

Is Myanmar Opening Up?

Simon SC Tay *for* TODAY

For too long after the Nargis cyclone hit Myanmar, the regime and concerned countries sparred. International observers claimed little or nothing was being done, and some even proposed forcing assistance on the country. In contrast, Myanmar officials were photographed in front of state cameras, handing out provisions at neat and orderly camps, and said they were on top of things.

In this last week, however, three events make us hope that this impasse has been resolved. A door now seems to be opening up for assistance into Myanmar.

First, on Monday, ASEAN ministers issued a statement that they will lead a coordinating mechanism and form a task force under Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan. In the statement, Myanmar also agreed to immediately accept medical teams from all ASEAN member states.

Second, just on Friday, after several abortive phone calls, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon met in Naypidaw with veteran junta leader, Than Shwe, and won approval for foreign aid workers to enter the country.

Third, just on Sunday, an international conference was held in Yangon with 50 countries present to pledge assistance.

Such developments should be welcome; better late than never. Little time remains to avert a second catastrophe for survivors who face the dangers of famine and the spread of disease.

But questions remain on how wide the door is really open. After decades of estrangement between Myanmar and the West over human rights and the treatment of Aung San Suu Kyi, many will be skeptical that the generals have had a change of heart. Cynics even suggest that the prospect of receiving and siphoning off billion dollar donations is what is motivating the generals.

The international pledging conference signals the on going tensions between Myanmar and would be donors. The generals say some \$11 billion is needed. The USA and other countries want guarantees of full and unhindered access as a precondition. Similarly while US and European military ships stand ready to deliver assistance, the generals are reported to require that these supplies be transferred first to smaller ships.

Such tensions between urgent international assistance and perceived external "interference" will not be decisively resolved at the conference. They will continue to require management as assistance efforts roll out.

Even in the earlier ASEAN statement, Myanmar's pledge to accept international assistance was on the proviso that such aid is not "politicized". That term was left

undefined. But the likely proviso is that those who wish to assist must aside put human rights criticism.

Yet the ASEAN statement also says the coordinating mechanism set up will draw on the Indonesian experience with the 2004 Tsunami. In that case, the previously closed society of Aceh opened up to assistance from a wide range of sources. This led not just to rehabilitation but also opened a door to political reconciliation. The generals in Myanmar will not willingly go down that path.

An alternative example with more likely appeal is from the concurrent tragedy of the earthquakes near Chengdu. In contrast to the initial reaction in Myanmar, the Chinese have given timely and high level attention to the disaster, and allowed an unprecedented openness to foreign assistance. In so doing, the Chinese leaders have won much approval of the international community and reinforced their legitimacy among their citizens.

The Myanmar generals may be similarly motivated. This is especially as some reports suggest that the monks, who led widespread protests late last year, have provided assistance to Nargis victims, increasing their wider role outside the temples.

ASEAN has played a significant role as an advocate. Even if much of their diplomacy has been behind the scenes, key states in the group have helped Myanmar open up, notwithstanding ASEAN's strong statement last year after the violence in the streets. Notably, ASEAN chair and Singapore's foreign minister George Yeo co-chaired the international donors meeting, alongside the UN.

Having helped open Myanmar's door, ASEAN must help maintain a comfort level among the generals and help manage relations with donor countries.

This role must continue even after these signs of openness and the UN is now in the picture. There is a real risk that the generals will renege on their statements and close the door if pushed.

ASEAN's credibility is in the spotlight. It can ill afford to fail. Yet ASEAN has never been a crisis manager of this type or on the scale required to effectively and urgently help hundreds of thousands in the storm-hit Irrawaddy Delta. It is not clear how they will work alongside the UN and other agencies.

If the group cannot deliver, and if the generals pull back, ASEAN may end up a discredited fig leaf for the generals. Yet, despite these risks of failure, ASEAN cannot but make the effort.

This is more than the expectation of the international community. Humanitarian crises evoke a sense of shared ASEAN citizenship, like the 2004 Tsunami, when sentiments flowed across borders regardless of sovereignty.

Helping in Myanmar can and must be seen as part of the commitment to build an ASEAN Community. After all, the ASEAN Charter, which member states aim to ratify by the end of 2008, addresses the “peoples” of the region.

It is fitting that ASEAN takes collective responsibility to work with the regime in Myanmar, alongside the UN and other states. Despite the attendant difficulties and critical pressures of time, the victims in Myanmar require all the help and more, and the peoples of ASEAN are right to expect no less.

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