

Headline
Date
Media Title
Section
Circulation
Readership

Subtle wind of change one year after cyclone

02. May 2009

New Straits Times

Local News

158042

512000

Language ENGLISH

Page No 16

Article Size 478 cm2

Frequency Daily

Color Black/White

AdValue 3187.27



Subtle wind of change one year after cyclone

When Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar on May 2 last year, devastating the lives of millions, the ruling junta's block on foreign aid angered many donors. A year on, the regime seems to be finally shedding its insecurities, giving new hope to the country's recovery process

THE grass, one year on, has finally taken hold in the salty soil of the cemeteries. The bodies, nearly 85,000 of them, have been fished from the rivers, dug from the mud, cleared from the ponds, put to rest. The graves, finally, are greening up.

An additional 54,000 people are still listed as missing, but everyone in the Myanmar delta who survived Cyclone Nargis knows full well that "missing" means "dead".

The cyclone that struck on the night of May 2 last year was one of the deadliest storms in recorded history. It blew away 700,000 homes in the delta. It killed three-fourths of the livestock, sank half the fishing fleet and salted a million acres of padi fields with its seawater surges.

In many ways, just a year beyond those horrors, life in the Irrawaddy delta has settled back into some of its familiar rhythms, the push of the planting and the pull of the harvest. It is a manageable if hard-scrabble life, one that the weather controls and the farmers expect.

But something unexpected has happened, too, say United Nations officials, aid workers and foreign diplomats in Myanmar. The storm — and a following surge of humanitarian aid — might have opened a breach in the political wall around Myanmar, including perhaps a new and softer line by the United States.

The geopolitics, of course, matter little to the farmers in the delta, where even mourning has become a luxury. They are still in need of slab foundations and sturdier roofs, new tillers (or new water buffaloes), money for seeds, fertiliser and school fees.

"The people in the delta aren't defeated, but they are lost," said a Western diplomat who visited the area. "They're desperate. They didn't have much before, and now they have next to nothing. They just don't see how to climb out."

Salty fields, wells and reservoirs; a dependence on food handouts; strangled local credit; flimsy thatched huts; another monsoon season approach-



People making their way past recently-built houses for the survivors of Cyclone Nargis in Pyinsalu town in the Irrawaddy delta. — AFP picture

ing — so much to worry over.

In the days after the cyclone, the generals who run Myanmar did not know what, literally, had hit them. The scale of the disaster was beyond their imagining — and then beyond their acknowledging.

French and US naval ships carrying aid supplies waited just offshore for more than two weeks while the generals dithered. Finally, lacking permission to deliver the aid, the ships withdrew.

"The generals thought it was just another typical cyclone, where the army would hand out some rice and a few tarps and that would be it," said a senior UN programme director who spoke anonymously for fear of angering the government.

"The regime made some shocking mistakes early on, really horrible, when they blocked the aid. But these were decisions driven by national pride. They thought, 'We can handle this on our own'. With all the international furor, they finally realised, 'This is way, way too big for us'. And after that, they did a lot. A huge national response occurred."

The secretive and xenophobic junta — still fearing a seaborne invasion by Western

powers — now readily accepts air shipments of foreign aid, even from the West. Myanmar's neighbours in Asean, especially Indonesia and Singapore, have been widely credited with helping the junta to assume a somewhat more relaxed posture.

"The overall response of the government has been remarkable," said Lilianne Fan, a former policy adviser in Myanmar with the relief group Oxfam.

"They are 'getting it' more and more each day that they are involved in the recovery process."

Healthcare experts also cite the government's efforts in actively addressing a range of public health issues, especially with bird flu and HIV/AIDS. And while foreigners still cannot enter the delta without permission, the number of international aid groups allowed to work in Myanmar has doubled in the past year.

"You can work here very well, and to say that you can't is a lie," said Dr Frank Smithuis, a physician and the longtime country director for Médecins Sans Frontières.

"Look, the human rights record is shaky, yes, and it's politically nice to beat up Myanmar, but the military has actu-

ally been quite helpful to us."

Dr Smithuis said the delta had recovered well enough — and that enough other agencies were working there — that he had deployed his staffers to poorer, needier parts of the country.

The junta is globally vilified and that has kept major donors away, including the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

A new recovery plan says the delta will need US\$690 million (RM2.4 billion) in aid over the next three years, though that much money could be hard to raise: A year-long UN appeal just ended US\$162 million underfunded, one-third short of its goal.

"Shockingly, some exiled Myanmar political and lobby organisations are actively campaigning against further donor funding for the delta, based on very poor knowledge of the situation on the ground," said Richard Horsey, former senior adviser on Myanmar to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. "Aid money is drying up."

Reports by exile groups about the military forcibly conscripting children orphaned by the storm are politically loaded and wrong, said the UN programme director, whose portfolio includes child-labour issues.

"There's been absolutely no evidence of that whatsoever," the official said. "If it had happened, I would know."

The US has a wide range of economic sanctions in place against the generals and their cronies, but Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has ordered a review of American policy.

Diplomats suggest that Washington might start by upgrading Myanmar to full diplomatic status with the appointment of a US ambassador. The top US diplomat here is Larry M. Dinger, whose title is chargé d'affaires, a rung below ambassador.

"I hope they have the guts to do it," Dr Smithuis said. "The US could reduce the isolation of a country that has already isolated itself." — NYT