



NTS ALERT

Humanitarian Emergencies (II)

As a followup to the previous edition, this NTS Alert examines the response of states and international organizations to humanitarian emergencies. The discussion will be based on the recent earthquake and snowstorm in China, Nargis cyclone in Myanmar and 2004 Tsunami in Aceh. This edition also examines whether governments have fully acknowledged the disaster as a humanitarian emergency.

China's Prompt Response

As discussed in the previous edition, the degree of devastation in the wake of the Sichuan earthquake has created a humanitarian emergency situation. The situation was made worse by 13,685 aftershocks, five of which measured above 6.0 on the Richter scale.

The openness demonstrated by a usually closed and centralised Chinese government has been rather surprising. In the past, the government of China chose to cover up the reality of the state of emergency in order to demonstrate government's total control over the situation. In the recent disaster experiences, China has shown a great deal of change from the past. For a start, the government has allowed a vigorous flow of information pertaining to damage and rescue efforts, instead of covering up the situation so as to portray an image of competency.

The government's acknowledgement of the state of emergency can be shown by the statements made and actions taken by the members of Communist Party Central Politburo. Vice Premier Li Keqiang has highlighted the importance of relief work in the wake of the earthquake in Southwest China by making it the government's top priority. He gave instructions to "go all out and make careful arrangements to rescue the trapped and affected people, ensure basic necessities for the people, and try every means to minimize the losses". In addition to this, President Hu Jintao also issued instructions on the relief work and Premier Wen Jiabao rushed to the affected areas hours after the earthquake occurred and assumed leadership of the headquarters for Earthquake Relief.

Leaders of 42 central government departments were summoned on 12 May 2008 to organize relief efforts, which were jointly carried out by military and civilian authorities. Vice Premier Li urged central departments and local governments to implement Hu's instructions and called for close coordination between military and paramilitary rescuers, police, medical workers and civilian emergency workers in the affected areas. "Every effort must be made to distribute equipment and tools for the relief work, and send more daily necessities like bottled water, food, tents and clothes and blankets" he said. He recognised that it was crucial to repair damaged traffic infrastructure, power and water supply facilities and also prevent secondary disasters.

In this edition:-

- **China's Prompt Response**
- **ASEAN-led Humanitarian Response in Myanmar**
- **Aceh opens up to the world**
- **International Standards needed for measuring humanitarian response**



Hence, he called for security measures to ensure the safety of reservoirs and drinking water, and to prevent contamination by dangerous chemicals and geological disasters such as mudslides. Moreover, market supplies and stable prices must also be guaranteed, in order to maintain social order and stability.

The government's efforts have shown results. As of 23 June 2008, more than 1.46 million survivors had been evacuated and 84,017 quake survivors were rescued from the rubble. An estimated 96,800 medical staff had treated more than 2 million injured people. Infrastructure had also been repaired and restored in the quake-devastated regions according to Vice Premier Li Keqiang. Quake-relief personnel have broken through blocked major roads and rail lines, and power and water supplies have mostly been restored in urban and rural areas.

Furthermore, China has been rigorous in protecting billions of dollars in quake-relief funds from misuse. At a nationwide 'live' press conference, China's Ministry of Supervision reaffirmed the importance of a newly-issued regulation by the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Commission for Discipline Inspection to avoid the misuse of relief funds. To date, China has penalized 43 officials for misconduct, with 12 serious offenders removed from their posts.

Regardless of the argument that China's rapid response to the disaster is a tool to soften its international image ahead of the Olympic Games in August and to improve ties with neighbours, the government's prompt response to the Sichuan earthquake has elicited praises from the international community. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon complimented China for its "extraordinary leadership" and "strenuous efforts" in disaster relief.

Similarly, the international community was impressed by the Chinese government's response in the wake of the snowstorm disaster. The director of UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, Salvano Briceno, praised the Chinese government for its swift response and ability to actively mobilise its resources to alleviate the

post-disaster hardship of more than 100 million people.

Following the snowstorm, the Chinese government took the necessary measures to assist China's rural and agricultural areas, maintain stable food supplies and normalise communications and power supplies. Premier Wen Jiabao and President Hu Jintao had also been proactive in the relief operation by visiting the affected areas.

Well-controlled public health emergencies

Public health emergencies following natural disaster are more commonly seen in developing countries where essential public health & health care services are already deficient or absent. For a case of earthquake, after 1-2 weeks limited scale indirect health effects may need to be addressed. Epidemic or pandemic risk could be increased due to overcrowding of camps and shelters for displaced people, insufficient sanitary facilities, and flooding and vector-borne illnesses.

The Chinese health minister acknowledged that infectious diseases are emerging as a major threat in China's quake zone, with injured and affected victims most at risk. Moreover, as summer approaches, the warmer weather creates optimal conditions for epidemics. Hence, health workers faced an "uphill battle" with the collapse of the public health system in the quake zone.

However, prompt sanitation measures have ensured no outbreaks of major disease. In the first 10 days of June 2008, more than half a million children under the age of 12 in quake-affected areas were vaccinated against infection, such as hepatitis A and encephalitis B

The strong role of China military in the relief operations

China had mobilised its armed forces within hours after the earthquake to lead the search and rescue effort. The military had to overcome the difficulties of the location, the massive damage and also bad weather. The government deployed more than 140,000 members of the People's Liberation Army and police to conduct rescue

and relief operation. Over 100 helicopters were also sent to assist the operation. Two thousand soldiers were sent to a series of dams near Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province to inspect a structure that has shown some cracks due to the quake. It was one of the largest peacetime relief operations in modern history.

In the case of the snowstorm disaster, the military mobilised 6.43 million soldiers and officers as well as 18.69 million reservists. Their roles

included clearing road of heavy snowfall, repairing damaged infrastructure, providing relief supplies to affected areas and managing crowds at railway stations. The military and police forces had also donated 123 million yuan and 15 million relief items. They also distributed international aid provided by foreign military and other donors. For example, the United States military donated thousands of jackets, blankets and boxed rations worth US\$820,000 to help the victims of the snowstorm.

What the Critics have to say?

Despite the praise China received for their response to the Sichuan earthquake, there has also been some criticism:

1. Shoddy construction and corruption have been blamed for the collapse of 7,000 schools that are causing an estimate of 10,000 students and teachers as casualties in the quake zone. Disaster preparedness measures did not seem to cover the children of migrant workers and poor families. Officials have prevented foreign reporters from entering areas where schools collapsed, stopped parents from speaking with reporters elsewhere and in some cases have threatened angry parents. In some cases, Chinese officials have sent letters to parents of at least two Sichuan schools. In this letters authorities warned that foreign and domestic agents, including members of the outlawed Falun Gong spiritual sect, are manipulating the situation to damage China's credibility and ruin the Beijing Summer Olympic Games.
2. Chinese troops and local volunteers lacked emergency skills and rescue equipment required to pull people from the rubble expertly and rapidly. Yet, most rescue workers from Western countries who had such skills were barred from Sichuan province. It was 3 to 6 days following the quake before some 200 search-and-rescue experts from "neighboring" countries were brought in, but restrictions remain on most Western personnel who could not be "accommodated." If most of non-Asian rescue workers had been given access on the immediate aftermath of the quake, there could have been more survivors.
3. The stockpiling of materials and equipment for emergencies came up far short. At least 700,000 tents had to be ordered from local manufacturers on the spot and another 3.3 million procured from abroad to accommodate 4 million homes that had been destroyed and 10 to 15 million homeless people. Further, China lacked much of the machinery needed, such as earthmoving equipment, power tools, cranes, mechanized hammers, and satellite communication technology.
4. The government moved quickly to announce that it would evacuate large numbers from aftershocks, landslides and potential flooding, build temporary homes, and provide food and basic supplies. However, it was not clear whether there were standards guiding these actions. It was also not clear whether a government policy existed for addressing issues such as compensation, ID cards and documentation, protecting vulnerable groups such as orphans, the disabled and the elderly or rebuilding lives and livelihoods. Moreover, there are at least one million Tibetans living in Sichuan province. Given China's recent crackdown in Tibet, the extent to which Tibetan survivors in Sichuan and the many rural poor are dealt with equitably, should be carefully looked into.

Sources

Cohen Robert, Disaster Standards Needed in Asia, Brookings Northeast Asia Commentary, 2008
China Stifles Parents' Complaints About Collapsed Schools, the Wall Street Journal, 18 June 2008





International assistance

During the first few days after the quake, China politely declined offers of rescue and medical personnel from the international community due to the poor inaccessibility of the quake location. However, China gradually received foreign medical teams, as the relief efforts shifted from rescue to rehabilitation. To date, China has received assistance from over 65 countries, 40 international organisation and agencies, as well as 20 private institutions and agencies. These different sources have offered various forms of humanitarian aid ranging from medical assistance, emergency supplies, heavy equipment and funding. Not only aim for relief operation, the donated fund, goods and services were also offered for the long term process of reconstruction.

Offers for international assistance tend to be forthcoming in the aftermath of natural disasters. However, it is important for governments to allow access to the affected areas by declaring a state of emergency that would allow the international community to participate in humanitarian activities. In the two recent disasters, China has demonstrated a great deal of openness to the international community, though with some caution towards Western aid. China hasn't allowed Western agencies to independently operate inside its borders in previous disasters, with the exception of the World Health

Organization, which was allowed to conduct investigations during the SARS crisis in 2003.

Sources

China deploys 50,000 troops in quake rescue, *Channel News Asia*, 13 May 2008.

China starts airdrops into quake zone, *Channel News Asia*, 14 May 2008.

China orders 90 more choppers, 30,000 troops to quake zone, *Chanel News Asia*, 15 May 2008

Chinese Soldiers Rush to Bolster Weakened Dams, *The New York Times*, 15 May 2008

Aid provided by US, Japan on route to China's disaster-hit regions, *Xinhua*, 9 February 2008

Senior official: Earthquake relief a priority for government, *Xinhua*, 14 May 2008

Death toll in China's May 12 quake to exceed 80,000, *Xinhua*, 24 June 2008

Cohen Robert, Disaster Standards Needed in Asia, *Brookings Northeast Asia Commentary*, 2008

Epidemics emerge as major threat in China's quake zone: report, *AFP*, 18 June 2008

China vows to normalize life, production in snow-hit areas as clearly as possible, *Xinhua*, 12 Feb 2008

Chinese premier makes latest visit to disaster-hit region, 3rd in 9 days, *Xinhua*, 6 February 2008

Leaders visit regions reeling from winter storms, *the Strait Times*, 10 February 2008

China warns officials against corruption, champions transparency of quake fund distribution, *Xinhua*, 24 June 2008

43 Officials punished over quake relief misconduct, *Xinhua*, 23 June 2008

China is urged to use influence with junta, *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 May 2008.

ASEAN-led Humanitarian Response in Myanmar

In the wake of the Cyclone Nargis, international humanitarian assistance into Myanmar was largely obstructed by the ruling junta's constant refusal to accept aid, especially from dominant Western states such as the US, UK and France. Their reason – to ensure their right of sovereignty. Nevertheless, despite the initial refusal for aid, ASEAN has made headway and its efforts have been pivotal in facilitating humanitarian assistance to Myanmar. While Myanmar's ruling junta seemed to be allergic to the humanitarian assistance rendered by dominant Western countries, it eventually agreed to allow aid in via ASEAN.

ASEAN has been able to collaborate with Myanmar and the United Nations (UN) in establishing the ASEAN Tripartite Core Group so as to undertake the recovery and reconstruction of the cyclone affected areas. Its successes thus far include operational tasks, such as facilitating requests for visas, visa extensions and permits to travel into Myanmar – in particular for commercial helicopters contracted by the World Food Program.

In addition to this, the recent deployment of a 200-strong assessment team to the Irrawaddy Delta, known as the Emergency Rapid Assessment Team (ERAT), comprising of members from the ASEAN countries, the UN system and the Myanmar government reflects a significant step in Myanmar's cooperation with not just her regional neighbours but also the

What is the ASEAN Humanitarian Task Force?

The ASEAN Humanitarian Task Force (AHTF) was established at the special meeting of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers on 19 May 2008 in Singapore. Under the chairmanship of Foreign Minister of Singapore, H.E. George Yeo, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers established a Task Force to engage the participation and support from the UN system, international institutions, ASEAN Dialogue Partners, donors from the international community, in the humanitarian effort.

***“.. to build back better than before..
that should be our guiding principle to
reflect our commitment as a regional
organization...”***

*- Dr Surin Pitsuwan, ASEAN Secretary-General,
referring to ASEAN's efforts in Myanmar after
Cyclone Nargis*

international community. Their task was to gather first-hand information and raw data in the affected areas for compilation into a composite joint assessment report in mid-July 2008 during the 41st meeting of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers in Singapore. The World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) had also given ASEAN their support for this exercise as part of the bilateral agreements between the ASEAN Secretariat and the two financial institutions. The need to engage Myanmar's neighbours has also been acknowledged as reflected by Dr Surin Pitsuwan's invitation to the Ambassadors of China, Bangladesh and India to serve in the Advisory Group of the ASEAN Humanitarian Task Force (AHTF). All three have accepted the invitation.

On 24 June 2008, the AHTF convened the ASEAN Roundtable on Post Nargis Joint Assessment (PONJA) for Response, Recovery and Rehabilitation in Yangon. During the Roundtable, the PONJA teams provided an update on how the joint assessment is progressing. PONJA teams were in the field between late May and the first three weeks of June to collect the data, which they have now started processing and analyzing for report compilation. The Roundtable also brought together disaster recovery management experts from countries with similar experience, such as Indonesia, Thailand, Bangladesh and Pakistan. They shared knowledge with representatives from the Government of Myanmar and other ASEAN Member States on ways to help the affected people and avoid creating new disaster risks in the future.





The PONJA teams noted that while the preliminary findings were based on only 60 percent of the households, the cyclone had severe impact on the livelihood, agriculture, shelter, sanitation, clean water and health of the population. According to the team, 11% of food stocks were partially destroyed; 56% of the people obtained their food from the market while 45% through humanitarian distribution. The World Food Programme (WFP) had told ASEAN officials that their stock of rice could only last until end of June and another 50,000 metric tonnes were needed to help the victims. It was also noted that 60% of the people surveyed considered their access to clean water inadequate and people are shifting from ponds to rain water due to salinisation. In addition to this, 22% of households reported psychological stress, the majority of whom shifted to bamboo houses with a maximum life span of two years while 60 percent village leaders said there was not enough seeds for the next planting season.

Nevertheless, there are signs of hope and improvement. For one, there was no second wave of disaster from diseases that broke out. This was verified by an advanced team sent by ASEAN in the first week of June. PONJA also noted that 47% percent of arable land was not flooded while part of the flooded land could still be cropped. Moreover, opinions of several members of the assessment teams stand in contrast to the flood of reports in the immediate aftermath of the cyclone that criticised the Myanmar government's response to the disaster. Members of PONJA noted the efforts by the ruling junta in providing amenities, such as street lighting and buffaloes to assist farmers to plough their padi fields for the next planting season. Also, contrary to reports of survivors booted out of government relief camps, team members such as Singapore Civil Defence Force officer, Major Ow Yong Tuck Wah, noted that many villagers preferred to stay in their own villages, as they wanted to plant their crops in time for the planting season.

Such views have also been reinforced by members of NGOs, who felt that the foreign media did not pay much attention to the resilience of the Myanmar people. According to Ramesh Shrestha, UNICEF representative in Myanmar,

given the high frequency of cyclones in the region every year, people were quite able to adapt to this sudden impact. Such an opinion was further reiterated by representatives from the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action. Commenting in their personal capacities, they noted that the local populations were probably not expecting much and they probably did not receive much. Brooks further depicted how survivors sought to fill in the gaps where national and international aid was lacking, such as rebuilding their own houses.

While it cannot be denied that the Cyclone Nargis disaster was indeed devastating and required assistance beyond the capacity of the state, some aid agencies were of the opinion that the issue of foreign aid workers being denied visas overshadowed the work of the many Myanmar nationals working for U.N. and private agencies. The U.N. Development Program in Myanmar, for instance had more than 1,000 staff, mainly Myanmar nationals. World Vision, the largest private foreign humanitarian group, had 580 local staff, and like most groups, quickly hired more when the disaster struck. According to Melanie Brooks, spokeswoman for the humanitarian agency CARE in Bangkok, "it was the national staff that really led the response... they speak the local language, they know the area, they know how to get things done." This ability to understand the local environment is therefore essential in facilitating progress during times of emergencies. This was further alluded to by Major Ow Yong who noted that ASEAN members were in a good position to understand their neighbours' cultures.

According to the Associated Press, researchers in London suggest that based on past experience, such as the 2004 tsunami, much of the life saving work in the first 48 hours or so after a sudden impact emergency is undertaken by the survivors. According to Alistair Henley, regional head of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies based in Malaysia, the concept of "helpless victims" is a myth the disaster relief community has been trying to dispel since at least the 1990s.

UN undersecretary-general Noeleen Heyzer has also praised the 'remarkable pace of response' and that the Myanmar government's willingness to allow the assessment teams to cover the entire delta signifies its readiness to cooperate with international aid agencies.

Further regional and international assistance will be rendered to Myanmar in the months to come. Dr Pitsuwan noted that ASEAN could do its bit by supporting township-focused, village-based approaches to address the immediate concerns of the Cyclone victims. Reconstruction and long-term integrated planning for the entire Delta would have to wait for the inputs of the international community. A second flash appeal conference for the immediate recovery for Cyclone Nargis victims in Myanmar will be held in New York on July 10. The first flash appeal was held on 25th May when the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) requested for US\$201 million.

Sources

ASEAN says team to have full access in Myanmar, Channel News Asia, 12 June 2008

ASEAN convenes roundtable for post-nargis joint assessment in Yangon PIA Press Release, 26 June 2008

ASEAN team begins full assessment of Myanmar cyclone damage, Borneo Bulletin, 6 June 2008

Myanmar cyclone survivors proved tough, experts say, Associated Press, 26 June 2008

Second flash appeal conference for Myanmar on July 10, Bernama, 25 June 2008

ASEAN Humanitarian Task Force Convenes ASEAN Roundtable for Post-Nargis Joint Assessment in Yangon , ASEAN Secretariat Press Release, 24 June 2008

Myanmar 8 weeks on, The Straits Times, 29 June 2008

Tripartite core group completes joint assessment on cyclone impact on Myanmar, Xinhua News, 24 June 2008

Welcome Remarks by H.E. Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, Secretary-General of ASEAN as the Chairman of ASEAN Task Force at the ASEAN Roundtable on Post Nargis Joint Assessment for Response, Recovery and Reconstruction, Yangon, Myanmar, ASEAN Secretariat, 24 June 2008

Secretary-General of ASEAN witnesses first hand the damage wrought by Cyclone Nargis on the Irrawady Delta, Media Release - ASEAN Secretariat, 26 June 2008

Aceh Opens Up to the World

In Aceh, a state of emergency had been declared prior to the Tsunami. This was due to clashes between the Indonesian armed forces and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), which began on 19 May 2003. The former had launched a major operation aimed at wiping out separatist rebels of GAM. As a result of the conflict, civilians felt the brunt of the conflict as many were displaced/forced to leave their homes. In addition to this, food and water shortages were reported at refugee camps – such as the camp in the Jeuli area, which housed thousands of refugees. Due to lack of proper nutrition and sanitation, the refugees, most of whom were women and children, also began to suffer from acute respiratory illness, influenza or skin problems.

In light of the lack of human security provided for the innocent civilians in Aceh, U.N. agencies and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the province, in consultation with donors, sought to direct their efforts towards meeting the immediate needs for food, clean water, and shelter. However, international humanitarian bodies were severely restricted in their ability to distribute or monitor the distribution of aid, due to new government regulations, ambiguity over the implementation of new regulations, and ongoing security concerns. According to Human Rights Watch, the government had even imposed restrictions on the international media, so as to avoid reporting of the conflict to the outside world.

However, such political dynamics changed dramatically when the tsunami struck a year later. From a province that was completely cut off from the rest of the world, the 2004 tsunami had made Aceh to be the world's biggest international humanitarian relief operation in recent history. According to the Indonesian government's Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency of Aceh and Nias (BRR), more than USD 7 billion of aid was pledged, with more than 500 organizations from more than 40 countries working on the recovery effort. Military humanitarian assistance was swift from Indonesia's neighbours such as Australia, Malaysia, Singapore as well as Japan and the





United States. Although there may have been some difficulties at first in gaining entry into Aceh, the Indonesian government acknowledged that external assistance was needed to cope with the massive destruction. One could easily contrast this situation with that of the response by Myanmar ruling junta after Cyclone Nargis.

Providing humanitarian assistance to Aceh proved to be a long and arduous process. The main problems experienced during the initial response to the tsunami included the lack of information on the extent of the disaster, as the tsunami had destroyed means of communications and infrastructure, a breakdown in transport systems such as roads and bridges and the lack of capacity at Banda Aceh and Medan airports, and the lack of coordination between aid organisations, militaries and the local government.

With communication breakdown and infrastructural damage being a critical problem in relief operations, much of the initial aid effort would have to be done by the various militaries, as they are equipped with the necessary logistical and organisational capacity. Foreign militaries – from 11 different countries with about 4,500 troops – were placed under the overall command of Indonesian Major-General Bambang Dharmono, who coordinated the military relief operations. Military-to-military ties seemed to have worked well during the relief operations, as countries like Australia and Singapore made substantial contributions via their military personnel.

Politics, at times, did get in the way of relief work, as depicted by the Indonesian government's initial announcement that foreign troops had till 26 March 2005 to leave Aceh – to which Vice-President Jusuf Kalla went to the extent of saying "... the sooner the better." Fortunately, this was later clarified after a meeting of ASEAN defence chiefs. According to Malaysian Defence Minister Najib Razak, "ASEAN troops carrying out relief work in Indonesia's tsunami-battered Aceh province will be allowed to remain indefinitely". Defence Minister Juwono Sudarsono further clarified that the earlier demand by Kalla was "not a deadline

International Standards needed for measuring humanitarian responses

According to a commentary by Dr Roberta Cohen, Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institute, Asia's recent disasters, in particular the Sichuan Earthquake and Cyclone Nargis, have brought to light the absence of internationally agreed upon standards for assisting and protecting survivors and measuring government response. There has been no doubt an increasing number of governments worldwide that have adopted laws and policies for dealing with disaster preparedness, such as ASEAN's agreement on disaster management and emergency assistance in 2005 (albeit not yet in force). Even so, these laws do not adequately cover some of the most serious problems that have arisen. Cohen offers a checklist of some of the main issues requiring attention for effective disaster management, both by affected governments and by international donors.

Firstly, disaster preparedness, in particular preventing or mitigating the conditions that lead to disasters, must be acknowledge that it is not only the responsibility of governments but the fundamental right of disaster victims. Not only must governments make a firm commitment to reinforcing buildings in areas known to be disaster prone but must make accountability part of the response when things go wrong. Moreover, while building disaster resistant structures is more expensive, taking the trouble to do so reduces disaster intervention costs later on. Foreign aid and international bank loans should be made available so that governments can readily take such measures.

Secondly, the stockpiling of materials and adequate early warning mechanisms are essential. Advance warnings must be effectively broadcasted and heeded while help must be provided in evacuating people who are unable to leave on their own. Engaging the military to assist in evacuation exercises would be the most effective means of assisting people and lessening the extent of a disaster.

Continued on page 10...

for involvement of foreign military personnel". Rather it was a benchmark for the Indonesian government to improve and accelerate its relief efforts so that by March 26th, the bulk of the burden of the relief efforts will be carried by the Indonesian government and authorities on the ground. This also emphasized the need to enable a smooth transition from military assistance to civilian assistance, in which there would not be any gaps in terms of their capacity to carry out the assigned duties.

Politics amongst NGOs also affected the pace of relief work, as some agencies had little inclination of coordinating with others. According to Rodd McGibbon from USAID (in an interview with Kirsten Schulze), there was the initial perception amongst US agencies that the UN agencies were useless, and therefore did not coordinate with the latter. Such politicking even continued when relief work was left to the BRR, which oversaw the various reconstruction and rehabilitation works in Aceh. While several civil society organizations have criticized the BRR's abilities in coordinating the reconstruction efforts (such as irregular development in various areas), it has for the most part done its best based on its available capacities.

The tsunami experience also provided several lessons for many of the international agencies that were involved, as to how to better respond to such complex humanitarian emergencies. In a 2005 report by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) entitled 'ADB's Response to Emergencies: Were We Prepared for the

Tsunamis?', it was noted that (in terms of financial aid), a common finding in most of the emergency evaluations was the excessive time for loan processing and/or implementation, considering that the need for funding was immediate and severe. Both ADB and government procedures often delayed timely release of funds. In addition to this an overall self-criticism of ADB's response to emergencies was that it tended to be ad hoc, with little attention paid to best practices. There were few ADB staff with any relevant training, and no focal points (core staff) for disaster and emergency assistance.

Nevertheless, nearly four years on, Aceh is progressively and recovering from its losses. It is hoped that the lessons learned during the tsunami would remain in the psyche of relief personnel – whether they come from the military, international NGOs or local civil society.

Sources

Aceh and Nias: Two Years after the Tsunami – 2006 Progress Report, BRR and Partners, Dec 2006
Aceh refugees face shortages of food and clean water, AFP, 16 June 2003
Aceh under Martial Law: Unnecessary and Dangerous Restrictions on International Humanitarian Access, Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper, Sept 2003
ADB's Response to Emergencies: Were We Prepared for the Tsunamis?, Operations Evaluation Department, Asian Development Bank, March 2005
ASEAN troops in Indonesia's tsunami-hit Aceh to remain, Agence France Presse, 17 January 2005
Schulze, K. [Between Conflict and Peace: Tsunami Aid and Reconstruction in Aceh](#), Nov 2005





... Continued from page 8

Thirdly, governments that lack the capacity fully to protect and assist their populations, should request for international assistance, irrespective of nationality and politics. Just as donors should 'know no politics' in providing humanitarian aid, recipient governments should know no politics in requesting and receiving it. The fundamental right of survivors to humanitarian and reconstruction assistance when their governments are unable to provide it should override arbitrary rejections of aid disguised as the prerogatives of sovereignty. Regional and international organizations should be expected to step in when governments are unable to fulfill their obligations and are unwilling to accept foreign help.

Fourthly, the distribution of aid on the basis of political opinion, political loyalty, social status, ethnic origin, race or religion should be prohibited and review processes established to hear complaints and ensure remedial action. This is in the interests both of victims and governments since discriminatory aid practices make donors less likely to contribute, or to offer reconstruction aid, as Burma had found out on both counts.

Fifthly, there is the need to ensure greater transparency in the distribution of aid. Donors should be encouraged to contribute their aid to international organizations, NGOs and local groups, rather than exclusively to governments, particularly where transparency and accountability are problems, as in Burma. Independent monitoring systems to check on the distribution of food and supplies should also be part of emergency and reconstruction aid. Dispensing with monitoring, as donors sometimes do, often leads to later exposure that aid did not reach the needy but helped shore up repressive regimes.

Survivors have protection needs beyond the provision of food, medicine and shelter. People displaced by disasters must be protected from violence in camps, forcible expulsions and returns, child recruitment, and receive assistance in obtaining lost documentation and just mechanisms for property claims and compensation. Valuable guidelines already exist that identify the human rights and protection needs of people uprooted by disasters. They can form the basis for international performance standards.

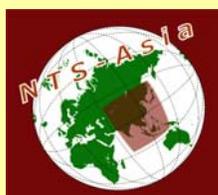
While an officially agreed list of international standards would be difficult to negotiate and might not be regularly observed, it is needed both as a guide to governments that do wish to do the right thing in responding to disasters and as a basis for the international community to measure performance. And it could have the added benefit of leading to civic empowerment that could have a broader impact. As a Burmese survivor whispered to a journalist, 'We don't even know that the government has a duty to protect its people.' Yet knowing one's rights is the first step toward accountability in times of disaster

Source

Cohen, R. Disaster standards needed in Asia, Commentary, Brookings Institute, June 2008

*NTS- Asia Secretary
General
Mely Caballero Anthony*

*NTS Alert Team
Sofiah Jamil
Irene Kuntjoro
Belinda Chng*



*Website
www.rsis-ntsasia.org*

*Contact Us
webmaster@rsis-ntsasia.org*

