stated that 98.12% had participated in the plebiscite and 92.48% had voted yes. Another step on the country's seven-stage roadmap to a discipline-flourishing democracy had been taken.

However, this proclamation did have the positive effect of moving the country on from petty junta politics, and creating space for cyclone response efforts to rise to the top of the agenda. Key to this was the junta's belief that its referendum banished

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several potent historical memories from the political scene. One was its violent repression of monk-led popular protests, triggered by economic hardship and motivated by democratic ideals, in September 2007. Another was its refusal to implement the results of a general election, won in a landslide by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, in May 1990. Still another was its initial power grab, through an internal coup against an ailing military-backed government, in September 1988. With mass endorsement for its constitution, the regime sought to consign all these events to the past and look ahead to its authoritarian democracy.

It was in this context that top generals finally turned to humanitarian needs in the delta. On May 18, Senior-General Than Shwe made his first trip to the disaster zone, and was photographed talking to officials and survivors in a pristine refugee camp. On May 19, at a special meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in Singapore, foreign ministers agreed to create a Task Force for channeling aid to Burma from all over the world. On May 25, an Asean-United Nations International Pledging Conference convened in Rangoon to address a Burmese request for more than $11 billion in assistance. More than 50 countries attended, and some sent higher-level delegations than had set foot inside the country for over 20 years. In between the Singapore and Rangoon meetings, both Asean Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan and U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon traveled to Burma for discussions with senior government officials and relief workers. At the same time, there was a marked improvement in aid transport into the country, and a growing confidence that most of it was reaching its intended targets. In this way, a platform for global engagement with Burma's humanitarian crisis was built.

Nevertheless, many important matters still need to be resolved. One is how far the junta will relent in opening up Burma to outside involvement. In a face-to-face meeting with Mr. Ban, Than Shwe promised to allow all aid workers into the country, and dozens of visas have since been issued to humanitarian agencies. However, to get a permit to visit the delta, foreign experts must submit a detailed travel plan 48 hours ahead of each trip. Already, the presence of outsiders has attracted harsh criticism from junta-backed newspapers. Another issue is how effective foreign experts can be. For years in Burma, almost nothing has worked, and that which does is tightly overseen and controlled by the military and its associates. In the delta, where needs are greatest, basic infrastructure is virtually nonexistent.

One month after Nargis struck, engaging with Burma thus remains very difficult. The generals who dominate this country of 54 million people view everything through a single lens of power, and adopt all available means to tighten their grip. "Our country is going through a variety of storm-like plots and intrigues that are much severer than Nargis, and they are endless," noted a government mouthpiece in the week that Burma started cautiously to open up to outsiders. Two days after much of the world came to Rangoon for the donor conference, Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest, which already totals more than 12 of the past 18 years, was extended for an additional year.

Despite such setbacks, the situation the world faces in Burma has become somewhat clearer in the past few weeks. At the extreme, the possibility of direct humanitarian intervention with which many in the West flirted is now a nonstarter. Promoted most visibly by French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, this option looks to responsibility to protect provisions agreed by more than 150 states at the U.N. World Summit in 2005, and advo-

cates that air drops be undertaken with or without Burmese government consent. However, problems in securing U.N. Security Council authorization, in actually getting aid to survivors in an efficient and effective manner, and in preventing the junta from retreating to its bunker in Naypyidaw mean that the option is unlikely ever to be triggered. Similarly, judicial action to bring charges of crimes against humanity against the generals, again floated by Mr. Kouchner, is at present beyond the realm of practical politics. For the time being, the junta has opened up sufficiently to the world to dispel all serious talk of radical action.

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Similarly, states clustered around the U.S. now visibly have zero chance of imposing their vision of political development on Burma. This is chiefly because Asian neighbors, while disliking much that goes on inside the country, have no intention of countenancing encroachments on its sovereignty. In the aftermath of the May 12 Sichuan earthquake, China diverged substantially from Burma in opening up to foreign aid and media. Indeed, it seems likely that Beijing saw Burma as an object lesson in how *not* to deal with the international community when disaster strikes. On the issue of national sovereignty, however, China held firm to the position long shared with Burma. At a May 17 briefing at the Chinese embassy in Washington, D.C., spokesman Wang Baodong insisted that other states show "due respect" to Burma, and reminded them that it is a "sovereign country."

In practical terms, this means that the U.S. and the European Union, which have looked principally to sanctions in framing their Burma policies, need urgently to rethink. It has always been obvious that sanctions will not work in Burma. They are not supported by any of its neighbors, and are disdained by most of its major trading partners. However, Nargis has taken debate to a new level by exposing the absurdity of the sanctions argument. In the same breath, leaders in the U.S. and elsewhere cannot argue both for isolating Burma through economic and political sanctions, and for engaging intensively with it through humanitarian aid.

Furthermore, the counterpart to dismantling sanctions is putting in place a policy that can serve not to isolate Burma, but rather to reintegrate it into the global community. Internally, it is essential to open up humanitarian space. Externally, bridges must be built to connect the regime to the world. On both counts, the only viable strategy is to work through existing dialogue channels. At a minimum, this means that any proposed Burma initiative must be endorsed by major Asian states. If China is not on side, then it will exercise its veto in the U.N. Security Council. If Asean is not persuaded, then no use can be made of its strategic relationship with Burma. By comparison, India and Japan, though significant to Burma, are not currently critical players.

Within the region, a number of moves are now being made. As a leading member of Asean, Indonesia is said to be putting together a multilateral approach to the junta. However, in the long run China is especially important to Burma policy. While no external power can control what the junta does, Beijing has access to the generals and is capable of steering them to

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some degree. Furthermore, Chinese leaders are moving beyond strict interpretations of the country's "peaceful rise" to acknowledge that its startling economic progress means it will inevitably have to assume a regional and global role.

One obvious way to fashion more active Chinese engagement is through a multilateral contact group convened by the U.N. Together with Asean, Beijing has a clear leadership role to play. However, if real progress is to be made inside Burma, it is necessary to supplement headline political initiatives with action on the ground. Here, China and the Chinese come into their own, with business activities and social ties that span much of the land. Some scholars estimate that there may be more than one million recent Chinese migrants in Burma. In a postsanctions policy framework these investors, traders, workers and floaters take on a key mediating role. Indeed, the more they can be directed toward legitimate economic activity, and away from the shadowy world created by junta cronies and Western sanctions, the more benefit they will bring. Over time, they can create conditions for other entrepreneurs to enter the country and join the broad-based rebuilding effort that is so desperately needed.

In pursuing a strategy that looks to China to play a leading part in reconnecting Burma to the world, many sensitive issues clearly need to be borne in mind. One is that there remains a highly conservative camp inside China which holds that everything should be left in the hands of the junta. Change is not likely to come quickly, and nobody should look for democracy in one of the poorest countries in Asia. But this position is no longer predominant. Another issue is that China has many more important relationships than its bilateral relationship with Burma. The Burma problem therefore needs to be addressed within the bilateral and multilateral relations that structure China's interactions with the complex and strategic region of Southeast Asia. A further issue is that peaceful coexistence, the central plank of Chinese foreign policy, has to be seen to be maintained for good relations in its neighborhood. However, with cover provided by a global coalition of support mobilized by the U.N. this should be possible.

It is already widely understood that the damage wrought by Nargis will not be patched up in weeks or months. The economic base of a low lying agricultural region has been devastated. Homes and schools have been destroyed. Human health and wellbeing are in the balance. Refugees subsist on almost nothing. To put the region back on track will be the work of years, and will require sustained engagement. Clearly, what is true of the Irrawaddy Delta is also true of the nation. Across the land, damage inflicted by ruinous governance stretching back many decades needs to be tackled through patient measures that look beyond the narrow political sphere, and set Burma up for broad forms of economic and social interaction with outsiders. Ultimately, it is only in this way that the country can change.

The initial post-Nargis phase played out as a classic instance of Burma versus the world. This is also how policy has long been framed by major Western powers. The opportunity now present is to bring Burma in from the cold and open it up to a complex pattern of active engagement with outsiders. The key future task is to ensure that this opportunity does not go begging.