

CHAPTER 3

HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE DILEMMA IN BURMA

The United Nations and other international organizations have undertaken numerous efforts to address some of Burma's most pressing problems. These efforts include programs aimed at mitigating the effects of prison's conditions, forced labor and conflicts in Burma's ethnic areas. The primary goal of UN action in recent years has been to facilitate national reconciliation in Burma through the promotion of tri-parties dialogue between the SPDC, NLD and the country's ethnic groups.³⁸ At present, 9 UN agencies have branch offices in Burma and about 30 international NGOs maintain humanitarian assistance programs in Burma. International organizations are also attempting to provide food to vulnerable populations, promote local economic development, improve health condition, and strengthen the Burmese education system.³⁹

Humanitarian assistance is identified as “[an intervention] to alleviate human suffering caused by natural disasters and conflict. This includes basic human needs such as health, water and sanitation, shelter and household items, protection, education, recovery of livelihoods and disaster preparedness activities.⁴⁰ It can include the provision of education and livelihood support, but does so as a means of substitution of normal services. The delivery of humanitarian assistance itself has grown more multifaceted, including numerous NGOs, IGOs, governmental agencies and even multiple territories. Hudda noted that, with so many players involved, representing various interests, the involvement of politics in the realm of humanitarian

³⁸ GAO, p. 3.

³⁹ For example, two UN entities have provided food and agricultural support to vulnerable populations, while the UN Development Program (UNDP) has created village-and township-level community development and small banking groups.

⁴⁰ Justine Foxall, *Humanitarian Assistance and Peacebuilding: Options for CCIC Policy Focus* (Ottawa: Canadian Council for International Co-operation, December 2003), p. 11.

assistance is inevitable. Politics have played a role in determining which of these situations gets greatest priority, and for how long.⁴¹

Burma has become an example of the politics of humanitarian assistance. Like Cambodia in the 1980s, Burma presents an acute dilemma to aid agencies: should aid be withheld to avoid propping up an unsavory regime and to force political change or do the acute needs of the population justify the provision of assistance regardless of the political context?

Those opposed to or at least cautious about international aid being given to Burma maintain that the SPDC is responsible for the poor conditions in the country and no sustainable, long-term solution can be found without a change in the government. Some opponents of humanitarian aid argue that politics cannot be separated from the aid issue because the root cause of the current situation is the prolonged military rule. Furthermore, they believe that under present circumstances, aid will only serve to legitimize a regime that should not be in power.

Proponents of humanitarian aid to Burma argue that with more than a decade having passed since the events of 1988 and the 1990 elections with no sign of political change, ordinary people cannot afford the luxury of aid being conditional on change, especially when the humanitarian situation is so dire. They stress that civilians already suffering due to the policies of the military government should not be dealt a second blow and deprived of humanitarian assistance. Moreover, they maintain that politics should not blind people to the social costs of denying aid.⁴²

The need for humanitarian assistance to Burma is perhaps evident. It is less evident that the extent of this need is broadly understood. A lack of statistics, coupled with political biases in reporting on all sides of the political spectrum, make it

⁴¹ Karimah Hudda, "Humanitarian Assistance: Good Will, Politics and Dilemmas," in *International Development and Assistance: Where Politics Meets Economy*, ed. Andrzej Bolesta (Warsaw: Leon Koźmiński Academy of Entrepreneurship and Management, 2004), p. 78.

⁴² Shukla, p. 19.

impossible to paint an accurate picture of the socio-economic conditions in the country. International Crisis Group indicated that overall assistance to Burma is still among the lowest in the world at less than \$3 per capita per year, but the upward trend in recent years is noticeable as a result of the increasing activities, the expansion of their geographical reach, particularly in the border regions, and the implementation of new activities on HIV/AIDS.⁴³ Supporters of aid to Burma argue that politics should be delinked from the issue of humanitarian assistance and aid should be delivered now, rather than after regime change.⁴⁴

The politics of humanitarian assistance to Burma raise two basic questions: Should it be provided and, if so, how should it be provided? The answer to the first question is ‘absolutely yes’ – not only should there be humanitarian assistance, but there should be significantly more of it. Humanitarian assistance is not just an issue of alleviating individual human suffering, but also of counteracting social instability, which could undermine any progress in the political sphere. International Crisis Group emphasized that many people in Burma are losing hope, and as people anywhere without hope, they are becoming increasingly frustrated with the whole system of government.⁴⁵

The answer to the second question is more complicated. The concept of ‘humanitarianism’⁴⁶ provides some guidance – international aid should be directed towards improving the lives of people and reducing suffering. However, it can be recognized that effective use of assistance entails reducing systematic vulnerabilities, strengthening local capacities, and promoting necessary policy and institutional changes. This requires attention to longer-term development issues. A significant increase in international assistance in Burma is necessary but it will not be easy to

⁴³ International Crisis Group, “Myanmar: New Threats to Humanitarian Aid,” *Asia Briefing*, no. 58 (December 8, 2006).

⁴⁴ Shukla, p. 19.

⁴⁵ International Crisis Group, “Myanmar: The Politics of Humanitarian Aid,” *Asia Report*, no. 32 (April 2, 2002).

⁴⁶ “Humanitarianism” is defined as the impartial, independent, and neutral provision of relief to those who are in avoidable danger of harm. <Michael Barnett, “Humanitarianism Transformed,” *Perspectives on Politics* 3, no.4, (December 2005), p. 574.>

implement. The national bureaucracy has very limited capacity. Moreover, an increase in humanitarian assistance activities could increase the government's sense of insecurity and lead it to invoke even more restrictions.⁴⁷

In effect, the delivery of humanitarian assistance in Burma is facing new threats. After a period of the expansion of humanitarian space,⁴⁸ aid agencies have come under renewed pressure, most seriously from the military government. Restrictions imposed by the military regime have worsened in parallel with its continued refusal to permit meaningful opposition political activity and its crackdown on the Karen.⁴⁹ The government of Burma continues to reject all assertions of human right abuses and remains very resistant to the international humanitarian aid agencies.

According to officials of international organizations now working in Burma, the Burmese military regime became more restrictive regarding activities of international organizations after it purged the former Prime Minister in October 2004. The regime formalized its restriction on the international organizations in 2006 by publishing guidelines to govern their activities in Burma.⁵⁰ The overarching purpose appears to reassure the military regime that activities do not threaten its political agenda, by ensuring that programs and priorities correspond better to the national objectives it sets as to rein in what it perceives as rouge behavior by some agencies.⁵¹

The Burma's regime has blocked or impeded activities undertaken by many international organizations following its ouster of the former Prime Minister in 2004. It has blocked international efforts to monitor prison conditions addressed by International Labor Organization (ILO), and until recently, forced labor cases addressed by International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The regime has also

⁴⁷ ICG, p. 26.

⁴⁸ "Humanitarian space" refers to the operational environment for humanitarian agencies in a given area/country. It concerns the extent to which agencies are able to freely access vulnerable populations and independently evaluate needs, deliver required assistance and monitor outcomes. <ICG Asia Report No. 58>

⁴⁹ ICG, p. 1.

⁵⁰ GAO, p. 17.

⁵¹ ICG, p. 9.

significantly restricted international assistance to populations living in conflict areas, and, to a lesser degree, impeded food, development, and health programs.⁵²

Despite these actions, several international organization officials stressed that their organizations are still able to achieve meaningful results in their efforts to address Burma's development, humanitarian, and health problems. For example, UN officials working in the health sector addressed that the Burmese regime had been increasingly cooperative in efforts to address HIV/AIDS prevalence and recently worked with several UN entities to develop a multi-sectoral plan that targets all victims of the disease in Burma.⁵³ It is seen that programs that address health and development issues in Burma have generally been less constrained by the regime's restriction than the human rights efforts of ILO and ICRC, which tend to work closely with the regime.

United States Government Accountability Offices (GAO) addressed that international organizations are facing an increasingly uncertain future as they continue their efforts to address Burma's assistance needs. The recent actions of the Burmese regime indicate that it is now seeking to exert a greater degree of control over international activities in Burma. While the regime appears to have accepted international efforts to relieve Burma's development, health, and educational problems as necessary, it has also opted to regulate them more closely. The regime also appears to have become more insistent that international organization cooperate with regime-sponsored political mobilization groups. Such actions can only further narrow the opportunities for international organizations to address Burma's pressing human rights, humanitarian and development problems.⁵⁴

The steps taken by individual nations and coalitions as well as international humanitarian organizations have produced fewer results. As a result, the calls for the United Nations Security Council to take up Burma as a critical international problem

⁵² GAO, p. 3.

⁵³ Ibid, p. 25.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 26.

have been made by the international community. Human Rights Watch urged that the United Nations Security Council should urgently consider the human rights and political situation in Burma in order to address widespread and systematic abuse of human rights by the military government.⁵⁵ Binding Security Council intervention is a necessary international and multilateral vehicle to restore the peace, promote national reconciliation and facilitate a return to democratic rule in Burma.

⁵⁵ Human Rights House Network, October 15, 2005, <http://www.humanrightshouse.org/dllvis5.asp?id=3746>.