

HUMANITARIAN AID - BURMA

A controversy seems to be raging on whether or not humanitarian aid should be provided to Burma. Some democracy advocates feel that providing humanitarian aid to Burma will be akin to rewarding the generals. What are the pros and cons?

First, it must be stated that the Euro-Burma Office (EBO) does not make policy and it does not have its own policy on humanitarian aid to Burma. However, the EBO advises the Burmese democracy movement in general and specifically, the Ethnic Nationalities Council, which represents people of the seven ethnic states (40% of the population and 60% of the territory) of the Union of Burma.

FACTS:

The **Ethnic Nationalities Council** welcomes humanitarian aid provided that it:

- Is not channeled through the Burmese military;
- Directly benefits the people of Burma;
- Is transparent; and accountable.

The exception to the above is the Three-Diseases Fund (3DFund) which by its nature must necessarily be implemented through the public health system already in place. The ENC also makes a special appeal for the cross-border delivery of humanitarian aid to the most vulnerable populations. See ENC Humanitarian Position 2005.

The **National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma** (NCGUB) which represents the winners of the 1990 general elections, agrees with the ENC. However, the NCGUB would also like to see humanitarian aid used as a tool to bring about a dialogue and national reconciliation. See NCGUB Humanitarian Policy 2003.

The humanitarian aid policy of the ENC and the NCGUB are based on a strategy consultation held in January 2002 amongst the NCGUB, the ENC's predecessor – the Ethnic Nationalities Solidarity and Cooperation Committee (ENSCC), the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB), the Women's League of Burma (WLB), the Students & Youth Congress of Burma (SYCB), and the United Nationalities Youth League (UNYL). The participants welcomed humanitarian aid given to the people. See SCC Meeting Decision – Humanitarian Aid, January 2002.

In August 2002, the then **National League for Democracy** (NLD) spokesperson, U Lwin, also reported that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi does not object to humanitarian assistance that will benefit the people -“under the strict control of transparency, accountability and monitoring.”

In February 2007, another strategy consultation amongst Burmese democracy advocates (ENC, NCGUB, NCUB, WLB, SYCB, NYF, etc) reaffirmed the humanitarian position of 2002, welcomed cross-border assistance and agreed to the Three Diseases Fund. The exception was the National Council of the Union of Burma.

The **National Council of the Union of Burma** (NCUB), agrees to cross-border assistance and the Three-Diseases Fund although it requires working through the Burmese military. It is against any other form of humanitarian aid inside Burma.

The Women's League of Burma (WLB), the Students and Youth Congress of Burma (SYCB) and the Nationalities Youth Forum (NYF), have not yet made separate statements on humanitarian aid.

FEARS:

The rest of the Burmese democracy community (refugees and exiles) is divided. Many fear that humanitarian aid delivered inside Burma will:

- a) Be diverted by the military for its own use;
- b) Be impossible to deliver without the involvement of the SPDC – a case in point is the Three Diseases Fund (3DFund);
- c) Enable the SPDC to continue ignoring social problems and use its own resources to further suppress the people;
- d) Give credit to the SPDC when in fact it is the cause of the problem;
- e) Lull the people into a false sense of well-being and reduce their motivation to overthrow the regime;
- f) Reduce aid to refugees and internally displace persons, and to democracy activists along the border.

OPINION:

Fears that the Burmese military will divert the humanitarian aid provided for the people are valid. That is why stringent safeguards are needed for aid delivery inside Burma as is the case of any aid currently being delivered along the border.

The 3DFund does involve the SPDC's infrastructure but no cash is disbursed directly to the Burmese military. Safeguards are in place and they need to be vigorously and continuously monitored. However, there are many other needs that can be addressed by humanitarian aid without officially going through the SPDC and its organs. This has been done in the past and is being done today. Those who say it is impossible have not been seriously involved in the delivery of aid inside Burma.

The Burmese military has been ignoring Burma's social problems for a long time. They will continue to prioritize spending for defense and military matters whether or not humanitarian aid is provided for the people. The European Union is considering humanitarian aid for Burma in the scale of 100 million Euros. The SPDC currently earns about 2,000 million Euros (2 billion) in untied hard cash from the sale of natural gas. This estimated cash flow will grow as more projects come online. The income from aid for the SPDC is insignificant compared to what it can get from gas. But the humanitarian aid being considered is significant for the people of Burma and it can help alleviate the suffering brought about by the military's neglect.

Anyone that believes that the provision of humanitarian aid will give credit to the SPDC has a very low opinion of the intelligence of the people of Burma. People know the cause of their suffering. They will also know who is providing the assistance. The

SPDC will get credit only if they actually change their policies and become ‘people-friendly’. If they do, is it not something that we should welcome? Another way for the SPDC to get credit is if it is reported that the democracy movement is blocking the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the people of Burma.

People who believe that humanitarian aid will lull people into a false sense of well-being are completely out of touch with the reality on the ground in Burma. The aid being contemplated is miniscule compared to the actual need. There is no way anyone could feel a false sense of well-being because of the aid being provided. The aid will barely save lives. Humanitarian aid on the Thai border roughly amounts to about 130.00 Euros per person per year. Nobody who has visited the refugee camps can claim that the refugees are living in comfort and therefore, do not have any motivation to better their lives. The amount being considered for Burma is at most 1.50 Euro per person per year if we assume that a quarter of the population in Burma live below the poverty line and are potential recipients of the aid currently being targeted.

The level of funding for the people of Burma is not proportionate to the need. Fears that aid delivered inside Burma will reduce aid to refugees and internally displaced persons and to democracy activists along the border, would be valid if the level of funding for Burma as a whole is not increased. More funding is needed.

Summary:

In March 2007, a panel discussion was organized by the Association Suisse-Birmanie. The panelists were *Professeur Paulo Sergio Pinheiro*, United Nations Human Rights Special Rapporteur for Burma; *Harn Yawngnwe*, Director of the European Office for the Development of Democracy in Burma (Euro-Burma Office), Brussels; and *Dr Jean F. Freymond*, Director of the Centre for Applied Studies in International Negotiations (CASIN), Geneva. The discussion concluded -

“HUMANITARIAN AID – It was generally agreed that the dire situation of the people of Burma calls for the international community to deliver humanitarian aid. It was agreed that it should not be dependent on whether or not the SPDC agrees to allowing the aid to be delivered. If people are suffering, they should be helped. Innovative ways and means to deliver aid to the most vulnerable populations should be explored even if it means crossing international boundaries.”

The EBO will continue to work with the Burmese democracy movement to prepare for a transition to democracy – empowering the disenfranchised, mediating conflicts, proposing political solutions, defining public policies, and building the capacity of political parties and civil society.

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