

Aid arriving in Myanmar, but junta remains under fire

International aid continued to arrive in cyclone-ravaged Myanmar Tuesday, but criticism mounted as the efforts were hampered by logistics problems and the military junta's bureaucratic stalling.

More than a week after Cyclone Nargis struck, hundreds of thousands are still without access to food, water and medicine, threatening a 'health catastrophe' that could increase the death toll 15-fold, aid agencies have warned.

The authorities in Myanmar said Tuesday that 34,273 people had died in the cyclone and that 27,838 were still missing, the BBC reported.

The agencies described efforts to get food, water and medicine to remote areas, but also of running into a basic bottleneck of lack of decent roads and bridges in Myanmar's countryside.

'One of the big limiting factors is that most of bridges in the Irrawaddy Delta are only built to withstand five-tonne loads, so we need a large fleet of small trucks,' said World Food Programme (WFP) spokesman Marcus Prior.

Cyclone Nargis, packing 200 km-per-hour winds, swept through Myanmar's central coastal region May 2 to 3, leaving an estimated 100,000 dead and up to 1.9 million in need of basic necessities such as food, water, shelter and medicine.

Much of the destruction was wrought on the Irrawaddy Delta, Myanmar's traditional rice bowl, a low-lying fertile plain intersected by hundreds of rivers and streams, posing a transportation challenge in the best of times.

While trucks, albeit small ones, are now bringing in basic supplies to the main delta towns such as Labutta and Bogale, unknown thousands of people have been stranded in the fingertips of the Irrawaddy without transport.

'There are no roads out there. People get around by boats and now they have no boats because they were destroyed by the cyclone,' said Richard Horsey, spokesman for the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), that is heading the relief effort in Myanmar.

Aid workers continued to complain about the Myanmar military's slowness in granting visas to UN relief experts who could facilitate and speed up the emergency operation with their expertise.

The UN has been seeking cooperation from the ruling junta in the granting of visas to about 60 key relief experts from the UN and other aid agencies in the military's headquarters in Naypyitaw, 350 km north of Yangon.

In Bangkok, Thailand announced that Thai Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej would go to Myanmar Wednesday to personally hand over a message from UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to the Myanmar junta.

Samak will also bring with him 100 satellite phones to help Myanmar authorities with their disaster relief efforts, said government spokesman Lieutenant General Wichienchote Sukchoterath.

In Brussels, Spain's minister for EU affairs Diego Lopez Garrido said that the Myanmar government's unwillingness to allow foreign aid into the cyclone-stricken country could count as a crime against humanity.

'If the junta puts serious obstacles in the way of this aid, we are facing a case which could be similar to a crime against humanity, because by this action they are allowing thousands and tens of thousands of people to die,' he told journalists ahead of an emergency meeting with EU aid ministers in Brussels.

EU High Representative Javier Solana said: 'The most important objective is to get the humanitarian aid there because there are many ordinary people who are suffering. We have to use all means to help them.'

'The UN Charter opens some avenues if things can't be resolved in order to get humanitarian aid arriving in a country which has this catastrophe if the leaders of the country don't allow the arrival of fast, well-organized aid,' Solana said.

In Frankfurt, the German volunteer civil-defence organization THW said that a German civil-defence team was flying to Myanmar to assess sites for water-purification plants in the disaster area.

The mission, in association with the UN World Food Programme and funded by the German foreign ministry, plans to set up six clean- water plants in areas where filthy water is spreading fatal diseases more than a week after the killer storm ravaged parts of Myanmar.

In London, the Buckingham Palace disclosed that Queen Elizabeth II has made a 'significant' personal donation to support the relief effort for the victims of the cyclone.

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