

# Road to death and devastation

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**(An experience of a foreigner wanting to donate to Cyclone Nargis victims)**

**Rangoon:** In the middle of the night the complex of small monasteries in Downtown Rangoon awakes to hectic activity. Trucks, pick-ups and small buses arrive; in the dark of the night monks and laymen load rice, beans, instant noodles, tarpaulin sheets, clothing, and medicines on the trucks ready to go on relief missions to help the ailing survivors of Cyclone Nargis in the remote villages of Irrawaddy (Ayeyarwady) Division.

Again the Buddhist monks take the lead and throw the lifeline to the homeless and suffering victims of Cyclone Nargis. Although the government-controlled press is not allowed to report it, nationwide monks organized their donors to bring help to the remotest villages in the remotest corners of the Delta. At 3 a.m. we are ready to go: two monks, 25 private donors and one foreigner. Whatever the agreement between the General Than Shwe and UN General Secretary Ban Ki-moon might mean in detail, foreign helpers are still not allowed to go outside Rangoon without a written government permit. So I climb on the back of the truck in the midst of bags of rice, yellow beans, instant noodle packages and tarpaulin sheets surrounded by a group of young Burmese girls and boys; everybody is excited to go to help and donate life-saving supplies to very remote villagers who struggle without outside help for three weeks already.

About 15 miles from Rangoon city centre we reach the first check-point of the police and military; I pull the blanket over my head, pretending to sleep being hidden from the curious views of the junta-authorities by my young Burmese travel companions. Burma is the only country where a foreigner has to beg that his aid is accepted and where I have to sneak in under a blanket to avoid governmental rebuff.

We rush over the bumpy, bad roads towards De Da Ye at one of the major outlets of the Irrawaddy River to the sea. Peeking from my hiding place, the scene is of utter devastation; in the dark under the star-lit sky, decapitated coconut trees, broken Pagodas with toppled golden spires, knocked over electricity poles and many, many destroyed houses, some black and burnt, some patched up temporarily with palm leaves and tarpaulin sheets pass by. Occasionally we have to stop as the bad road conditions take their toll; our cargo gets dislocated and bean and instant-noodles bags come down on the travellers on the loading space of the truck.

After more than three hours, passing another two checkpoints and some show-piece government-run evacuation camps we reach De Da Ye. We have to continue our journey by boat for no roads lead to the paddy fields and the villages in the Delta. Here, I am safe to leave my hiding place; the locals do not mind foreigners and I get many friendly and encouraging smiles. Everybody is angry and disillusioned about the lack of assistance from the military junta; the military confines its resources to man check points and to guard the tents of the government evacuation camps; probably, they are afraid that the shiny blue tents will get stolen. In contrast, people are very supportive of the monks and greet them with utmost respect; without the help of the monks and

the aid of their private donors no aid would arrive.

The pier is chaotically busy as many different groups of monks accompanied by their private donors arrive in the morning and all have to reload the aid in boats. Finally, we are on our way South; we pass cyclone ravaged villages; it looks like being in a war zone; most of the bamboo houses are destroyed; toppled bamboo skeletons point their fingers at the sky; most of the more solid structures are severely damaged: roofs gone and walls cracked by falling trees. We pass huge islands with vast paddy fields in midst of the river but hardly any people are to be seen. The tidal wave of 12 feet washed away the houses, their inhabitants and their animals leaving only some bamboo and palm leaves hanging in the broken trees far above the ground. Frequently, we pass cadavers of water buffaloes floating at the river banks, the stench of the decaying carcasses is overpowering.

After more than two hours we reach our first village, a small river fishing and farming community of about 150 members. They were somewhat lucky as they live on a raised piece of land and the tidal wave was only about five feet high; they only lost seven of their 25 houses. However, all houses have been damaged by the cyclone, over-turned or roofs gone. The survivors are desperate; they didn't have rice for days, they don't have clothing other than that what they wear and they need material to patch up their houses urgently. We provide them with rice, yellow beans, instant noodles, clothing, flip flops, candles and tarpaulin sheets. We get big smiles from the children for some biscuits and candies.

We want to continue to our final destination, a large village community with about 1,200 people further inland. But first have to reload some of our heaviest cargo to smaller boats as our big, fully loaded boat cannot navigate the small creek of 12 to 16 feet in width. Nevertheless, we only progress at walking speed through the small waterway and it takes us more than two hours to reach the village. On our way we pass through endless paddy fields, destroyed houses and broken trees. Too seldom we meet some survivors who are trying to rebuild their isolated houses; we hand-out food, clothing, flip-flops and candles. Finally, we arrive in the large village, it's 80 per cent destroyed. The houses used to be lined up like a string of pearls along the central pathway. Now, only the pathway reminds of the many houses which used to be the home for large families: 150 houses of a total of 185 are completely gone, only broken water jars and remains of fences allow us to imagine the magnitude of the disaster. Some 50 people drowned during the cyclone or are still missing. Most of the livelihood is destroyed: the water buffalos and the pigs are dead, the rice stores swept away or are rotten, the paddy fields full of seawater. The survivors depend on outside help and squeeze into the few remaining buildings and the Buddhist monastery. The monastery is the only solid stone building which weathered the cyclone largely undamaged. Here the local monks do whatever they can to relieve the sufferings of the villagers and to distribute the donations from private donors. Even more than three weeks after the cyclone no government official has shown up yet and international help is not in sight. When we unload the cargo and bring the donations to the monastery hundreds of children and adults await us with gleaming eyes, full of gratitude; the food will help them to survive a couple of days longer.

How will they survive the next couple of months? As many remote villages they are too far away

from the reach of the few international NGOs which are allowed into the Delta, their paddy fields are spoilt for the next couple of months by the seawater, their water buffalos are dead and the rice seeds destroyed. On our way back to Rangoon we face thousands of homeless and destitute survivors of the cyclone lining the roads from the Delta towards Rangoon. Even at night in total darkness, children and adults, men and women line both sides of the roads begging passengers of the passing cars for food, water and clothing. They have given up hope that the State will assist them in their misery in any way; they never experienced a ruler or government which feels socially responsible for its subjects.

After 20 hours we are back in Rangoon and our monk leaders rush away quickly; they are on the phone already to plan the next relief missions for the coming days. Time is of essence; too many lives are at stake.