

The Cyclone Disaster in Myanmar...and the Human Tragedy of Global Capitalism

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On May 2, 2008, Cyclone Nargis swept through the country of Myanmar, leaving in its wake a catastrophic human disaster. Deaths are estimated as high as 100,000 people, and at least one million are now homeless. Entire towns and villages have been washed away. 10,000 people died in one coastal town alone.

The densely populated Irawaddy Delta of 6 million people, with many fishing communities, was hit hard. Yangon (the former capital) on the edge of the Delta, where another 6.5 million people lived, was completely flooded. Flimsy houses in the poor shantytowns around cities were demolished. Some 24 million people in the five disaster-hit states—almost half of Myanmar's population of 57 million—were affected by the cyclone with its 120 mph winds and 12-foot waves that surged up to seven miles inland.

Even areas not hit as hard are now running out of food and water. Crops, livestock, and fish have been ruined, along with irrigation systems, rice mills, and storage barns. The areas hit by the cyclone make up half of the irrigated farmland in Myanmar—which had produced 65 percent of Myanmar's rice. Millions of people who survived are now facing hunger, disease and lack of shelter.

People around the world are witnessing the terrible plight of the Myanmar people unfold before their eyes. In the face of such immense human tragedy, there is hope that everything possible will be done to provide aid and relieve the terrible suffering.

There is tremendous wealth, resources, and technology in the world that could be used to respond to this disaster. There is no shortage of people with skills and compassion that could be mobilized to help. But clearly, this is not happening.

The Western mainstream media says this is because: The U.S. and other countries are trying to help but a despotic regime in Myanmar is refusing to cooperate and is therefore to blame for the high death toll and continuing suffering.

This article will break down this storyline, look at what's behind it and compare it to reality.

To understand the situation in Myanmar today you have to examine two interpenetrating contradictions. One is the relations between the world imperialist system and Myanmar as a poor country oppressed and dominated by global capitalism. The other dynamic is the geostrategic importance of Myanmar to imperialism and the rivalry between different capitalist countries in the region. These larger factors have deeply influenced the extent and character of the destruction caused by the cyclone, as well as the rescue and relief efforts.

Natural Disasters and Man-Made Conditions

The official storyline argues: In the face of natural disasters like Cyclone Nargis, humanitarian aid trumps everything. Condoleezza Rice says: “What remains is for the Burmese government to allow the international community to help its people. It should be a simple matter. It is not a matter of politics.”

In reality: There are terrible natural disasters human beings have little control over. But what happens in the face of such catastrophes is profoundly affected by the organization of human society. So, to answer Condoleezza Rice: It is NOT a “simple matter” of relief efforts. It IS very much a matter of politics, economic relations, and power relations, from beginning to end.

Disaster relief and aid—both within a particular country, and between particular countries—doesn’t take place in a vacuum.

We live on a planet where human life is susceptible to tornados, tsunamis, cyclones, and earthquakes. Scientific understanding exists to predict and prepare, to a certain degree, for such acts of nature. But whether and how this works and what happens in the wake of such disasters is *profoundly imprinted* with and *goes through* the workings of the world capitalist system.

Look what did and did not happen before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina. Everyone saw how power relations in society, poverty, and the oppression of Black people affected who got out and who didn’t; who died and who survived. Everyone saw how all the inequalities that *already existed* affected what happened as the floodwaters rose.

Natural disasters do not “discriminate”—people all over the world are hit by tornados, hurricanes, and earthquakes. But different people and different countries are *not affected equally*.

We live in a hugely lopsided world where a handful of rich, imperialist countries dominates the rest of the planet. The U.S. sits at the top of a global capitalist system driven and shaped by the maximization of profit. The majority of people live in poor countries oppressed and dominated by imperialism and by social-economic structures that reflect and reinforce the interests of local elites who are subordinate to imperialism. Development of these countries has been stunted and distorted by imperialism. And all this *profoundly* affects the capacity and ability of governments and people to respond to a natural disaster.

Myanmar already faced rising costs for basic foods, commodities, and especially fuel. 10 percent of the population did not receive enough food to meet its basic daily needs. In many rural areas 70 percent lived under the absolute poverty line. Shantytowns surrounded the cities.

What we see now is a vivid example of how the poverty and distorted development that comes from being dominated and oppressed by foreign powers can turn a natural disaster into catastrophic human tragedy. As Debarati Guha-Sapir, Director of the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters in Brussels, said: “The villages are in such levels of desperation — housing quality, nutritional status, roads, bridges, dams — that losses were more determined by their condition rather than the force of the cyclone.”

It is also the case that international political relations—where Western imperial powers are

generally hostile to the military regime in Myanmar—are behind the contentiousness over aid getting into Myanmar. China’s economic interests and political relationship with Myanmar have factored into international relief efforts. And Myanmar’s economic and political relationships with other countries in South Asia have also figured into what aid has been offered.

“Isolated” from the World?

The official storyline says: Myanmar is run by a bunch of dictators who chose to isolate themselves from the rest of the world.

Reality: Myanmar society is repressive and relatively closed off from the outside world. The reactionary military regime seeks to maintain power and control society through brutal force and by limiting contact with the rest of the world. But this is not why the U.S. criticizes Myanmar.

What the U.S. really means when it says Myanmar has “isolated” itself is that Myanmar has not fully opened its doors to U.S. imperialism. The military regime has not been completely pliable, compliant, and subservient to the United States. And now it has refused to accept aid from the U.S. that has all kinds of conditions and potential “strings attached”—such as Bush’s insistence that Myanmar open its borders to U.S. officials, aid workers and military personnel.

It is not surprising that Myanmar hesitated to accept U.S. help, given there is open speculation and discussion about the use of U.S. military aircraft, troops, and warships to deliver aid. A *Time* magazine headline read: “Is It Time to Invade Burma?” And France is pushing to invoke a UN “responsibility to protect” doctrine to deliver aid *without* Myanmar’s permission.

U.S. sanctions on Myanmar (that began in 1997 and have since been extended) ban new investments in the country and prohibit imports into the U.S. from Myanmar. The U.S. says it maintains these sanctions because of human rights abuses. But in fact, this U.S. “isolation” of Myanmar is aimed at undermining and destabilizing the government and creating conditions to bring to power a regime more subservient to the United States.

Reality: In fact, Myanmar is not “isolated” and cut off from the rest of the world. Historically and up to today, Myanmar’s development has been conditioned by its integration into and subordination to the global system of imperialism.

Burma (which changed its name to Myanmar in 1989) was a colony of British imperialism for over 60 years. In fact the commercial production of oil in Myanmar dates back to 1871 when British colonialists set up the Rangoon Oil Company.

Since formal independence in 1948, different imperialist powers have exploited the country’s people and plundered its resources. It is beyond the scope of this article to review this history. But an example of imperialist control and development of Myanmar’s energy resources provides a picture of the country’s relationship to the world capitalist system.

Myanmar has the world’s tenth largest gas reserves. It has been producing natural gas since the 1970s. Today, gas exports are Myanmar’s most important source of national income.

In the 1990s Myanmar granted gas concessions to foreign companies from France and Great Britain. Later Texaco and Unocal (now absorbed into ChevronTexaco) gained rights to Myanmar's gas as well.

In 2005 other countries in the region, including China, Thailand, and South Korea invested in Myanmar's oil and gas industry.

What did this mean for the masses of people in Myanmar?

In 1996 a human rights suit was filed against the American-based Unocal Corp. A group of villagers accused Unocal of using forced labor conscripted by Myanmar soldiers. Villagers were raped, murdered, and brutally relocated during the construction of a \$1.2 billion gas pipeline to Thailand, started in 1990.

The suit, which Unocal settled in 2004, brought to light the kind of horrible crimes that were being committed by a consortium of foreign companies, including Unocal, all of which were receiving support and protection from the military regime.

One woman testified how soldiers came to her home, shot her husband, and killed her baby. Other villagers recounted how their neighbors were executed because they refused to leave the area Unocal wanted. Two girls said soldiers raped them at knifepoint (*The Nation*, June 30, 2003). Human Rights Watch interviewed hundreds of villagers who were driven from their homes and farms, many forced to work at gunpoint and beaten by guards.

The UN issued warnings of serious human rights abuses in 1995. After such embarrassing evidence came out, Texaco left the country in 1997. But Unocal retained 28 percent interest in the pipeline.

The U.S. State Department even acknowledged forced labor was being used. But still the U.S. government openly defended Unocal in this suit. Then Attorney General John Ashcroft filed a brief denouncing the villagers' attempt to sue Unocal, arguing that the suit (and similar suits) should be dismissed because they interfere with U.S. foreign policy and undermine the U.S. "war on terrorism."

Today, on the blood and bones of the Myanmar people, the Unocal pipeline transports some 700 million cubic feet of gas per day.

This story provides a window into Myanmar's relationship to world imperialism - how the development of Myanmar has been conditioned by its integration into and subordination to the global system of imperialism.

Beyond the interest of imperialism in profiting off the resources and people in Myanmar there is the geostrategic importance of this in the world. And this is a big factor in how the U.S. and various international forces look at their relationship with Myanmar and how they have responded to the current disaster.

U.S. Geostrategic Interests in Myanmar

The official storyline: Laura Bush joined the chorus of U.S. critics calling the Myanmar government "inept" for failing to alert people about the cyclone and standing in the way of

getting humanitarian aid to people.

Reality: It is shameless and utter hypocrisy for the U.S. to be criticizing any government for not helping people in the face of a natural disaster. The U.S. has more money and resources than any other country in the world—many, many times those of a poor country like Myanmar. But when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, the Bush regime was responsible for horrible humanitarian crimes. It failed to evacuate people to safety, abandoned thousands to die in the rising floodwaters and then subjected tens of thousands, overwhelmingly African-Americans, to the most inhuman and degrading treatment.

The inadequacies and failures of the Myanmar government in responding to the cyclone disaster have everything to do with two defining facts: its reactionary nature, and larger geo-political dynamics.

The military regime in Myanmar is an oppressive and corrupt force that has ruled the country since 1962. It has not hesitated to use the most brutal methods to crush any popular resistance and is widely hated by the people.

The military dominates and administers major aspects of the country's economy. Only military personnel are allowed to own shares in the military-run corporations that form a significant part of the economy. Military officials occupy top positions in almost every government agency. It oversees a society and economy of great inequality and savage capitalist and semi-feudal exploitation.

In the last 15 years, the economy has in fact become *more* integrated with the world capitalist economy, especially through the development of the country's oil and natural gas industries. The military has entered into various kinds of joint ventures with foreign energy companies—and, as in the case of Unocal [[see Part 1]], even provided these companies with brutally conscripted forced labor.

The reality is: The US criticism of the Myanmar government has *nothing* to do with concern for the victims of the cyclone. It has everything to do with cold calculations about how to use this disaster to further U.S. interests—to pry open the country, to weaken the military regime, and to create more favorable conditions for a full-out regime change. The U.S. wants to bring to power a government in Myanmar that more fully serves U.S. economic and political interests, including in relationship to U.S. contention with other capitalist powers. To understand this, we need to first of all look at the geostrategic interests the U.S. is pursuing in Myanmar.

Three great regions of Asia come together where Myanmar sits on the planet—China in the north, Southeast Asia in the south, and India in the west. Looking at a map, it becomes clear how Myanmar is key to establishing land-links between Central Asia in the west, Japan in the east and Russia in the north.

Off the coast of Myanmar is the Strait of Malacca. This waterway between Malaysia and Indonesia is one of the world's most strategic water passages. It links the Indian and Pacific Oceans and is the shortest sea route between the Persian Gulf and China. Each and every day, supertankers carrying more than 12 million barrels of oil pass through this strait. More than 80% of all China's oil imports are shipped through this waterway.

Since 9/11, the U.S. has been trying to strengthen its military influence in this

region—arguing that this is part of the “war on terror.” The U.S. has set out to further and deepen its empire in the world. The focus of the U.S. right now is dominating and controlling the Middle East. At the same time there is a whole complex of world contradictions in which control in Southeast Asia is highly important.

The U.S. has been virulently critical of the military government in Myanmar—not because of the regime’s reactionary nature. The real reason for U.S. hostility towards Myanmar is because its government is not the kind of pliant pro-U.S. neo-colonial state the United States wants and needs in the region.

It is no secret that the U.S. wants a “regime change” in Myanmar. It plays the “human rights card,” backs pro-U.S. anti-government movements, and aims to demonize and strangle the regime through sanctions and other measures. The military regime in turn has responded by seeking closer ties with China and other countries in the region. And part of the reason the U.S. wants greater influence and control in Southeast Asia (including in Myanmar) is that it wants to counter China’s growing regional strength.

Capitalist China has invested heavily in countries in Southeast Asia and has looked to profit off of Myanmar’s timber, minerals and natural gas. Myanmar provides an overland route for Chinese goods to the Indian Ocean. Trade between the two countries has grown. Since 1989 China has given the Myanmar regime some \$1.5 billion worth of military hardware.

For the U.S., Myanmar is a strategically important choke point in relationship to economic and geo-strategic interests. And now the U.S. is looking for ways to exploit the devastating tragedy in Myanmar to step up its maneuverings for a “regime change” in Myanmar. Bush stated: “We’re prepared to move U.S. Navy assets to help find those who have lost their lives, to help find the missing, to help stabilize the situation. But in order to do so, the military junta must allow our disaster assessment teams into the country.”

Economist and author F. William Engdahl has written about U.S. efforts to bring about “regime change” in Myanmar and the particular role of the National Endowment for Democracy, an entity funded by the U.S. government and designed to support U.S. foreign policy objectives. Engdahl says:

“The U.S. State Department has recruited and trained key opposition leaders from numerous anti-government organizations in Myanmar. Since 2003, the U.S. has provided the NED with more than \$2.5 million a year for activities that promote a regime change in Myanmar. The NED funds key opposition media including the New Era Journal, *Irrawaddy* and the Democratic Voice of Burma radio... In reality the U.S. State Department has recruited and trained key opposition leaders from numerous anti-government organizations in Myanmar. It has poured the relatively huge sum (for Myanmar) of more than \$2.5 million annually into NED activities in promoting regime change in Myanmar since at least 2003.”

All this is behind the scenes and clearly at play now as the U.S. offers assistance and aid to Myanmar in the wake of Cyclone Nargis. Such “humanitarian help” comes with political strings and a whole imperialist agenda. The Bush administration says a condition for aid is that U.S. officials, aid workers and military personnel be allowed to come into Myanmar and directly handle emergency relief operations—rather than let the authorities in Myanmar administer and deliver the aid.

In 1997 the U.S. imposed sanctions against Myanmar, which prohibited new investments in

the country. In 2003 the U.S. banned Myanmar imports into the U.S. and restricted financial transactions with named government officials. In 2007 Bush imposed new financial sanctions against Myanmar, freezing U.S. assets of additional members of the military government. One week before the cyclone hit Myanmar, the U.S. ban on trade and investment and the freezing of assets for the country was strengthened even further. Then on May 17, two weeks *after* the cyclone, Bush ordered the sanctions to remain in effect. This has only further exacerbated the economic plight of the people in Myanmar. Meanwhile ChevronTexaco continues to operate its gas pipeline project in Myanmar, which is the single largest foreign investment project in the country and the single largest source of income for the military regime.

Concluding Remarks

When a terrible natural disaster strikes a country like Myanmar, millions of people are affected; many lives hang in the balance. Humanity's knowledge and resources need to be brought together. People need to be mobilized to save lives, provide medical care and deliver food. But in the world today—dominated by the global system of capitalism—the driving interests of profit, not the needs of the people, are put first and foremost.

Today in such human catastrophes, the outmoded economic, political and social relations of imperialism stand out in stark relief. The world needs revolution, and things could be a different way. In a whole new socialist society power would be in the hands of the people. Society's resources and knowledge and, most especially, the compassion, creativity, and political consciousness of the masses, could and would be fully mobilized to build a whole new emancipating society that will be able to figure out and solve all kinds of problems, including how to deal with natural disasters.

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