Memorandum

To: Dr. Genie Stowers, Ph.D.
Fr: Steve Adami
Re: Getting Help to Victims of 2008 Cyclone Nargis: AmeriCares Engages with Myanmar’s Military Government
Date: March 12, 2014

Introduction

Cyclone Nargis impacted the sovereign nation of Myanmar and challenged its ability to protect and provide for its citizens. The international relief effort that followed was fragmented and faced numerous bureaucratic obstacles. This memorandum highlights the 3 main issues that hindered the relief efforts: (1) the Myanmar government’s lack of a disaster response plan, (2) inadequate access to Myanmar from the international community, and (3) the absence of effective collaborative/network governance.

Issue # 1: Myanmar’s Government Lack a Disaster Preparedness/Response Plan

An issue central to this case was the Myanmar’s military government’s lack of preparedness to respond to large scale disasters. The Myanmar government was not equipped to deal with the externalities and aftermath of Cyclone Nargis and lacked the internal structures, policies, capacity, and knowledge to safeguard its citizens from a catastrophe (Roman, 2010; Adams & Balfour, 2009). The Myanmar government did not have a crisis management plan, nor the resources or experience, to deal with such an event. As a result, assistance from the international community was needed (Selth, 2008).

The regime initially refused aid from other countries and international organizations. Once they did approve aid it could only come in the form of supplies, not medical personnel. After the disaster hit, the government was attempting to plan and execute a response in the midst of establishing regulations and protocols to manage aid from the international community. While citizens of Myanmar were suffering, shipments of aid lay in government warehouses due to the lack of capacity to regulate its inspection policies and deliver supplies to affected areas—a form of administrative evil (Adams & Balfour, 2009). This undermined the government’s accountability to its citizens (Talbot, 2005; Adams & Balfour, 2009). After declaring a national emergency, the Myanmar government took several days to dispatch the military to distribute food and other aid. Myanmar’s response to send the army to the delta proved unsuccessful as they were more interested in setting up road blocks to stop others from delivering aid and stopping survivors from escaping.

Recommendations:

1. Through the Ministry of Social Welfare, the Myanmar government should form a disaster/catastrophe relief committee who meet regularly to develop and implement emergency response and contingency plans for each type of catastrophes known to impact the region. The plan should include crisis management, and formal protocols to receive aid from the international community and INGO’s.

2. The Ministry of Social Welfare should build its capacity to deliver aid by utilizing contingency plans, mobilizing volunteers, warehouses, and landing strips, both inside and outside its primary population centers. The focus of the plan should include the ability to mobilize aid, deliver it to impacted regions, and assist those in distress.
3. Myanmar’s government should train its own disaster teams. Immediately after a disaster, teams should be dispatched to impacted regions to assess the situation and inform the relief effort that will follow their assessment.

**Issue # 2: Inadequate Access to Myanmar from International Community/International Politics**

INGO’s and the international community had limited access to Myanmar. The military government of Myanmar had restricted the ability of INGO’s, as well as international actors, to enter their country making relief efforts complicated, fragmented, and extremely slow. Sanctions imposed by the United States and the international community, in an attempt to change the political power of Myanmar and overturn the military government, hindered the relief effort. Myanmar denied access to the impacted areas and would not permit visas to INGO’s offering assistance. Paranoid the relief efforts would spark an attempt to overthrow their government, Myanmar made their policies stricter causing greater calamity for their citizens. In essence, the regime’s top priority was not its citizens but its sovereign security. The actions of the Myanmar government raise concerns about ethical practices and social equity. Ethical standards and social equity is the basis for a just society (Frederickson, 2010). Myanmar’s management of international agencies was disorderly. The government implemented ad hoc procedures and conflicting orders creating bureaucratic obstacles to receiving aid.

**Recommendations:**

1. AmeriCares representatives Goodwin and Coos should have tried to partner with an INGO with prior approval to ship supplies to Myanmar. Simultaneously, they should have continued to forge a partnership with the Myanmar government, namely those with political clout for visas and cargo inspection, attempting to expedite their shipment of aid.
2. The international community should have immediately met with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to negotiate a treaty in which aid could have been delivered through ASEAN representatives immediately after the catastrophe.
3. The UN Security Council should have adopted and implemented the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, which allows aid to be delivered to victims in need when governments will not cooperate.

**Issue # 3: Absence of collaborative/network governance: Politics over People**

Due to Myanmar’s military rule, the country has been isolated from the rest of the world. Putting politics and power over saving the lives of people was unethical (Menzel, 2012). The unethical actions on behalf of the actors—national and international—manifested itself in a lack of collaboration and coordination between Myanmar and the international community (Frederickson, 2010). Systemic problems plagued the international relief efforts to cyclone Nargis. The relief surge was full of independent actors responding in their own individual ways. The relief efforts were ad hoc, polluted, and non-collaborative. To ensure successful relief operations, the international community needs effective coordination and collaboration in response to humanitarian crises (Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004). This is identified in the PA concept of network governance/theory because effective coordination and communication shape the rules of engagement and determines the strengths and volatility of partnerships in a collaborative effort (Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004).

**Recommendations:**

1. The United Nations should coordinate an international disaster management system focusing on an integrated approach guaranteeing coordination of disaster relief operations and collaboration from the international community emphasizing the well-being of the individuals affected.
2. The main objective of all humanitarian negotiations on behalf of the Myanmar government and the international community should focus on access (impartial assessment to the needs of the people), assistance (providing needed aid programs in a timely and effective manner), and protection (respecting humanitarian international laws, rules, regulations). These are essential to protect citizens marginalized by events beyond their control.

3. The Myanmar government should evaluate its actions and capacity after the disaster in order to formulate a plan for future relief efforts. Emphasis should be laid on unified policies, timely evacuation protocols, and education community members proactively.

References


