

## **Cyclone relief no laughing matter**

*Awzar Thi*

On the night of 4 June 2008, a group of police officers came to a house in suburban Rangoon, searched it and took away one of the occupants. But the person they took is not a wanted robber, murderer or escapee. He is a comedian.

Although Zarganar is famous in Burma for his antics on stage and screen, he has not been joking much lately. Instead, he has been at the front of local efforts to get relief to where it has been needed most since Cyclone Nargis swept through his country a month ago.

[Pic of Zarganar (no caption)]

Zarganar, whose adopted name means “pincers”, has thrown everything into the relief effort, organising hundreds of volunteers in dozens of villages to help in giving out food, water, clothes and other basic necessities to thousands of people.

His sister told Voice of America that he had sold his and his wife’s mobile phones to use the money for the work, and that as the monsoon is setting in they had just purchased seeds to distribute in order that villagers who have nothing to plant might at least grow vegetables and stave off hunger.

He has also been a vocal critic of the government response to the cyclone, constantly pointing to the shortfalls in assistance and needs of survivors.

“The odor [of death] sticks with us when we come back from the villages,” Zarganar told The Irrawaddy news service on June 2, a full month after the cyclone struck.

“Nobody can stand it, and it causes some people to vomit. How could people find edible fish and frogs in that environment?” he asked, in response to an editorial in a state-run newspaper that survivors did not need foreign aid as they could catch and eat small animals instead.

Although perhaps the most outspoken, Zarganar is not the first person to be detained over the cyclone response—or the lack of it.

In mid-May, at least eight journalists from local periodicals who were doing their best to gather news and report on the tragedy without running afoul of the censors were held overnight at an army camp in the delta. They were released, but not before being threatened and having their digital photographs deleted.

Back in Rangoon, the reporters’ editors were also told to stop covering the extent of damage and instead publish articles on rebuilding efforts. The warnings had the desired effect. Journals that were the week before packed with images of hungry, tired and frightened people sheltering in monasteries instead concentrated on the setting up of emergency camps and delivery of supplies.

Meanwhile, authorities continue to constrain and prevent domestic donors from getting where they want to go.

At the end of May, some blocked a bridge into Rangoon and impounded vehicles that were returning from taking goods to the needy.

Monks who tried to deliver food from other parts of the country also found officials interfering with their every move, wanting to make it appear that they were the ones responsible for the largesse.

And international agencies have corroborated reports from many areas of people being evicted from temporary facilities and being told to go back to homes that they no longer have.

Zarganar has a home, but he is nowhere to be found in it tonight. Not for the first time, he is in a cell somewhere, awaiting news of what will happen next.

Burma's new constitution may insist that nobody can be held for more than a day without going to a court or being charged, but as Zarganar knows full well, the gap between what is said and done in his country is far too large for such words to be taken seriously, although that is no laughing matter either.

### **Numbers are not the issue**

Among the many responses to the unconscionable blockading of humanitarian assistance to victims of the cyclone that swept through Burma on May 10, perhaps the strangest, if not the most offensive, have been claims that journalists, diplomats and aid workers have exaggerated the death toll.

Take an article that David Rieff wrote for the Los Angeles Times (Save us from the rescuers, May 18). For Rieff, exaggerated reports are all about numbers. And not just high numbers for that matter, but pretty much any numbers. If the numbers jump up suddenly, he reasons, they're suspect. But even if they don't, they're still suspect, because those who make them up are prone to hyperbole and have vested interests.

What Rieff omits is that those ultimately responsible for the making of numbers, those who are most prone to hyperbole and those with the biggest vested interests are not the relief agencies against whom he rails or their proponents, but the national authorities who obstruct the making of accurate tallies with which to obtain a better picture of what needs to be done.

Burma's government is particularly notorious for this sort of behavior, not least of all since the cyclone hit and the army carried or sold off the first planeloads of stuff that arrived. But it is by no means alone in Asia in its ability to manipulate and distort a tragedy for its own advantage.

Ultimately, it is the fault and success of the powerful that the truth of what has happened can never be known fully, that attempts to make sense of it by assigning numbers can be all too easily dismissed as exaggerated or inaccurate, and that those persons searching for answers can be ridiculed and silenced.

The issue for Burma today is not about numbers at all. It is about the language and behavior of social and political control, as it always is at such times. Those who make the mistake of wagging their fingers at the wrong people over the wrong issue do more than disservice themselves. They risk winding up like Rieff, as proxies for the holders of power, as spokespersons for the perpetrators of abuse.

Anyone who sincerely wants to get a sense of what has been going on in Burma should not bother with arguments about how many have died and how we can know for sure that humanitarian groups haven't got it wrong. Learn from real stories instead. Websites like The Irrawaddy, Mizzima, and Democratic Voice of Burma are daily retelling narratives of affected persons and also of those who have been packing their cars with supplies and driving them through the gauntlet of checkpoints that now ring the cyclone-affected areas.

These people aren't giving accurate numbers of dead, killed, missing, sick or displaced. Some hazard guesses when prompted. But the way they offer up the figures suggests that they mean little. What counts is everything else: the odor of dead bodies still permeating the air two weeks on; the emptiness of mothers who have gone insane after witnessing their children being swept away before their eyes, the desperateness of people literally throwing themselves at arriving vehicles to plead for help.

"It is," wrote a resident of Rangoon who joined one convoy a few days back, "worse than we expected." Nargis hasn't been exaggerated; it has been understated.

### **More abuse and suffering ahead**

While the military government's atrocious handling of Cyclone Nargis and its aftermath is by now well known, it is likely that once authorities have obtained a semblance of normalcy and official behavior becomes a little more coherent, human rights abuses directed against storm refugees and people in nearby areas will increase.

To begin with, the emptying out of afflicted coastal regions could become a permanent feature of Burma's map. Entire villages and their populaces have been swept away; with them have gone council offices and registrars containing records of land titles and other important documents. Whole islands are now all but deserted, the survivors moved elsewhere or concentrated in isolated temporary camps.

There have been no public announcements about what will happen to those who have been relocated, but as in Burma all land is technically state property and as its uncompensated seizure is commonplace, military and civilian officials will be eyeing these areas with a view to something other than simply letting villagers back to rebuild.

Where rebuilding does go on, it is likely to be accompanied by a dramatic increase in demands on the citizenry to pitch in. There is a lot that needs to be done. Who will do it? Not international agencies. They won't get free rein. Not domestic businesses and joint ventures. They are promoting themselves as do-good donors because of lucrative contracts to construct things like government schools and hospitals. The remaking of small bridges and canals, digging of ditches and repaving of side roads is going to fall to the locals.

[Pic of cyclone nargis (no caption)]

Although the International Labor Organization has reduced the use of forced labor in Burma, even in normal times the practice is still widespread. Its national office will have its work cut out in the coming months, as town and village authorities increasingly slip back into old habits and give their constituents orders to turn up at 6:00 a.m., one person per household, with tools and the time needed to reinforce an embankment or byway.

The increased demands on people's hours will be accompanied by more on their pockets too. The levying and collecting of tax in Burma is ordinarily haphazard. Officials will both be obliged and emboldened to seek more money and stuff from more people more often. Already there are reports that traders have had goods confiscated in the name of cyclone victims, and that villagers have had to give increasingly large amounts for basic services. As the cash crisis hits home, petty bureaucrats and security forces will shift their shortfalls onto the ordinary folk underneath them, who are already suffering from galloping price increases and severe unemployment.

Other routine human rights abuses are equally likely to grow in number during the rest of the year and into the next. There was a story this week that children orphaned due to the cyclone had been picked up and taken away in army trucks, ostensibly for special care. Elsewhere government thugs beat back angry crowds of people who had seen but not received emergency supplies. Such incidents will readily multiply.

The displaced, hungry, sick and homeless are not going to be able to organize and protect themselves from the inequities of officialdom as usual. They have lost their livelihoods, houses, families, contacts and their ordinary means of survival and self-defense. They are going to need the special interest not only of humanitarian groups but also human rights defenders and bodies at home and abroad throughout this period of heightened risk.

Rights advocates, journalists and specialized agencies need to ready themselves now to respond to the wave of abuses that are sure to follow this emergency period, and make sure that they have the money, people, means and mentality to react quickly and effectively to reports of incidents as soon as they arise, for arise they shall.

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This article consists of edited text from several issues of a UPI column entitled 'Rule of Lords', [http://www.upiasiaonline.com/Human\\_Rights/](http://www.upiasiaonline.com/Human_Rights/). The author's work can also be read at his blog, <http://ratchasima.net/>.