

## **Asean Again Outfoxed by Burma's Junta**

Wednesday 28 May 2008, by [Kyaw Zwa Moe](#) (Date first published: 20 May 2008).

**Asean countries, of course, have great sympathy for the cyclone-hit Burmese survivors, but they lack any political leverage—and courage—to try to influence the reclusive generals who rule Burma.**

Sadly and shamefully, this means Asean has again agreed to let the generals' determine the rules.

After an emergency meeting of Asean foreign ministers in Singapore on Monday, the grouping agreed to set up a task force to coordinate distribution of humanitarian aid to Burma while working through the United Nations.

However, the international aid and the desperately needed expert relief workers will continue to be limited and allowed to enter Burma only upon the approval of the military regime, said Singapore's Foreign Minister George Yeo. This will probably mean Asian-only relief workers and a trickle of aid from the West.

In other words, the Burmese junta is still in the driver's seat. Asean, the UN and the rest of the world are—again—being manipulated by the oppressive generals.

Hypocritically, Nyan Win, the Burmese foreign minister, told reporters, "*We always welcomed international aid.*" In fact, the xenophobic junta has let in only an estimated 20 percent of aid that's needed and that's reached only a few areas, while other areas of the Irrawaddy delta have yet to see any aid or aid workers, Asian or otherwise.

In its statement, Asean said Burma "*should allow more international relief workers into the stricken areas, as the need is most urgent, given the unprecedented scale of the humanitarian disaster.*"

It was the latest plea among hundreds from the world's governments and aid organizations. Don't expect anything from Asean's call.

For the past two weeks, the world has witnessed the slow, calculated response of the junta, which is oblivious to the needs of the estimated 2.5 million survivors. Estimates say as many as 134,000 people are dead or missing.

The Burmese foreign minister said the losses from the cyclone are expected to total more than US \$10 billion. On May 25, an Asean-UN International Pledging Conference will be held in Rangoon.

The Asean statement said, "*This Asean-led approach was the best way forward.*" In fact, this Asean approach has accomplished nothing and may, in fact, set back a true, effective response to the disaster. The UN and Western governments have been outmaneuvered, again.

Dire warnings are mounting of a potential second wave of deaths among survivors, especially children, who have been hard-hit by the lack of fresh water, proper shelter, sufficient food and medicine.

Asean has extensive experience in dealing with Burma's generals. Its latest "best way forward" is another example of appeasing the cynical, hard-hearted generals.

Kavi Chongkittavorn, an editor at The Nation newspaper in Bangkok, said last week in reference to the then upcoming Asean ministers' meeting: *"I am very concerned the Burmese junta may be using Asean for its own purposes, for buying time and dragging its feet."*

He called it like it is.

Naval ships from the US, France and UK are nearby Burma. They are loaded with relief supplies, but the Burmese government stubbornly refuses their offers of help. Activists, and human rights groups have called for the UN and Western governments to initiate a "responsibility to protect" principle and to enter Burma to aid the refugees without the approval of the military government.

The French foreign minister also has urged the UN to invoke the "responsibility to protect" principle and provide aid without the approval of the generals.

Obviously, Asean doesn't like that idea. *"That will create unnecessary complications. It will only lead to more suffering for Myanmar [Burmese] people,"* the Singapore foreign minister said in the meeting.

The Burmese generals have successfully manipulated Asean since 1997, when it was accepted into the grouping. This time, it's no different.

Meanwhile, on Monday—17 days after the cyclone—the generals announced three days of national mourning for the victims. That was obviously an afterthought, coming immediately after China's announcement of three days of national mourning for its earthquake victims.

Even the appearance of mourning is a calculated ploy of the generals.

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