

Myanmar/Burma - Prospects for the Future

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Panel 1 – In the Aftermath of the Cyclone

Panel 2 – Options for the Future

Intervention by Harn Yawngwe, Executive Director, Euro-Burma Office

We have seen that cyclone Nargis created conditions for the international community to be able to work with the Burmese military regime and provide assistance to the people of Burma in the humanitarian sphere. But it is clear that Burma will need much more attention than the international community is willing or able to give in the humanitarian, economic and political spheres. Even in the delta, the UN has not been able to raise enough funds to meet the needs in the relief phase. Much more funds will be needed for the recovery phase.

How can the international community address other needs like the famine in Chin State or the food needs of the Muslim Rohingya community in northern Rakhine State without more funds? While it is extremely important for the aid delivery to be strictly monitored and reported, we need to also be careful not to focus only on negatives aspects and believe claims of official corruption or the diversion of aid without first verifying them. Otherwise, we will not be able to raise more funds to meet the needs of the cyclone victims, and those of the people of Burma.

The global financial crisis will also have an impact on the people of Burma. People were already financially very stretched. We saw how that sparked the demonstrations last September. The cyclone has affected the livelihood of 2 million people. If the situation does not improve, many may decide to take their chances in neighbouring countries. But unfortunately, there will be no jobs. As the economy shrinks in neighbouring countries, Burmese migrant workers could be repatriated. Burma would not be able to absorb the returning workers. Each migrant worker supports up to 5-10 people in his or her family in Burma. There is a need to mobilize international financial institutions like the World Bank and the IMF to assess the possible impact in Burma and possibly plan for a rescue package. We do not want to see another humanitarian crisis. Current European and western policies restrict the World Bank and others from doing this.

All this is also happening at a time of great political uncertainty. The military's Road Map and the planned 2010 elections are adding to this sense of uncertainty. Military commanders have no idea how their local fiefdoms will be affected by the new constitution, and how their career prospects will look after the elections. There is a policy vacuum and many are looking to protect their personal interests.

The international community needs to be more strategic in order to be able to effectively address the humanitarian crisis, the looming economic crisis and the period of political insecurity that Burma will be facing.

Ways have to be found to really be able to help the people of Burma. In this respect, I believe that there is also a need for the Burmese democracy movement to develop a strategy to allow us to reject the SPDC Road map in principle but to mobilize the population to participate in the 2010 election. It would be a mistake for political parties to just boycott the elections, and not mobilize the people.

We do not like the SPDC's constitution and the planned outcome of military dominance, but we need to uphold the democratic principle that the will of the people shall determine who will rule. We need to educate and empower the people to understand that their voice counts and that it must be heard. We need to involve the people in the political process if we want to build a democracy. For example, the ENC has in principle rejected the SPDC's Road Map. But it has stated that it will support the decision of the people in the seven ethnic states. Therefore, if the ethnic people decide to form parties and participate in the upcoming elections, the ENC will support them. The NLD does not accept the Road Map, but at the same time, they should be mobilizing the people. The outcome is not cast in stone. In 1990, we exiles urged a boycott of the elections saying it was not 'free and fair', but when Aung San Suu Kyi's party won, we had to quickly change our tune.

End.