

Politics and Disaster Response: Recent Experience in Asia

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Disaster response is often political. Although the nature of the disaster shapes the type of response, the human connections and interests of governing nations inevitably play a significant role in the way that people, organizations, and nations can respond to disasters.

There has been a 65% rise in the average number of natural disasters since the 1990s. According to the Center for Research of the Epidemiology of Disasters, 43% of natural disasters occur in Asia, affecting 200 million people each year.¹ Death tolls in Asia due to natural disaster are the highest in the world.

Vulnerabilities are often more severe and chronic in developing nations. Individual and structural vulnerabilities, such as fragile economies and unstable governing bodies, exacerbate the human toll of natural disasters and continue to impede the progress of development. Women, children, and other minority groups are not only more likely to be harmed by natural disasters but they also face struggles to rebuild their lives because of their preexisting and ongoing vulnerabilities.

Two major natural disasters have occurred in Asia this year: Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar and the Sichuan earthquake in China. These disasters highlight the political nature of disaster response and the future quandaries nations will face as they struggle to provide relief in a changing geopolitical environment.

MYANMAR: CYCLONE NARGIS

Cyclone Nargis, a category 3 to 4 storm, swept across the Irrawaddy Delta and former capital city of Yangon on May 3, 2008. Much of the damage was due to a tidal surge 12 ft high and reaching 25 mi inland. Almost 2.4 million people have been affected and 130,000 assumed to be dead or missing.²

Myanmar, a country of 47 million people, is the second least developed country in Asia. Health and development indicators in Myanmar lag behind other nations in the region. The infant mortality rate is the highest in southeast Asia and chronic malnutrition affects 40% of children younger than 5 years.³ Myanmar ranks 132 of 177 in the Human Development Index.⁴

After the cyclone, organizations mobilized in anticipation of great needs in an already vulnerable environment. The

United Nations (UN) launched a US \$187 million appeal for aid, and international agencies called upon foreign expert staff. The military junta accepted limited supplies from the UN, government, and nongovernmental organizations, but declined multiple offers to send foreign aid workers, stating that they were unnecessary. Early in the emergency, the Myanmar government controlled all aid distributions. Aid organizations expressed concern that food was being diverted away from the communities and falling into the hands of military officials.

The first international aid plane from Thailand arrived on May 6, but ships with supplies from other nations awaited clearance at sea. Although other countries were able to deliver supplies in the following weeks, US military ships returned home, having never received access from Myanmar's government.

Local communities and aid organizations already working in Myanmar continued to provide services despite a lack of resources and expertise. Although collaborations among monasteries, local organizations, and aid agencies facilitated relief efforts, many responders believed ongoing needs would not be met without an international disaster response.

The cyclone and its aftermath exposed communities to stagnant and contaminated water sources—a breeding ground for outbreaks of endemic disease such as malaria, dengue fever, and cholera. According to the complete village tract assessment, 70% of households reported inadequate access to clean water.⁵

At the time of this report, there have been no outbreaks of dengue fever or cholera. Preventive efforts have been well under way as experts in the region anticipate a particularly bad year for dengue fever. Nongovernmental organizations, the World Health Organization, and health authorities are procuring funding, monitoring cases, spraying larvicide, and distributing educational information.

On May 19, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) stepped forward as a liaison between the international community and the Myanmar government. The meeting outlined the next steps for the Myanmar government, ASEAN nations, and the rest of the world. The chair of the Special ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting said, "Internation-

tional assistance to Myanmar, given through ASEAN, should not be politicised. On that basis, Myanmar will accept international assistance.”⁶

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon also met with Myanmar Gen. Than Shwe. He stressed the importance of allowing international aid workers access to affected communities. The meeting resulted in an agreement to allow all aid workers into Myanmar.⁷ This statement was met with some skepticism by news and aid agencies.

International organizations continued to report obstacles. Less than 3 weeks after the disaster, the junta declared the end of the emergency, but UN representatives expressed concern that this decision was premature. Complicated logistics and limited access were delaying the delivery of needed services to remote communities. In mid-June, an aid worker waited 3 weeks for permission to enter a remote village. Upon his arrival, he was met by a village only one third of its original size and still in great need of emergency aid.⁸

PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA: SICHUAN EARTHQUAKE

On May 12, a magnitude 7.9 earthquake hit China's Sichuan province. Agencies have estimated 69,185 deaths, 5.4 million displaced people, and 15 million people affected. Aftershocks were felt throughout the region and impending floods from broken dams and rains threatened already-vulnerable communities.

Of China's citizens, 56% live in rural areas. Despite impressive economic and political growth and power, the Chinese government is aware of growing disparities among its people. Sichuan province is the fourth largest province in the country, and is known for its vulnerability to natural disasters and economic and social disparity among its many ethnic groups.

Chinese leaders immediately mobilized more than 50,000 troops, engaged in dialogue with international disaster response organizations, and allowed journalists to cover the disaster. The Chinese Red Cross deployed 35,000 staff by May 18 and the Ministry of Health deployed more than 200 health bureau professionals.

Although swift in response, Chinese national capacity was exceeded by the magnitude of the disaster. Even though troops immediately deployed to assist in search and rescue activities, they met with challenges in procuring appropriate transport aircraft and efficiently evacuating the wounded.⁹ An International Federation of the Red Cross representative commended the efficient initial response but said, “We can't expect that the government can do everything and handle every aspect of the needs.”¹⁰

China accepted assistance mostly in the form of monetary and in-kind contributions. It also accepted regional rescue teams from Japan, Taiwan, Russia, and South Korea.¹¹ The government initially declined offers for technical support

from the UN and many Western international aid organizations.

Foreign disaster response experts, although few in number, provided support to Chinese local and national aid organizations. A German Red Cross member commented that despite a small team, the capacity and sustainability of national staff was remarkable.¹² Oxfam Hong Kong focused on collaboration with Chinese public health experts and local organizations.¹³

Crush injuries, rhabdomyolysis, and acute renal failure occur in the postearthquake environment, and poorly constructed buildings are associated with high incidences of crush injury.¹⁴ Affected communities were vulnerable because many buildings were constructed poorly. In response to the need, the Hong Kong Society of Nephrology, Doctors Without Borders Hong Kong, and the International Society of Nephrology provided funding for additional supplies to a Chengdu dialysis center.

POLITICS AND DISASTER RESPONSE

As disasters increase, international aid organizations are struggling more often with limited access to communities, often for political reasons. Cyclone Nargis and the Sichuan earthquake illustrate the political nature of disaster response.

A government's ability to respond adequately to a disaster depends upon its capacity to warn communities of impending disaster, its ability to independently respond to needs of communities, and its willingness to accept international assistance. Political relations between governments and their peoples, as well as relations with other nations, will shape the response of disaster-affected nations. Countries may be reluctant to allow other nations to intervene for fear of allowing the world to view internal political issues that may draw criticism.

SOVEREIGNTY VERSUS INTERVENTION

In Myanmar, the junta's decision to restrict international aid generated discussion of national sovereignty, and a call for the broader application of statements such as the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty's “Responsibility to Protect.”¹⁵

The junta's reluctance to allow aid organization's access was based upon the suspicion that aid from Western governments would be linked with political pressure for a change in government. Myanmar's leaders perceived foreign aid as more of a threat than negative reactions from affected communities.

Aid organizations and some Western governments believed that the junta's failure to provide an adequate response merited an international intervention that would supersede the wishes of the Myanmar government. Bernard Kouchner, the former head of the international aid agency Doctors Without Borders and now France's foreign minister, de-

clared the possibility of “imposing” aid on Myanmar without its consent. Although the Responsibility to Protect document states, *Where a population is suffering serious harm, as a result of internal war, insurgency, repression or state failure, and the state in question is unwilling or unable to halt or avert it, the principle of nonintervention yields to the international responsibility to protect*, this applies only to situations of crimes against humanity once all other options have failed. Many countries are reluctant to pursue this process because national sovereignty is a strongly held notion and the consequences of past interventions against governments in Kosovo and Iraq still resonate.

SELECTIVE ACCEPTANCE OF INTERNATIONAL AID: IS IT SUFFICIENT?

The Chinese government received praise for its response to the Sichuan earthquake. Government will, human capacity, developing infrastructure, and increased transparency contributed to the ability of the Chinese government to respond. Despite this praise, some critics question the effectiveness of selective aid.

Some pundits believe that the Chinese government has learned from the internal and external backlash to its “closed door” response to the Tangshan earthquake in 1976, which killed 240,000 people. Others believe the growing accountability to the Chinese people and global partners has influenced China’s decision to rapidly and openly respond to the disaster.

Some have questioned why the Chinese government initially restricted foreign experts from assisting. On May 14, a newspaper article declared that international agencies were “refused access” by Chinese officials.¹⁶ Reports later indicated that although China declined offers from specific nations and the UN, it was simultaneously pursuing agreements with other nations such as Japan, Russia, and Taiwan. Less than 48 hours after the earthquake, the government accepted aid from the Tzu Chi Foundation in Taiwan. Further investigation is necessary to better understand the impact of China’s selective acceptance of foreign aid on the lives of earthquake-affected communities.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Natural disasters will increase in frequency in the coming years, as climate change continues to affect communities and the nations that govern them. Time will tell whether the “Responsibility to Protect” will play a more powerful role in disaster response. In addition, the impact of selectively accepting foreign aid has yet to be determined. Nations need to work together to gain a common understanding of the politics of global disaster response. Lessons learned from the recent disasters in Asia are key so that individuals affected by natural disaster can successfully rebuild healthy lives.

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