

Strategy and Priorities in Addressing the Humanitarian Situation in Burma

Presentation Notes

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Richard Horsey has a long-standing involvement in the situation in Myanmar. After spending a year travelling in the country and its border areas in the early 1990s he decided to make Burmese language and Asian studies a focus of his undergraduate degree.

In 1997 he joined the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Geneva, where he was appointed to the secretariat of a Commission of Inquiry into forced labor in Myanmar. A year later, after the Commission's work was completed, he left the ILO to begin doctoral studies in London.

From 2000 to 2007, he rejoined the ILO. During this time he took part in a series of groundbreaking missions to the country for discussions with the SPDC leadership, with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and with ethnic representatives; he subsequently served for a number of years as the interim ILO representative in Myanmar.

After leaving the ILO, he worked as a consultant, mainly focusing on political and humanitarian issues in Myanmar. After Cyclone Nargis struck in May 2008, he was appointed by UNOCHA as Senior Adviser on Myanmar, based in Bangkok. Richard Horsey is currently an Open Society Fellow. He is a fluent Burmese speaker and holds a PhD in psychology.

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1. The humanitarian situation is dire and getting worse

- Humanitarian situation remains serious (key issues include maternal and child health, as well as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria, which together take a very high death toll).
- Poverty is accelerating. The economy has been in poor shape for a long time, and traditional social safety-nets are eroding. Detailed studies conducted by the UN have shown that very large numbers of people are living in poverty, and that many more are living precariously just above the poverty line, so that any economic shock will push them into poverty.

This is compounded by two factors:

- The global economic crisis is having a serious impact across the country (hitting all levels, worse than thought)
- Longstanding conflict, insecurity, and abuse continue in many areas – for example northern Rakhine State, south-east Burma, and many ceasefire areas.

2. Humanitarian space is constrained, but not being fully utilized

- It is vital to make full use of the space that exists, both as a humanitarian imperative and as an important strategic consideration.
- For example, space exists for more of the following: urgent lifesaving interventions (antiretroviral therapies, malaria and tuberculosis programs; primary health initiatives in particular those addressing early childhood mortality), and various livelihoods activities at local community level.

3. A more development-oriented approach is needed, together with a significant increase in overall resources

Taking a short-term humanitarian approach is inefficient, because:

- It excludes some key areas where support is needed (reforming out-dated and ineffective socio-economic policies; capacity building; tackling poverty; post-Nargis recovery).

- It creates funding uncertainties and problems for longer-term programs and planning, since most humanitarian funding is single-year.
- It prioritizes short-term results over medium-term impact, both in project design and in project evaluation.

4. Significant levels of continued support are required for the Delta

- The people affected by Nargis received only one-tenth of the support provided to post-tsunami Aceh, a similar-sized disaster.
- This means that while the minimum emergency life-saving support did reach those affected, not enough has been done to enable people to get back on their feet. In particular, shelter and agriculture received the least support from donors in the first year.
- For shelter, this means that there has not been enough money for any large-scale provision of durable houses. Very large numbers of people are still living in makeshift shelters, under damaged plastic sheeting. This will not last through the current monsoon season (starting now), which means that additional distributions of emergency shelter may be required. There is currently no funding for this.
- For agriculture, it means that many farmers have not been able to access the credit and inputs that they need. This has an impact on the food security and livelihoods of farming families, but also an impact on the population as a whole. Farms are the engine of the rural economy in Burma and the source of rural jobs, without which poor families (who are mostly landless) will be unable to survive.
- More also needs to be done to return the area to water-security – rehabilitation of village water ponds and tube wells (many still having salinity problems), and the expansion of durable water solutions (tube wells, rainwater collection and storage, and so on).
- As I mentioned earlier, there are two reasons why it is critical to provide continued significant levels of support to the people of the Delta. First is the humanitarian imperative to do so: these people desperately need and deserve our support. Second is the

strategic consideration. Having pushed for, and successfully obtained, considerable humanitarian space in the Delta, if we fail to fill that space it will be difficult to consolidate the gains we have made, and very difficult to advocate for more space in other areas of the country.

- While in general we cannot say at this stage that the positive experience in the Delta has translated into greater humanitarian space in other parts of the country, it has certainly created a more open and constructive working environment, and has contributed to better communication and less suspicion between the government and aid agencies.
- But there are some examples that demonstrate a positive impact outside the Delta. The International Labour Organization (ILO) is one of these. After Nargis, the ILO developed a program for rehabilitating village infrastructure in the Delta (footpaths, jetties, village roads). This is a well-tested methodology for recovery and employment-creation after disasters which the ILO has a great deal of experience with. This program also gave the ILO a field presence which was important in providing a good understanding of the situation as regards its main concern in the country, forced labor – helping to reassure the organization that there was no major recourse to forced labor following the cyclone. As a result of this experience in the Delta, the government has expressed a willingness to consider similar ILO projects in other parts of the country where there *is* more of a forced labor problem. This is something that the ILO has been interested in doing for a number of years.

5. The assistance community needs to position itself now to take advantage of opportunities that may arise in the future

- In the coming year or so leading up to the 2010 elections in Burma, we can expect a somewhat more difficult operating environment for aid agencies. But this should not blind us to the fact that there may also be opportunities in this *pre-election* period. For example, it is likely to become more difficult to get decisions from the government – because decision makers will have other priorities, and because bureaucrats will be reluctant to take any decision without political guidance. But existing programs, unless they are seen as being particularly politically sensitive, are unlikely to be interfered with

either – for the same reasons, and because political officials may be reluctant to be seen to be preventing assistance reaching electorates.

- We must also recognize that, however flawed the election process will likely be, there will be important new opportunities in the *post-election* period. Many observers have quite rightly seen the election process in Burma as deeply *flawed*, but most have therefore also tended to underestimate its *significance*. This is a mistake. The election will bring about major institutional and political changes – not necessarily changes for the better, but changes nonetheless. These changes will be difficult for the regime to control, and will lead to new opportunities.
- Similar considerations apply when it comes to humanitarian assistance. Nothing in the election process should give us much confidence that either the humanitarian situation or the operating environment for assistance agencies will significantly improve as a result of the elections. But there will be significant changes, and therefore also opportunities.
- It is difficult to predict accurately in advance where the opportunities will be, but here are some possibilities:
 - *A technocratic shift?* The constitution makes clear that the army's main concern, as one might expect, is defense, security and border affairs. It has always been less concerned with social issues, and it is very possible that social ministries will be able to be run in a more technocratic way. It may therefore be that the main obstacle to better socio-economic policies will be technical capacity rather than political will. This presents an opportunity for the international community to help achieve some of the policy reforms that we have long wanted to see.
 - *A move towards more populist policies?* Elections, even those that are not free and fair, change the political equation for elected officials. We are already seeing that public reputation is starting to become important, and that as a result the situation of the electorate is becoming a factor in a way that it never was in the past. This also may facilitate efforts at policy reform.

- *More space at the local level, particularly in ceasefire areas?* One of the significant changes following the election will be the establishment of fourteen regional legislatures and governments. There will only be very limited devolution of political power to this level, but it is in the social-service areas that there may be some space. There will have to be some Kachin ministers in the Kachin state government, for example, and we can imagine that they are more likely to be in health and education than in the security ministries. The same applies to the special regions (semi-autonomous areas *within* the fourteen states/regions).
- Providing assistance to ethnic and ceasefire regions is important both because of the serious humanitarian and development situation in those areas, and because this can also help to consolidate peace in areas that still cannot be described as “peaceful.” This is very important, as a proliferation of armed groups and militias in these areas, all of whom are vying for control of resources and populations, is very worrying.
- *More debate over the needs of communities?* It seems probable that there will be a relatively large number of “independents” (that is, legislative members who are not a part of any party), both at the national and the regional level. One of the reasons for this is that well-established parties with a national political agenda, other than those allied with the regime, are likely to face significant hurdles. One effect of this will be a kind of “legislative parochialism” – with legislative discussions potentially dominated by a plethora of local issues. This would tend to stifle debate of national political issues, but a small positive benefit may be that at least some local issues and concerns can be heard in a way that is impossible at present.

6. *What role for the international system?*

- International organizations should shift to a more development-oriented approach. There should also be a greater emphasis on capacity building. The World Bank could potentially have an important role here (*not* lending, but technical assistance).

- We need to adjust the traditional approach to providing assistance to Burma, which in general has attempted to *bypass* government. While in many ways this approach is correct – the best method for delivering much assistance *is* at the local level directly to communities – this does not mean that the goal should be to bypass or ignore government completely, for two reasons. First, government structures have the responsibility to provide services and the geographical reach to do so – in health and education, for example – and it would be impractical and unhelpful to avoid these structures. Second, we want to educate government officials, both at the local and national level, about better approaches and better policies. Many of the governance problems in the country have more to do with outdated approaches and poor capacity than with deliberately abusive policies.
- At the same time, we certainly need to be aware of the fact that this is a regime that *does* have abusive policies and we must ensure that our efforts do not in any way reinforce those policies. This is something that agencies on the ground are generally quite sensitive to, and the ILO experience can I think be instructive in this regard.
- In short, we should give a greater emphasis to policy dialogue and reform.
- It is also clear, as I said at the outset, that a significant increase in resources is needed for Burma.

7. How to navigate the political waters?

There will be some constraints on the operating environment as we move towards the 2010 elections. We should expect short-term difficulties, but should also understand that these will probably be temporary. By remaining engaged, we will be able to quickly seize opportunities that arise. This is a conclusion that applies equally to the political and humanitarian spheres.