

Myanmar's perspective on US and Japan cooperation and coordination on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief in South and Southeast Asia

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Southeast Asia is prone to frequent natural disasters. In recent years, natural disasters have increased in frequency and intensity causing untold suffering to human beings and damage to properties. Myanmar, situated in Southeast Asia, has a long coastline stretching over 1,500 miles. This coastline is directly exposed to the Bay of Bengal and further south to the Indian Ocean. Myanmar in the past has suffered from natural disasters such as cyclones and storm surges. The most serious natural disaster to strike Myanmar is the Cyclone Nargis in May 2008 causing almost 140,000 deaths and affecting more than 2 million people. Cyclone Nargis brought damage to Myanmar in a dimension so vast which the country has never encountered before in its history. The wind speed of the cyclone reached over 200 km/h and the southern part of the Ayeyarwaddy delta experienced storm surges of 4 to 5 meters high. The cyclone hit the delta region and some parts of Yangon region including the city of Yangon.

Another type of disaster is man-made like armed conflicts and destruction of the environment. Myanmar since independence in 1948 went through a long period of armed conflicts between government forces and armed ethnic groups as well as armed ideological groups, such as the Burma Communist Party. Caught between these conflicts our people suffered untold miseries, loss of lives and properties. The country has just come out of military rule which lasted in one form or another for over fifty years. During the Revolutionary Council period, which lasted from 1962 to 1974, and the one-party Socialist Government from 1974 to 1988 and the SLORC/SPDC era from 1988 until March 2011, successive military governments ruled Myanmar. The military governments were highly distrustful and suspicious of foreigners. In dealing with foreigners, xenophobia was the order of the day. During the first two eras of military rule the country imposed self isolation. Myanmar experienced natural disasters such as cyclones striking the western State of Rakhine and the southern part of the delta region. It also experienced several major earthquakes as well as flooding due to the heavy monsoon rains. Major cities such as Sagaing and Mandalay in the north and the new capital city Nay Pyi Taw, Bago and the port city of Yangon all lie along the Sagaing fault which has seen major earthquakes over the past one hundred years. Recently, last year several earthquakes of moderate intensity of around 5.8 on the Richter scale shook Mandalay and Shwebo and the vicinity of these two cities causing widespread destruction to pagodas, houses, schools and hospitals. They also resulted in a number of deaths and several injuries. There were over hundred aftershocks. In such cases of severe

calamities, relief and rehabilitation were carried out mainly by the government and the Myanmar Red Cross. Rarely did Myanmar accept international humanitarian assistance due to the xenophobic nature of the government. This was also true of the sufferings endured by the people as a result of armed conflicts between the government armed forces and various ethnic and ideological armed groups. The government never requested international assistance to relieve the miseries of the people.

Cyclone Nargis hit the southwest coastal areas of Myanmar on the afternoon of 2 May 2008, devastating towns and villages on its path sweeping through the southern delta of the Ayeyarwaddy and Yangon region and extending its wrath and fury to the following day. It is the most devastating cyclone to strike the Asia Pacific region since 1991. Apart from its huge death toll and massive damage to physical assets, losses in terms of the economy amounted to approximately 4,500 billion kyats equivalent to around USD 4,057 millions. Despite the country suffering, huge losses and damage, instead of taking prompt necessary measures for the relief of the affected regions and people, the government went ahead with the scheduled 10 May 2008 referendum on the draft constitution. This in spite of calls by the international community to postpone the referendum. The resources required for the disaster relief were expended for the referendum. The international community offered prompt humanitarian assistance upon learning of the severity of the damage inflicted, however the government failed to respond to this offer and proceeded to tackle the problem only through its own means and limited resources. The delay in accepting assistance from the international community was severely criticized from within and outside the country. A National Disaster Preparedness Central Committee was formed on 3 May 2008 with Prime Minister General Thein Sein at its head. However, the dimensions of the damage caused by the cyclone were overwhelming that it was a huge challenge for the government to respond to the urgency of the problem. Later on, the Foreign Minister stated publicly to the world that Myanmar was in need of assistance to respond to the disaster. Meantime, the public spontaneously responded to the relief efforts for the people in the affected areas providing emergency relief supplies, but these efforts were not coordinated with measures taken by the government. Therefore, the public's response was not effective as it really should be.

Within days of the cyclone, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers decided to establish the ASEAN-led co-ordinating mechanism for the post-Nargis response. As a result, the Tripartite Core Group (TCG) was formed to provide an operational umbrella to facilitate and lead the post-Nargis effort. The TCG brought together the Government of Myanmar, ASEAN, the United Nations and International NGOs. The Government and people of Myanmar in cooperation with the humanitarian community made sustained efforts to help communities in the delta rebuild their lives. The TCG submitted on 9 February 2009 the Post-Nargis Recovery Preparedness Plan outlining a three-year strategy plan from 2009 to 2011 for consolidating progress and

promoting resilient and enduring recovery in the affected areas. The report provides a framework for assistance from the international community that complements the government's own reconstruction plans. Disaster management is today no longer a phenomenon that can be implemented or achieved by a group of individual, community or society or nation alone. It cannot do without international support and assistance.

As mentioned earlier, Myanmar has seen the longest armed conflict between the government forces and armed groups in the world. The national reconciliation efforts exerted by the present government has brought about significant results in achieving peace agreements with the armed ethnic groups. Out of 17 groups, already 16 groups have come into terms with the government to sign ceasefire agreements with the government, in fact some of them have already initiated political dialogue with the government. There remains only one major armed group which has yet to adopt ceasefire with the central authority. The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) is still negotiating with the authority for an eventual agreement to stop the fighting in Kachin State. The fighting resulted in a large number of refugees. Villagers in Kachin State have been displaced and living in dire conditions. International humanitarian assistance is needed for these people and of late assistance in the form of clothings, medicines, food supplies and other home utensils have been provided to them through UN agencies as well as the government and the Myanmar Red Cross. However, due to the security situation in Kachin State direct humanitarian assistance by foreign countries is still not permitted.

Another man-made disaster occurred in Rakhine State in the western part of the country. Here, communal violence between local Rakhine residents and illegal Bengali immigrants has taken place. The outbreak of violence started two years ago and due to lack of trust flare-ups occur from time to time. It is believed that there is both external and internal instigation to create troubles between the two communities. International humanitarian assistance has been forthcoming to the affected parts of Rakhine State. As in the case of the Kachin refugees such assistance has to be channeled through government departments or UN agencies or the Myanmar Red Cross.

In the light of the above circumstances, Myanmar cautiously welcomes increased cooperation and coordination between the United States and Japan on HADR operations in South and Southeast Asia. The tensions between the US and China; China and Japan on issues such as the South China and East China Seas and the mistrust between China and South Korea on the one hand and Japan on the other deserve to be taken into consideration when the US and Japan enhance their operations on HADR in the region. China's concerns and suspicions to such cooperation and coordination between the US and Japan should be given due attention. China should be comfortable on the strategic alliance between US and

Japan on HADR operations. To allay the concerns of China, complete transparency should be given in HADR activities. Myanmar as a neighbour of China shares a long common border of 2,400 kms. It has good relations with China at the level of strategic partnership. On the other hand, because of the recent improvement of relations between Myanmar and the US, Myanmar wishes to see cooperation and not confrontation between the US and China. Moreover, it is imperative to maintain a peaceful and stable environment in the Asia-Pacific region for the benefit of the entire community in the region. As such Myanmar also desires that any activity between the US and Japan would not disturb the status quo in the region. As a small country the major security concern of Myanmar is to maintain its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Thus, in any situation concerning the region Myanmar has to take into account the existing relations between the major powers.

As for Myanmar, it enjoys a certain level of comfort with the mechanisms and institutions already existing within the framework of ASEAN, ARF, ASEAN+1 and ASEAN+3 in the area of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. It would be in the interests of ASEAN to explore ways and means to strengthen ASEAN HADR mechanisms and institutions in cooperation with the US-Japan strategic alliance on the issue. Moreover, it would be good to bring on board other major powers in the region into the framework of HADR operations which the US and Japan intend to strengthen. For instance, China as a country prone to major earthquakes, severe floods and typhoons has a wealth of knowledge and experience on HADR operations. It also has the capacity and resources to deal with such situations.

The people of Myanmar have a strong resilience to natural calamities and man-made disasters. The post-Nargis experience has shown that in spite of the huge sufferings faced by the people they continued their lives looking forward to a brighter future. This is a strong characteristic of Myanmar people and it is upon this foundation that the national resilience has been rooted.

However, Myanmar in the face of numerous catastrophes lack the capacity in its officials, civil societies and national NGOs. Assistance and support in this area are to be welcomed. There is also an urgent need to raise the capacity of institutions such as providing modern equipment for the prediction of accurate weather conditions especially adverse climate events. Disaster preparedness at all levels including the public, civil societies and government institutions through public awareness campaigns and education should be enhanced through the assistance of the US-Japan HADR strategic alliance.

