

Nargis Cyclone aftermath - Hope survives



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With reports of starvation and growing health problems, the news from Burma's Irrawaddy Delta is grim. No question, the paranoid junta leadership has stymied the relief effort, at the expense of over 2.4 million people. Half of those affected by the devastating cyclone and tidal wave remain without basic needs – food, shelter and clothing one month after the winds have died down.

In villages from eastern Laputta in the heart of the Delta where over 50% of the people died, to the villages in southern tip of the Yangon township, the eyes of those affected continue to glaze over with shock and tears, as the psychological recovery of loss of family, friends and their foundations of lives has set in.

This cyclone is perhaps one of the worst natural disasters Southeast Asia has experienced in the last 50 years. Unfortunately, the trauma post-Nargis continues. The reality on the ground is a more complex picture than the dire news reports to date. The grit and courage of the survivors has been largely ignored. Witnessing their willpower to cope in this crisis has been inspirational.



There are positive stories to tell. Donations have poured in from all over the world into this devastated region. On a bumpy Sunday drive from the capital to the southern town of KungYangon, families and children lined the main road in search of basic food for a daily meal.

Putting aside pride, they have incorporated accepting aid from outside into their survival strategy. In these accessible township communities, the government has only provided six kilos of rice per family since the May 3rd cyclone, well below the sufficient amount to feed a family.

Local citizens and foreign aid truckloads have filled the gap and have brought in tones of rice, dried fish and other basic necessities to this accessible region close to the capital. Aid is getting in. Children are smiling, and to a fault, every person on the roadside smiles with appreciation and welcome as the trucks and cars pass by – even those that are returning empty. The smiles - lightning bolt of joys - have replaced the tears of early May.

It is this region – Zone 3 of the Delta – that is moving out of dependency. Roofs have been rebuilt, and even though the houses are smaller (since many used the walls of their own house for repairs), there is a sense of purpose among these survivors. Common bonds in the community have been forged to address the crisis, as social relationships have strengthened. Within and among villages trust has been built in a society where fragmentation and fear is used to maintain the military's upper hand.

Despite the persistent pressure from the junta, this region has traditionally been self-sufficient and produced a surplus. Many want to return this mode as soon as possible and are collaborating to do so. They have less than two weeks left in the rice planting season, but local initiatives are thriving, from sharing of the few remaining water buffalo to the pooling of capital.

Lifblood of civil society

One story in particular struck home. After stopping at a partially destroyed Hindu temple (Hindus are a minority in the Delta) to make a small donation for its restoration, the Indian community described how the nearby local mosque (Muslims are also a minority in the Delta although larger in number) has provided donations for the community in the first few weeks after the cyclone. Minority groups crossed religious divisions to work together for survival.



There is now a sharing among both communities as donations are distributed to the residents in both villages as aid comes in. Bonds of humanity have crossed different beliefs. Similar ties were forged with the Buddhist monasteries and Christian churches where the ethnic minority Karen live.

Religious organizations have become the lifblood of civil society in this Delta region, and have served to provide both physical and psychological support after devastating losses. Thanks to vital assistance from outside and sheer fortitude, residents in this area are moving beyond Nargis.

The story in other parts of the Delta, however, is less optimistic. As one moves down from Zone 2 to Zone 0, the magnitude of the disaster intensifies. In the worst hit areas there are no longer villages to speak of. There remain large pockets of people without food and shelter, sharing tarps to protect against the daily rain. Starvation is real, as each day is a fight for survival. There is no anchor of community to build on, as survivors have lost family members or friends.



There is no “normalcy” to rebuild a foundation upon. Many are being forced back into the areas of villages, which remain flooded in water and unlivable. Other survivors are in areas that even now are completely inaccessible through the allowed routes of boat. The stench of death still permeates the air. The regional commanders determine the degree of local access to these hard-hit zones.

Thus, there are sharp inconsistencies across the Delta on who can and has received aid. Day by day conditions change, with access granted one morning and denied the next afternoon. International NGOs – such as the International Red Cross/Red Crescent, Save the Children, World Vision, Merlin, MSF, Pact and more – have brought in assistance where they can.

Mercy Malaysia has played an exceptional role in providing much-needed health care in some of the most devastated villages. The key conduits are locals, who staff the international NGOs and are forming and redefining local organizations.

Every moment is precious

Local NGOS – steered by previously apolitical people – are mushrooming as the crisis continues to grow. The local relief workers quickly adapted to the emergency relief effort and are learning how to deal with the psychological effects of assisting trauma victims.

In many cases INGOS have forged ties with the elite private sector (aka cronies) to get in the supplies they need. Pragmatism has ruled. Progress is slow, since in these still devastated areas one needs to go by boat and one is lucky if one reaches three villages a day.



Every moment is precious, as deaths continue due to starvation and an intensification of water-borne diseases, namely cholera. It will be a matter of a few weeks when a new crop of mosquitoes will breed and malaria and dengue will return as a health threat.

The social ties in these communities have been strained as the competition for scarce resources is intense. Lotteries for a dried fish, a mosquito net, a tarp to protect from the daily rain, and a bowl of rice are common. Ethnic, class and political divisions are sharp, as difference is used for greater access to the minimal supplies for survival.

Even amidst the misery, there is hope. New relationships have formed. A mother Aye Aye Win lost all her four children, among them her two month old boy she was breast-feeding. She now breastfeeds a one month girl named Nargis, whose mother died on a tree giving birth to her daughter the night of the cyclone. The mother bled to death in the rain, yet managed to hold her daughter above the flooding waters.

The young baby was rescued by a seven year old boy – Min Soe - who lost his whole family. Aye Aye Win, Min Soe and Nargis are a new family. They remain hungry and without shelter, but have each other to help ease some of the pain. They humbly asked that the international community not forget them.

It is this shared common humanity that is keeping people alive as severe conditions persist in the Irrawaddy Delta. It is the hope that more aid and more options for the people to empower themselves will come. Even as we go about our daily lives in increasingly more difficult economic times, the bravery of the people inside the Irrawaddy Delta should be lauded and not forgotten.

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