

AI Index: PRE 01/141/2008
12 May 2008

Myanmar: Cyclone relief -- Asian governments must insist on swift action

(Hong Kong) Leaders of Amnesty International in Asia Pacific, meeting in Hong Kong, called on their governments to use every means possible to pressure the Myanmar authorities to focus on disaster relief and facilitate international assistance to protect the rights to life, food and health of its citizens.

“Our governments, from the ASEAN countries, Japan, India, South Korea and China are best placed to influence the Myanmar authorities to lift the blockages and allow aid, expertise and materials to reach the millions now in need. Time is of the essence if lives are to be saved,” said Mika Kamae, chair of Amnesty International’s Asia Pacific Forum.

It is now over a week since Cyclone Nargis devastated the Irrawady delta, killing tens of thousands and leaving over a million homeless, without essential food, shelter or healthcare. A UN flash appeal has attracted millions in government donations, and many disaster relief agencies are assembled on standby in Thailand. However, the Myanmar government is still impeding such life-saving assistance. It has yet to issue sufficient visas to the three international agencies it has approached for assistance (World Vision, JICA and UNICEF).

Amnesty International believes that by deliberately blocking life-sustaining aid, the government of Myanmar may be violating the right of its citizens to life, food, and health.

“The Myanmar authorities must also give complete priority to mobilizing their own resources for disaster response. Instead, yesterday considerable government resources were tied up conducting the constitutional referendum, even in close proximity to the devastation. There can be no clearer message to the destitute about the priorities of those in power,” said Milabel Cristobal, Director of the Amnesty International Hong Kong section.

Children are the most vulnerable to the after effects of natural disasters. As a State Party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Myanmar authorities also have legal obligations to uphold their rights to life, food and health “to the maximum extent of their available resources, and where needed within the framework of international co-operation”. Swift facilitation of assistance from the region is also necessary to uphold the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (2005) which Myanmar has ratified.