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Myanmar: Cyclone survivors at increased risk because of Myanmar government's actions

Myanmar's government is stepping up efforts to force survivors of Cyclone Nargis out of emergency shelters and is keeping aid from reaching them, according to new research published by Amnesty International today. The government's actions place tens of thousands of already vulnerable survivors at increased risk of death, disease and hunger.

On 20 May, Myanmar's government, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), announced an end to the rescue and relief phase of the disaster response and the beginning of the reconstruction phase. Since then, the SPDC has launched a campaign to force homeless cyclone survivors out of government and unofficial resettlement camps.

The authorities have targeted schools and monasteries, as both were used as polling stations for the delayed May constitutional referendum, and because the school term began on 2 June.

Most of the displaced survivors cannot return to their original homes as large swathes of the Irrawaddy delta, which bore the brunt of the cyclone, remain largely uninhabitable.

"After surviving the cyclone's fury, thousands of cyclone survivors are now suffering at the hands of the SPDC," said Benjamin Zawacki, Amnesty International's Myanmar researcher.

Drawing on a wide range of sources, including eye witness accounts and interviews with people with first-hand information from cyclone-hit areas, Amnesty International's findings underscore the urgent need for the SPDC as well as international donors to adopt human rights standards as safeguards in the disaster response.

Amnesty International is also concerned about aid delivery. On 16 May, the SPDC mouthpiece New Light of Myanmar pledged to "conduct investigation into the cases [of misappropriation of aid] to expose the offenders and take punitive action against them in accordance with the law." Amnesty International welcomes such steps and calls on the SPDC to strictly monitor the distribution of aid by its officials and to investigate any allegations of theft, abuse of power or other diversion of aid.

"Given the SPDC's long track record of abuses, humanitarian agencies should be especially alert to SPDC diverting or obstructing their aid," said Zawacki, who has been in the region for the past month gathering information from the affected areas.

Amnesty International has confirmed more than 30 instances and accounts of people being forcibly removed from emergency shelters in monasteries, schools and other places.

In the last two weeks, the relocation campaign has become more systematic and widespread. The authorities have forcibly relocated people out of Maungmya, Maubin, Pyapon, and Labutta, where they

had been originally displaced, further south back to their original villages.

Of the 45 camps that existed in Pyapon, by 28 May only three remained. On 23 May authorities in Yangon forcibly removed more than 3,000 cyclone survivors from an official camp in Shwebaukan in North Dagon Myo Thit, and from an unofficial camp in State High School No. 2 in Dala township.

Abuses also include confiscation and misuse of aid. Amnesty International has received over 40 reports or accounts of aid being confiscated by government officials, diverted or withheld instead of being handed to cyclone survivors.

Despite statements against such conduct by senior SPDC leadership, local officials can act with impunity. For example, Amnesty International received eyewitness testimony that on 26 May, at the Pan Hlaing bridge in Yangon's Hlaing Tharyar township, Police Major U Luu Win stopped 48 trucks carrying supplies from private Myanmar donors. As of 1 June, the police had not released the trucks.

Background

Cyclone Nargis, devastated the Irrawaddy delta on 2 and 3 May 2008, killing tens of thousands of people. More than 130,000 people are believed to be dead or missing and 2.4 million have been seriously affected, many left without essential food, shelter or healthcare. A month after the cyclone, the United Nations announced that it has only been able to provide aid to 40 per cent of the survivors.

The crisis in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis is occurring against a backdrop of grave and longstanding human rights violations. The SPDC currently holds over 1,850 political prisoners in poor conditions. Nearly all key political activists languish behind bars or in hiding. Critics of government policy are routinely harassed, threatened and arrested. For over two years in eastern Myanmar, the army has waged a continuous offensive targeting ethnic Karen civilians in which it has engaged in widespread torture, forced labour, and forcible displacement. Read more on this in the report [Crimes against humanity in eastern Myanmar](#).

[Myanmar Briefing: Human rights concerns a month after Cyclone Nargis](#)

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