

## Two new reports on Nargis relief disappoint

Two new reports released this month examine relief efforts after Cyclone Nargis. One, by the International Crisis Group, proposes the normalizing of aid relations with Myanmar. The other, by a conglomerate of groups based over the border, critiques the work of the United Nations and international agencies in responding to the disaster. Neither achieves what it sets out to do.

Readers familiar with the ICG publishing style will move swiftly through the usual preliminary contents and into the guts of the report, [Burma/Myanmar after Nargis: Time to Normalize Aid Relations](#), which the group says has been written following talks with “government officials, activists, diplomats and representatives of international and local aid groups.” The report documents domestic, regional and global responses to the disaster; posits reasons for certain aspects of the government’s behaviour, and, its authors assert, makes a case for normalizing aid relations through high-level dialogue, policy openings and new partnerships.

Critics will find no shortage of errors and lacunas in *Burma/Myanmar after Nargis*. For example, it is simply not correct to say that “nobody anticipated, or could reasonably have anticipated, what was going to happen” on May 2 (in footnote 7). *The Mirror* newspaper of that morning carried a half-page interview with the head of the meteorological department, U Htun Lwin, predicting that the coastline could by afternoon be hit with 100-mile/hour winds followed by a surge in the sea level, and that the effects could extend to Yangon. Perhaps the size of the storm was unanticipated but that the people in its path could and should have been better prepared there can be no doubt, and it is unnecessary and inappropriate for the report’s authors to be apologizing on behalf of the government for this failure.

More seriously, repeated references to the problems of “petty” thievery and corrupt “local” authorities also suggest that the authors are for some reason misrepresenting the nature of corruption in Myanmar, which grows as the money increases towards the top end of town, among the heads of army commands and ministries. This may be an unintended result of interviewing people high-up whose interests are served by giving the impression that theft of aid is basically a problem of errant subordinates selling ration biscuits in marketplaces, rather than something they do themselves. In any event, it gives readers the wrong idea.

Nor is there anything about the sorts of capricious official orders to the World Food Program to buy rice from other countries and cut back on deliveries in coming months that were [cited](#) on New Mandala recently, or the harassment of private Myanmar citizens whom the report lauds for their efforts at helping others in the first days and weeks after the cyclone struck, when the government blocked assistance from abroad.

Whether or not one agrees with the report's insistence that the relief effort is a "window of opportunity" for new initiatives on Myanmar, and despite its inaccuracies and blind spots, only the most rabid proponents of sanctions will disagree with its basic premise that there needs to be more, not less, humanitarian assistance going into Myanmar. This is a premise which, the report's authors admit, the ICG has held in one form or another since 2002. But that being the case, readers are entitled to ask what the group proposes this time around that is really different from what has come before, apart from the need for the U.N. Secretary General to have a continued personal role and the insistence that "it is now time to act." The report doesn't give any clear answer.

The difficulty boils down to the report's title. What does "normalizing" mean when it comes to Myanmar? The ICG doesn't say. In fact, the word "normalize" only appears once in the body of the report, without any sense of the need to clarify or locate it. This is disturbing. That the report's authors seem to think that they don't need to explain the concept that lies behind what they are proposing suggests that they haven't really thought it through for themselves. The end result is that notwithstanding a few pages of "next steps" and a box of "operational principles" (which would be unobjectionable anywhere in the world), the normalizing of aid remains elusive and the closing arguments for it uncertain, despite the authors' attempts to have it otherwise.

[\*Post-Nargis Analysis: The Other Side of the Story\*](#) sets out, as its title suggests, to give an alternative view of the cyclone relief effort, with a concern for "the obstructions to aid and human rights abuses" that have not been reported in U.N. documents or, for that matter, the ICG report. Although it is made to look like the work of "civil society organizations," the groups listed as being behind it are affiliates of political groups in exile. That in itself is not problematic. There is clearly a strong need for more reporting on issues and incidents related to the cyclone and relief effort that are either inadvertently or deliberately kept out of the reports of official agencies and big international groups, and opponents of the military government have a role to play in collecting and distributing news.

Unfortunately, the short document doesn't live up to its promise of telling the other side of the story. Its author has written the contents mostly in response to specific points in the Post-Nargis Joint Assessment report of agencies working on the recovery effort, and the sum of its parts is less than its whole. The report has no consistent narrative or urgent message to deliver. More disappointingly, while its producers boast of having valuable networks in Myanmar, there is nothing fresh in it at all. Having stitched together a few news items with unremarkable comments, it ends abruptly with some hollow recommendations, like, "We urge the international community to consider having independent civil society groups as additional counterparts in the post-Nargis assessment and recovery implementation processes." Ho-hum.

The six-month anniversary of the cyclone is an important time for review of what has been done so far and for renewed vigor. These two reports are well-timed but disappointing. Of the two, the ICG one will inevitably travel further and cause some ripples by virtue of the organization's size and reach, but by next year it will be forgotten, along with so many others before it. Hopefully the same will not be the case for Nargis's victims, and that instead during the coming six months there will be important and original work done to enable a better understanding of how international agencies can find the room they need to operate in Myanmar.