

# Norway: Presentation Notes

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Ambassador Wegger Christian Strommen the Ambassador of Norway to the United States. He came to Washington, D.C. in 2007, after serving as Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva since 2005. He was Norway's Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York from 2002-2005, served on the Security Council during Norway's tenure from 2000-2002 and as Norway's Deputy Foreign Minister from 1999 - 2000. Ambassador Strommen joined the Norwegian foreign service in 1984 and has also practiced as an international lawyer. He is married to Reverend Cecilie J. Strommen and they have two daughters.

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**Summary:** The aftermath of Cyclone Nargis showed that it is possible to provide assistance in Burma. After the first weeks of denying access for international humanitarian aid, access to the delta area is now good. Several international organisations are established there. The needs are greater than there is funding available. The needs are great in all of the country. The present time also represents opportunities for engagement.

- Deep concern about the humanitarian situation for the Burmese people and the political oppression and deprivation of human rights that they face. One of the main challenges in Burma is the overwhelming humanitarian need all over the country.
- The root causes of the dire humanitarian situation lie in decades of failed policies that have disregarded the population's basic needs and human rights. There will be no long-term relief without a democratic Burma.
- But: Burma receives less than three dollars a head in humanitarian assistance. This is extremely low compared with other countries in the region with a similar level of economic and social development.
- Providing assistance to Burma is challenging, but possible, as we have seen in connection with Cyclone Nargis and the establishment of the Tripartite Core Group (TCG) that coordinates and facilitates assistance to the delta area. The TCG is a novel concept (UN + regional organisation (ASEAN) + authorities) which can be used as a facilitating mechanism in other disaster areas.
- We should not forget that the first response to the cyclone disaster came from local people: NGOs, local employees of UN and INGOs, businesses, monasteries, government authorities, as well as from loose networks of "concerned citizens". Without these efforts Cyclone Nargis would have had a greater destructive impact.
- Norway has been increasing its funding to Burma in recent years. We provide assistance through the UN, through Norwegian NGOs established in Burma and through Burmese CBOs. In addition we provide humanitarian assistance to Burmese refugees in Thailand.
- Many Burmese representatives of civil society are critical of the (Western) policy of isolating Burma. They ask us to revisit the discussion on this strategy. After the cyclone hit the delta, the only right thing to do was to seek cooperation with the regime through the UN, ASEAN and the countries in the region.

- However flawed it may be, Burma will have a general election in 2010. This will be the first national election in 20 years and it will usher in a new constitution, a “civilian” president, a bicameral legislature, 14 regional assemblies and regional governments. The election will leave the military with substantial power, but the election also represents a significant political shift that may provide surprises.
- The opening for international assistance after Cyclone Nargis + the amount of organising of different CBOs at local, regional and national level in Burma + national elections + generational change in the top military = opportunities for change.
- In this context: We welcome Secretary Clinton’s call for a policy review.
- We should look at the humanitarian space that does exist and ask how we – donor countries – better can fill it. Funding is one issue, and we are pleased to see that the US has increased its funding inside Burma – indeed the US was one of the largest donors of humanitarian emergency relief after Cyclone Nargis.
- The provision of assistance for reconstruction is politically more challenging as we have to engage with government somehow (for example: rebuilding schools and hospitals, repairing infrastructure – these are all “owned” by the government). If we do not engage and provide funding, it is ultimately the people of the delta who will suffer.
- At same time we know about the dire humanitarian situation in most of Burma due to failed policies as well as to natural phenomena. How do we engage Burmese authorities in policy dialogue on health, education, agriculture, fisheries? Do we go through ASEAN as a first step? It would be good for the people of Burma if Burmese leaders could learn from best practices elsewhere.
- It is good to engage Burmese authorities through the UN, but we must also remove restrictions. Example: UNDP’s mandate and funding for Burma is restricted by the Board (due to US pressure). Members of the Board of UNDP should look again at the mandate and funding with a view to removing restrictions that hamper UNDP’s development agenda in Burma.

- Whereas sanctions will not be removed overnight, we need to think about how we meet the new Burmese government after the elections next year. By immediately banning them from travelling to US and Europe?
- What about some of the trade sanctions that are directly detrimental to people that work in fisheries and agriculture and in textile production? For example, donor countries are spending taxpayer's money to up-grade and reconstruct the fishing industry in the Irrawaddy delta after Cyclone Nargis, but we will not accord the same fishing industry trade preferences as we would to fishing industry from other Least Developed Countries (GSP).
- We should in other words, as many Burmese want us to, revisit the discussion on isolation vs. engagement. Norway has a long history of emphasising dialogue even in situations where we strongly disagree with our dialogue partners – indeed even when they are considered terrorists by most of our friends.
- In Burma we contribute to isolating a regime that is very comfortable with isolation. It can clearly be argued, as the Norwegian Minister for International Development has done, that it would be a better strategy to challenge and expose the regime in Nay Pyi Taw. Let them travel and discover how much Burma is the odd one out, in the region and internationally.
- Many of us have been waiting for sudden change in Burma for the past twenty years, hoping and praying there would be change tomorrow, next week, next year. I think we must recognize that change in Burma will take a long time, but that there may be a window of opportunity now to engage with and support those inside the country who wish to engage with the international community.

The effects of natural disasters can be very different. In Aceh, it is generally believed that the tsunami was a major factor in bringing about an end to the conflict. In Sri Lanka, however, the tsunami had the opposite effect. What the effect of Cyclone Nargis will be on Burma, I will not speculate on, but many believe it has created opportunities that were not there before.