

The Tatmadaw Exposed

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Burma's army leaders want to build a modern army with sophisticated weapons and jet fighters. However, when the country faced a major natural disaster last month, these same leaders were unable to mobilize troops to conduct a relief mission in the Irrawaddy delta, much less send jets, helicopters and navy ships to aid victims of Cyclone Nargis.

When the cyclone slammed into the delta and southern Burma on May 2-3, the army was all but invisible for the first few days, as orders from the top leadership weren't forthcoming.

In the wake of the greatest natural disaster to hit Burma in living memory, Burma's 400,000 soldiers remained in their barracks or on the frontlines of the regime's dirty war against ethnic insurgents.

There are some who believe that the army's inaction was due to a deliberate decision by the regime's leadership to leave the cyclone victims to struggle on their own. It appears that the lines of communication and the chain of command broke down at the highest levels.

At any rate, the army's response certainly wasn't what one would expect of a military that receives the lion's share of the national budget.

Over the past two decades, neighbors have watched with great concern as Burma's military, the Tatmadaw, continued to grow rapidly.

Burma's army has been transformed since 1988. Twenty years ago, the Tatmadaw had 180,000 troops; now it is believed to have around 400,000.

It also has substantially more military hardware than it did in the past: tanks, jet fighters and navy ships, all purchased from reliable suppliers, including China, Russia, Singapore, Poland, Ukraine, Israel, North Korea, Pakistan and India.

In 1988, the Burmese Navy had 100 vessels, but many of these were old and obsolete. Now it has a commanding fleet of frigates, coastal boats, river gunboats and amphibious vessels, courtesy of China and Yugoslavia.

Burma's extensive coastline is now guarded by regional naval command bases in Sittwe, Hainggyi Island, Moulmein, Mergui and the Irrawaddy delta.

The air force has also seen rapid expansion since 1988.

In the 1980s, half of the jet fighters and air force planes in Burma could not fly. Many counter-insurgency campaigns against the Karen and Shan were conducted using modified training planes.

Since 1988, Burma has turned to China and Russia for new aircraft to modernize its air force.

The regime has purchased F-7 jet fighters—a model similar to the Russian-made MiG-21—and A-5C air support and ground attack aircraft from China, as well as Mi-7, Mi-17, Mi-2, and Mi-8 helicopters from Russia. In 2001, the Burmese air force also bought a squadron of MiG-29 jet fighters from

Russia.

To accommodate these aircraft and ensure access to all parts of the country, air force bases and air fields have also been built and expanded in northern and southern Burma. The air force has also introduced a new command and control structure, and offers a wide range of training to pilots and ground crew.

Despite all these improvements, however, observers note that both the navy and air force face major maintenance challenges. Spare parts are not always available, and due to fuel shortages and technical malfunctions, jet fighters and helicopters are often grounded.

Although it has not been officially disclosed, Burma has more than 60 helicopters and dozens of jet fighters, interceptors and transport planes. But they were all missing in action when the country faced a catastrophe in May.

When French and American naval ships came close to Burma's shores last month, the Burmese navy and air force seemed to be paralyzed. There were no movements to counter the foreign warships and no surveillance flights.

The chain of command between top leaders in Naypyidaw and the navy, air force and regional commands appears to have been ineffective, if not paralyzed.

In the end, the regime sent in a trusted point man to take over in the delta. Almost a week after the cyclone, Light Infantry Division 66—whose commander, Brig-Gen Maung Maung Aye, is believed to be close to Snr-Gen Than Shwe, especially since he played a leading role in crushing last September's monk-led uprising—moved in.

Last week, the regime announced a reshuffle, removing Admiral Soe Thein from his position as navy chief and assigning him to head the ministry of industry (2). No official reason was given for the move.

Since then, speculation and rumors about the reasons for his dismissal have been rife among Burma observers and dissidents.

Some have suggested that Soe Thein was unhappy with the regime's decision not to allow foreign ships to help cyclone survivors. They also say that he was angered by the decision of the regime's leadership in Naypyidaw to deny rites for navy personnel killed by the cyclone at the base on Hainggyi Island.

Others say that top leaders were not happy with his inability to deploy ships to counter the US and French warships standing ready just outside Burmese waters, waiting for a green light to deliver humanitarian assistance to the delta.

Mistrust between Burma's army, on the one hand, and its navy and air force, on the other, has existed since the 1988 uprising, when hundreds of navy and air force officers joined the democracy uprising.

Burma's top leaders often cite the threat of foreign aggression as the chief reason for its relentless push to build a strong and modern Tatmadaw. Top leaders openly talk about the threat posed by the country's neighbors, Thailand, Bangladesh and India, as well as by the Western powers.

But last month's performance revealed that the Tatmadaw is far from being the formidable force

that it purports to be. The navy, air force and army were poorly coordinated, and in the end completely failed to come to the assistance of cyclone victims.

The Tatmadaw is still an effective tool of intimidation when directed against and unarmed and impoverished population. But faced with a serious external threat—natural or otherwise—the regime has shown that it is completely at the mercy of divisions and a lack of communication among the top leadership.

P.S.

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