



# NTS ALERT

# A Tale of Two Disasters

*This edition of the NTS Alert examines and compares the disaster relief efforts undertaken by China and Myanmar after the recent earthquake and cyclone in early May in their respective countries.*

## Earthquake in China's Sichuan Province

### *The Damage*

A major earthquake rocked the Sichuan Province of the Southwest China on Monday afternoon, 12 May 2008. The quake's epicentre was about 55 miles northwest of Chengdu, capital of Sichuan, one of China's most densely populated provinces. The quake measured up to 7.9 on the Richter scale causing the death toll of nearly 40,000 lives and nearly 250,000 people are injured on day nine. A series of mudslide on the aftermath of the quake had also killed 200 rescue workers. These numbers are certain to rise. Many of the victims are students that are buried under the rubbles of collapsed schools. Close to 7,000 school buildings have been destroyed, while

approximately 80% of the buildings in the quake area were estimated to have crumbled. Not only losing their houses and all of their belongings, a large number of parents despaired over the loss of their children, many of whom were the only child as a result of China's one-child policy.

The calamity of the earthquake is also shown by the estimated five million homeless people, which may be the world's largest refugee crises in recent history. Eight days after China was hit by its worst natural disaster in decades, the task of saving lives is quickly being replaced by an equally difficult challenge of conducting a massive relief effort for millions of survivors. The large Chinese military force that was

### In this edition:

#### ***Earthquake in China's Sichuan Province***

- The Damage
- Domestic Response
- International Response
- Earthquake Cracked Open Problems of Corruption & Economic Gap

#### ***Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar***

- The Damage Thus Far
- The (Lack of) Immediate Response
- ASEAN: Bridging Myanmar and Global Relief Efforts
- Relief Aid Versus Votes

### ***China and Myanmar Disaster Relief Efforts: A Comparison***



deployed into Sichuan for a search and rescue operation, was largely transformed into looking after for five million homeless people.

The earthquake has also caused concern over the effects it has had on nuclear facilities in the Sichuan area. The Chinese government had previously assured the public that all nuclear facilities were safe and under control. Minister of Environmental Protection, Zhou Shengxian, noted that the quake had buried 32 sources of radiation under rubble in Sichuan province. However, no details were given as to which sites were affected nor whether any of them were damaged. In addition to this, the quake has also raised concern over the safety of dams along

the Min River, as cracks on the dams may result in flooding in a matter of weeks since the earthquake struck. Nevertheless, the government has assured that the dams remain stable and have taken measures to ensure it. (see section on *Domestic response*)

Apart from the direct devastation caused by the quake, the earthquake is not likely to significantly slow China's surging economic growth because the Sichuan region is not a major manufacturing centre. The earthquake should have less effect on the country's export-oriented industries as well, because the chief production sites for those industries are located along the eastern coast. The province makes up 3.9% of China's GDP and

### **Earthquake cracked open problems of corruption and economic gap**

Close to 7,000 schools were destroyed in Sichuan province by the earthquake. It struck in the afternoon when many students were in class or taking their daily naps. A large number of children are dead under the rubbles of their schools. Questions emerged over whether corruption and shoddy construction were to blame for taking such a heavy toll of young lives. Angry victims of the earthquake said that the schools were easily destroyed due to its poor infrastructure quality. This happened because the parties involved in building the schools wanted to gain more profit by either bypassing some safety procedures of the constructions or corrupting the construction budget. The government has responded to this issue by advising the public not to come up with deliberate accusation. They have promised to take this matter seriously through appropriate investigations once the relief operation has ended.

In addition to this, the devastation caused by the earthquake exposed the problem of economic disparity as a result of China's economic growth and development. It is increasingly clear that the quake inflicted its greatest destruction on rural areas and on the smaller towns and cities that have mushroomed from farm fields in recent years as part of China's rapid urbanization. Such areas have far less stringent building-safety practices than China's relatively wealthy big cities, construction experts say. As a result, some citizens were more vulnerable than others when disaster struck.

The issue is especially thorny for China's government: President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao have based much of the public legitimacy of their administration on trying to address a widening wealth gap resulting from decades of capitalist reforms. Part of their overall plan, for example, has called for improving rural health care and education. Incomes in rural areas, for example, averaged 4,140 yuan a person last year, or about \$590 at current exchange rates. That represents an increase of 91% from a decade earlier, not adjusted for inflation. Urban disposable incomes, by comparison, rose by 150% during the same period, to an average of 13,786 yuan last year. China's leaders have become increasingly concerned about the widening income gap, particularly in rural areas because rural residents still comprise more than 60% of China's 1.3 billion residents.

China's booming economy has lifted the financial fortunes of most of its citizens, but some have gained far more than others. China is now among the most unequal major economies in the world. Much of this imbalance is seen in the contrast between residents of the big, wealthy cities, and those of small, poorer towns and rural areas. The disparity is a growing concern to leaders worried about social instability.

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manufacturing output in Sichuan is only about 2.5% of the national total. In terms of transportation, little or no major damage to the national transportation system. Unlike the snowstorm which directly paralyzed some of the most important railways and highways in China, the earthquake only affected some local transport system.

In terms of inflation, the earthquake is expected to further fuel inflationary expectations in some parts of China due to possible supply shortages. However, compared with the snowstorm, the impact on inflation will be smaller. There is also little impact on China's currency, because the earthquake took place in regions that do not contribute much to China's external trade. In short, the earthquake will have smaller impact on China's macro-economy than the massive snowstorm that hit earlier this year. Nevertheless it will still significantly hit insurance companies, oil companies, shut down stock market, property developers, toll-road operators and manufacturers with substantial operations in the region.

With regard to food shortage, the officials assured that although 75,000 acres of farmland in the province were destroyed by the quake, there would not be any shortages and the price for agricultural products will remain stable. As Sichuan is an important region for the production of rice, wheat, corn and other crops (making up 6% of China's grain production), the National Development and Reform Commission will impose price controls on food, drinking water and transport in central Sichuan and Gansu provinces to address the problem of inflation.

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#### **Domestic response**

Within the domestic sphere, the ability of the government of China to deal with the earthquake is a test of the leadership's ability to coordinate a complicated relief effort. While at the international level, China's swift response to the disaster is placed in stark contrast with that of Myanmar. Since Myanmar's government has been criticised due to its slowness in handling the aftermath of the Nargis cyclone, China was keen to avoid that kind of criticism.

Moreover, China's leaders are anxious to soften its international image ahead of the Olympic Games in August. China's rapid response to the disaster would serve to win some brownie points and improve ties with its neighbours.

China's leaders moved immediately to show the public they were dealing with the disaster. Premier Wen Jiabao went directly to the affected area within hours of the quake. President Hu Jintao convened special meetings of the ruling Communist Party's Politburo Standing Committee to discuss the disaster, and said relief and rescue work would be the government's top priority. A disaster relief headquarter was immediately set up. Appropriate decrees were also issued from the central government to expedite the disaster relief operations.

On the same day as the quake, Vice-Premier Li Keqiang, a member of the Politburo and deputy head of the General Headquarters for Earthquake Relief, summoned the heads of 42 central government departments to a meeting to organize





relief work. The State Disaster Relief Commission had also initiated a "Level II emergency contingency plan" to cope with Monday's strong earthquake in southwest China. The Level II emergency contingency plan covers the second most serious class of natural disasters according to China's regulation.

China immediately mobilised its 2.3 million-strong armed forces within hours after the earthquake to lead the search and rescue effort, despite the difficulties due to the nature of the location, the damage caused by the quake and also bad weather. This is due in part to the military's long history of providing humanitarian assistance in times of natural disasters.

Around 50,000 military and paramilitary personnel were sent to the region in the first few days, along with more than 30 helicopters and 12 medical and disease prevention teams. On the third day after the quake, the government announced the deployment of another 90 helicopters. Up to a week after the disaster struck, there were over 116,000 of troops, armed police and regular police involved in the operation. Two thousand soldiers were sent to a number of dams near Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province to inspect a structure that has shown some cracks due to the quake.

The Chengdu disaster is one of the largest peacetime relief operations in modern history. It is also the largest airlift operation. Apart from the army deployment, China launched a national blood drive for survivors. The health ministry has sent 3,500 specialists in epidemic control to Sichuan and private airlines were called in to transport aid. For the survivors, China's government provided temporary shelter, in the form of Styrofoam houses, as a stop-gap measure to address the housing problem.

China's rapid response to the earthquake has won international praise from other governments and international aid organisations. Although China also faced some criticism for not allowing in specialist search and rescue teams from overseas immediately after the quake, and then only allowing in small contingents from a few

countries. It was found to be frustrating for some foreign aid agencies.

However, China eventually accepted foreign medical teams, as the relief efforts shifted from searching for survivors to caring for the homeless. China also accepted financial aid from several sources such as South Korea and Hong Kong – as a gesture of goodwill to its neighbours and the wider international community. Even so, the government is deeply suspicious of privately funded and privately organized institutions, including charities, viewing them as a potential threat to its grip on power. Beijing requires all charities to be associated with an official agency, with all donations funnelled through the government.

China's centralised style of governing appears to have helped it eliminate many of the type of bureaucratic hurdles that may slow the relief efforts as experienced by the US government in responding to Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Beijing has also rushed in expertise and equipment by leveraging state ownership in airline, communications and resources companies.

Nevertheless, this centralised system has restricted media coverage on the earthquake relief. Although the state-run Xinhua news agency has been said to be surprisingly aggressive at covering the earthquake in Sichuan province, apparently there has been instructions from the politburo concerning propaganda and reporting of quake relief work. In short, the politburo ordered the news media to vigorously propagate the "hard-work" and "moving scenes" of the government and military in conducting relief efforts. The goal is to "guide public opinion in a positive manner". This has been said to "create some sense of psychological closure" for the public.

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## ***International response***

Despite China's initial reluctance to accept foreign rescue assistance, over 40 states and 30 international and non-governmental organisations were ready to dispatch their help.

Japan and Taiwan, were ready to send, among other forms of aid, their experts and medical personnel that are experienced with earthquake disaster. Japan also offered 60 sniffing dogs that could be useful in the search and rescue operation. The Czech Republic, South Korea and Australia also offered similar things to expedite the rescue operation. The German Red Cross was sent over a mobile hospital to operate in Sichuan. The UN, US, Canada and EU were among others that have stated their readiness to provide aid and assistance when needed from the very beginning. It is interesting to note that the international organisations have stated that the resources provided to help China would not disrupt the pool of resources for the disaster in Myanmar.

China has been more open in the relief campaign to look after the displaced persons. Treating the nearly 250,000 people injured was an overwhelming task. It has finally received aid, among other countries like Ukraine, Russia, the US, Japan, Saudi Arabia, South Korea and Singapore.

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## *Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar*

### *The Damage Thus Far*

On the 3rd of May 2008, Cyclone Nargis, a Category 3 storm with 3.5m waves and 190km per hour winds, wrecked havoc in Myanmar's coastal but low-lying regions. Five disaster areas have been declared – Yangon, Ayeyawaddy (Irrawaddy), Bago, Mon and Karen. About 24 million people (nearly half of Myanmar's population) live in these disaster areas. Entire villages in the Irrawady Delta region have been swept away by the cyclone. It is the first time Myanmar has experienced a cyclone with such devastating consequences. Moreover, Cyclone Nargis is said to be the worse cyclone to hit Asia since 1991, when 143,000 people were killed in Bangladesh.

According to the UN OCHA's 17th Situation Report on 21 May, the official figures for dead and missing stand at 77,738 and 55,917 respectively. Unofficial figures are considerably higher as aid workers put the death toll at more than 100,000. This is further exacerbated by the lack of water and sanitation facilities, coupled with decomposing dead bodies, which exposes cyclone survivors to the risk of contracting air and water-borne diseases such as measles, dengue, acute respiratory infections, diarrhoea and other dysentery cases. The disaster has also caused a further dent in the country's socio-economic development, as Myanmar has estimated the losses from the disaster to have exceeded US\$10 billion.

The cyclone has also affected Myanmar's food security. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) spokesperson Diderik De Vleeschauwer, the impact of the cyclone had destroyed rice fields and in turn, precious rice seeds for the upcoming planting season. Mr De Vleeschauwer went on to state that if rice seeds were not received within the next 40 to 50 days, rice planting would not happen in time for harvesting in late 2008. In addition to this, it was noted that the Myanmar Government estimated that \$243 million would be needed to

restore agricultural output. As a result, Myanmar could turn from a rice exporter to a rice importing country and thereby only be even more susceptible to the negative impacts of the wider global food crisis.

The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that about 1 million children have been affected by the cyclone, with many sleeping in the streets, or in schools and monasteries, often without bedding, and frequently without protection from the rain. Leading aid group, Save the Children, has also expressed their concern that as many as 40 percent of the needy are believed to be children, who run the risk of starving to death if sufficient aid is not delivered soon. It is estimated that about 30,000 children in the delta region of Myanmar, one of the poorest countries in the world, were malnourished even before the storm.

### *The (Lack of) Immediate Response*

Countries worldwide have sought to provide aid to the victims of Myanmar. However, despite the international community's eagerness to assist, most of the aid was blocked, if not delayed, from entering by the Myanmar government, which claimed that it could handle the disaster on its own and was not in favour of massive foreign intervention into the country. Agencies have had to rely on their in-country and local partner organisations to distribute supplies. The authorities have also made it difficult for relief workers to actively assist victims by stating that the relief aid should be handed over to the military government, who would then disseminate the supplies. Yet while Myanmar's state media provides footage of the military and high-leveled generals active in providing assistance to Cyclone victims, other sources of international media has depicted footage from various cyclone-hit areas, in particular remote rural villages, that have yet to receive any sort of aid at all.

To make matters worse, the lack of proper control over the dissemination of relief aid items has also

resulted in some of these donated items finding their way into markets. Relief aid items with Red Cross labels, believed to have been pilfered, were seen to be on sale in Mingalar market in Yangon. Local residents speaking to Mizzima News noted seeing foreign made biscuits, dried meat, instant noodles, tarpaulins and plastic sheets on sale in various markets around Yangon, such as Nyaunpinlay, Mingalar, Bogale and Theingyi markets. Another local resident said that the biscuits put on sale in the market are the same as the ones distributed to cyclone victims in South Dagon Township by local authorities. An aid worker speaking to Mizzima News added that mosquito nets with United Nations Humanitarian (UNH) logos were also spotted at the corner of Bar Street, in Yangon. Instant noodles are being sold at Kyat 600 (USD 93.08, based on the official rate) per sachet as the price tag in Nyaungpinlay market. In addition to this, US made makeshift tents designed for patients are available at Kyat 87,000 (USD 13,495) per unit in Mingaladon market.

Myanmar has also shunned various naval vessels, belonging in particular to the United States, France and Great Britain from delivering aid to cyclone victims. According to the Associated Press, the Myanmar government had rejected a proposal by the U.S., in which four U.S. warships would be able to provide a major boost for current relief efforts – by providing the capacity to deliver supplies to inaccessible areas of the delta, with 14 helicopters, two landing craft vessels, two high-tech amphibious hovercraft and about 1,000 U.S. Marines. Myanmar's state newspaper, New Light of Myanmar, noted that such assistance, from the US, "comes with strings attached," citing fears that Washington wants to overthrow the country's government and seize its oil.

Such a response has only fuel further international opposition towards the ruling military junta's handling of the disaster. According to UK prime minister, Gordon Brown, the disaster was becoming a "man-made catastrophe" and the military regime should be held to account for its "negligence". France's UN ambassador Jean-Maurice Ripert further warned that the government's refusal to allow aid to be

delivered to those who need it "could lead to a true crime against humanity". Increased pressure has also come from Myanmar's close neighbours. Thai Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej, for instance, made a trip to Myanmar's new administrative capital Naypyidaw in an attempt to convince the junta's leaders to open up for more international assistance, notably from Western countries, after United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon asked him to use his influence.

Given mounting international response to disaster relief efforts in Myanmar, the government has tried to do more to appease the international community. On 19 May, Myanmar's state media reported that well-wishers across Myanmar had donated 7,854,848,955 kyat (approximately USD 7.27 million) in cash and in materials to the relief efforts. Myanmar's military government also declared three days of official mourning for the victims of the Cyclone. The announcement was made as China, one of Myanmar's few allies, began its own three-day period of mourning for victims of the massive Sichuan earthquake that has left 71,000 dead, missing or buried. Yet, while the declaration was a rare acknowledgement by the regime of the human cost of the tragedy, there was no minute of silence or public ceremony to mark the solemn occasion. Local residents speaking to Channel News Asia reports expressed their confusion regarding the mourning period. According to Mya Mya, a 43-year-old flower seller who is sheltering in a public school after the storm destroyed her home. "We didn't know about this news. How are we meant to show our grief for storm victims? "So far we haven't got any supplies from the government. We just got some supplies from private donors, so that's why I have to work for my family." Hence, with the lack of effective government intervention to alleviate the suffering of Cyclone survivors, there seems to be little grief amongst the people of Myanmar, but rather a sense of apathy.

The military junta has also been criticized for attempting to cover up the suffering on the surface, in a bid to look good in front of the international community, as high leveled delegations – such as UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon – fly into Myanmar to see extent of the





### **Relief Aid Versus Votes?**

It what seemed to be a tactic to divert attention away from the Cyclone relief efforts, the Military junta conducted a nationwide referendum to approve a draft constitution. Critics say that the proposed charter would only serve to perpetuate military power in Myanmar. The junta, on the other hand, note that it is part of a transition to a "disciplined democracy" and that turnout for the voting was positive as 92% of voters had said "Yes" to the plans for a new constitution.

Despite widespread damage from Cyclone Nargis, the junta-backed Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) and Township Quarter level authorities have been collecting "advance votes" from some residents in South Dagon. The advance voting began the day after the cyclone. The door-to-door advance polling was originally intended as a convenience for the elderly and those planning to travel out of the city. However, residents speaking to *Mizzima News* noted that it seemed as if everyone was now asked to cast a ballot ahead of the official poll date. Voting was however delayed for a few days in 47 townships in Yangon and the worst-hit Irrawaddy Delta regions.

Nonetheless, there has still been increasing frustration amongst residents with the junta's priorities of providing aid and gaining votes. *Mizzima News* further reported that even cyclone survivors in a Rangoon suburb have been ordered out of a temporary shelter so that it can be used as a polling station for the referendum. The 57 people whose homes were destroyed are staying in a community hall in San-Yeik-Nyein Quarter, South Dagon Township in Yangon. The hall is normally used for religious purposes and ceremonies such as weddings. Local authorities had informed one of the survivors when they brought food donations to the shelter, to move out but they did not specify on where they should move.

According to David Mathieson of Human Rights Watch, it would be impossible for 92% of voters to have voted 'yes' on a document that they know very little about and that most have never read." Moreover, many people in Myanmar live in poor rural areas that would be far away from polling centres. The limited numbers of foreign diplomats who were escorted under supervision to selected polling stations did not report long queues or crowds that might have indicated a huge turnout.

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damage by the cyclone. According to reports from The Irrawaddy, many cyclone survivors in the Irrawaddy delta express that they do not want the UN chief to visit their camps and temporary shelters for fear the military regime will tighten security and intimidate people who have lost family members and homes. Myanmar comedian Zarganar and other Burmese private donors who visited the cyclone-ravaged delta, noted that many cyclone survivors are so desperate for food and relief supplies that the visit by the UN delegation would only cause further stress from the military junta's "inspections" and jeopardize their fragile situation. It was also reported that in town of Kungyangone, police and local authorities drove through the streets using loudspeakers to tell people not to go out begging for food along the road one day before Snr-Gen

Than Shwe visited the town on May 19. In the attempt of demonstrating that the Myanmar government has everything under control, they warned cyclone victims that they would be arrested and punished if they took to begging in the street.

### ***ASEAN: Bridging Myanmar and Global Relief Efforts***

Fortunately, some inroads have been achieved with the assistance from Myanmar's regional neighbours in Southeast Asia. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been active in, not only providing assistance to Cyclone victims but also attempt to amend the political deadlock impeding the critical aid from reaching the victims. ASEAN Secretary-General

Dr. Surin Pitsuwan flew to Washington to seek financial support from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, where he met with World Bank President Robert Zoellick to discuss long-term cooperation in development and poverty alleviation to bridge the gap between old and new members of ASEAN and also to explore avenues for advancing sustainable development in the region. Speaking to the press in Washington, Dr Surin also noted that the constant international pressure has seen the junta gradually easing the strict rules on granting visas to foreign aid workers.

ASEAN has also noted that it would activate all necessary emergency mechanisms for relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction in Myanmar. This decision came about after an emergency meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers in Singapore, which was aimed at exploring ways to help Burma in the short and long terms. Also present at the meeting was Myanmar's Foreign Minister Nyan Win, who briefed his counterparts on the post-disaster situation. In the lead up to the Foreign Ministers' meeting in Singapore, ASEAN had also sent in its Emergency Rapid Assessment Team (ERAT) into Myanmar to assess the extent of the disaster.

But perhaps the most significant development in ASEAN regarding the cyclone disaster is the establishment of the ASEAN Coalition of Mercy, in which Myanmar has agreed to receive international aid via ASEAN. Dr. Surin also noted that the Burmese military junta had agreed to issue visas to aid workers from ASEAN countries, under the auspices of Mr Surin's office. According to Thailand's Foreign Ministry's director of the ASEAN Affairs Department, Vitavas Srivihok, the Cyclone Nargis disaster provides a perfect opportunity for ASEAN put these strategies and mechanisms into practice, and do its best to alleviate the suffering of the people in Myanmar. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon welcomed the junta's "recent flexibility" as the international community would be better able to provide aid into the country, while at the same time, not impinging on Myanmar's state sovereignty. While these developments do indicate some progress in facilitating more aid to cyclone survivors,

especially those in remote villages, it remains to be seen whether these efforts will be sufficient and effectively translated on the ground.

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### China and Myanmar Disaster Relief Efforts: A Comparison

	<u>China</u>	<u>Myanmar</u>
<b><u>Nature of Disaster</u></b>	<p>Sichuan Province earthquake</p> <p>7.9 to 8 in Richter scale. The quake's epicentre was about 55 miles northwest of Chengdu, capital of Sichuan province, one of China's most densely populated</p>	<p>Cyclone Nargis</p> <p>Category 3 storm with 3.5m waves and 190km per hour winds, affecting coastal and low-lying regions</p>
<b><u>Casualty Toll</u></b>	<p>Official figures up to 21 May 2008: 40,075 dead, 247,645 injured, nearly 5 millions are homeless.</p>	<p>Official figures as of 21 May 2008: 77,738 dead, 55,917 missing.</p> <p>Unofficial figures suggest death toll to be more than 100,000.</p> <p>More than 2.4million people said to be in need of aid.</p>
<b><u>Human Security Concerns</u></b>	<p><b>Health:</b> there is no major epidemic outbreak, but there is the threat of radiation from radioactive sources hit by the quake.</p> <p><b>Economic:</b> food stock and prices are controlled, impact on the macro-economy is relatively small compared to the snowstorm in January.</p>	<p><b>Health:</b> Malnutrition, measles, dengue, acute respiratory infections, diarrhea and other dysentery cases, snake bites</p> <p><b>Economic:</b> losses of up to US \$10billion, rice stock destroyed, relief supplies ending up in markets.</p>
<b><u>National Response</u></b>	<p>One of the largest peacetime relief operations in modern history. A rapid and massive relief response from the government.</p> <p>Initially declined international rescue offers due to inaccessible conditions of the quake location, but started receiving international aids once the relief moved from rescue operation to taking care of the homeless. They welcomed financial aid.</p> <p>Media instructed to broadcast and write positive propaganda on the disaster relief.</p> <p>Three day mourning period.</p>	<p>Strict restrictions on foreign aid à slowing down relief efforts and increasing suffering</p> <p>Recently agreed to accept aid from ASEAN and selected countries such as India, China, Bangladesh and Thailand</p> <p>State Media depicting positive efforts and that military government has the situation under control.</p> <p>Three day mourning period after China's announcement of 3-day morning period</p>

	Olympic torch relay was put on hold until the primary rescue/relief work was done. The celebration of the Olympics will also be simplified.	Held referendum on draft constitution despite lack of primary/basic relief efforts
<b><u>Global Response</u></b>	<p>International praise to the swift and massive response of the Chinese government</p> <p>Aid offers are pouring in from over 40 states and 30 international and non-governmental organizations.</p>	<p>International condemnation of the military junta's lack of effective efforts in addressing the need of the people, especially those in remote areas.</p> <p>Relief supplies still on standby on military vessels (e.g. US, France, UK) close to Myanmar, till given green light from Myanmar's government.</p>

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