

12 May 2008

Secretary-General's press conference on Myanmar(unofficial transcript)

SG: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

Today is the 11th day since Typhoon Nargis hit Myanmar. I want to register my deep concern - and immense frustration - at the unacceptably slow response to this grave humanitarian crisis.

You have all heard the numbers. The official death toll reported by the Government of Myanmar, as of this morning, has risen to 31,938 with 34,460 people missing. International relief agencies report far higher figures. The estimate of those currently at severe risk is in the neighborhood of 1.5 million.

We are at a critical point. Unless more aid gets into the country - very quickly - we face an outbreak of infectious diseases that could dwarf today's crisis. I therefore call, in the most strenuous terms, on the Government of Myanmar to put its people's lives first. It must do all that it can to prevent this disaster from becoming even more serious.

The United Nations and its agencies are well-positioned to help with everything from emergency food, fresh water and medical supplies to repairing critical national infrastructure - transport, communications and community distribution networks. The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, as well as many national and international NGOs, are heavily engaged as well. They, too, need greater access and freedom of movement. The Emergency Relief Coordinator, John Holmes, here with us, will give you more details in a moment.

We already have many staff on the ground. Yet they are grievously over-stretched and the Government continues to deny visas to most foreign aid workers..

As a result we have been able to reach fewer than a third of the total number of people at risk - some 270,000 people. Even they have received only the most rudimentary assistance. We therefore have so far been unable to organize the massive logistical support that would ordinarily be well underway. By one WFP estimate, the volume of food so far allowed into Myanmar amounts to less than a tenth of what is needed. Rice stocks in-country are close to exhaustion.

We see some encouraging signs. Many airlifts of aid arrived over the weekend and earlier today. The Government has made some initial moves to ease access restrictions. I would repeat, however: much more is needed.

Over the weekend and throughout much of last week, I tried repeatedly to telephone senior General Than Swe. I wanted to ask his cooperation with the international community and offer the United Nations' full support. I was not able to reach him and so delivered a letter earlier this morning through diplomatic channels. This was my second letter to him since Cyclone Nargis.

I hope the Government will move quickly to expedite visas for relief personnel. Much needs to be done, immediately, to set up major logistics operations to deliver supplies to the most affected areas. This requires the specialized expertise of major international relief agencies. Myanmar cannot do it alone.

On Friday, we launched a Flash Appeal asking for \$187 million to provide urgently needed relief through key UN agencies and NGOs. I urge all countries and private donors to respond generously.

We appreciate the international community's strong support and swift response to the crisis. I am working closely with ASEAN [Association of South East Asian Nations] and other governments in the immediate region, as well as more widely. Since Friday, I have spoken with the leaders of Thailand, Indonesia, Australia, Germany, Canada, Norway and China, among others, as well as the U.S. Secretary of State. Today I will speak with the leaders of India, and Singapore.

I have asked their help and urged them to cooperate in a joint effort with the United Nations to make both civil and military assets available, including the transport planes, helicopters, trucks and boats we desperately need. We plan to set up a logistics base in the area, probably in neighboring Thailand, to ensure that aid will be channeled into Myanmar in a systematic and orderly way.

Without this combination of national and international resources and equipment, I fear that our response will remain far inadequate to the scale of the catastrophe. This is a cause of immense frustration - and even anguish - for the world leaders I have spoken with. Handled properly, Myanmar can recover from this calamity. Handled poorly, it will become an even deeper crisis that will set back the country's people and its Government for years.

Again, I most strongly urge Myanmar authorities to cooperate in the ways I have described. All our work must be coordinated with Myanmar's authorities as closely as possible.

I also call on Myanmar's most immediate neighbors to do everything they possibly can. They have a special responsibility and a special role in securing the full cooperation of Myanmar's Government and helping its people survive this disaster.

I emphasize that this is not about politics. It is about saving people's lives. There is absolutely no more time to lose.

In closing, although this is not directly related to this press conference this afternoon, I want to express my sadness and sympathy for the victims of today's earthquake in southwest China. We do not yet know the extent of the tragedy. But you have seen the reports of the hundreds of students trapped at a local university, and potentially many others are dead. My thoughts are very much with them and their families. Thank you very much.

Q: Mr. Secretary, the time is brief here. Will you ask the Security Council, or at least push, using the power of your office, for sanctions or any tougher measures on the Government, which appears to have no fear for any type of action in this current crisis?

SG: This is up to the members of the Security Council, to decide whether they will discuss or take up this matter. But at this time, what I am focusing on is to deliver humanitarian assistance as soon as possible. I would like to make this issue on purely humanitarian grounds.

Q: Mr. Secretary-General, I would like to go back to that question. There are several members of the Security Council who are opposed to discussing humanitarian aid, and they don't share the same view about the responsibility to protect civilians in case of a natural disaster. I wonder if

you should really go to the Security Council and ask them to put their act together, because you need political pressure to make things work. This is not just politics.

SG: You already know the history of the Security Council's debate on the situation in Myanmar, not necessarily on this humanitarian issue. My understanding is that there are some differences of opinion among the members of the Security Council on how to deal with the situation in Myanmar, whether it poses a threat to the region. Therefore, while I leave it to members of the Security Council to decide among themselves, as the Secretary-General, at this time, first and foremost, I am focusing on delivering humanitarian assistance to minimize as much as possible the unnecessary sacrifices on the part of the Myanmar people. And we are there to help recover and overcome these difficulties.

Q: While you are making every effort to deal with the Myanmar issue, what acts will it take to cooperate with the Chinese Government to help the people in the earthquake region?

SG: The Chinese Government, in the past and now, has been playing a very constructive role in all the questions relating to Myanmar, including the human rights situation. Now it is time –I have spoken to the Chinese authorities very closely, and they are very much fully on board, and they promised that they will do all in their power to help with United Nations humanitarian activities. And I appreciate that support and cooperation.

Q: Mr. Secretary-General, based on your knowledge of the Myanmar leadership, through your constant discussion with Mr. [Ibrahim] Gambari, your discussions with them, their ambassador, your general worldview, what do you think is going on here? Is this just an isolated and suspicious regime, that just wants to cling to power? Why aren't they more open? What is their motivation? What is their thought process, in your view?

SG: This is one of the poor countries, and it has been isolated. This is kind of some self-imposed isolation, unfortunately. They seem to be not fully confident in coming out to the international community. At this time of humanitarian crisis, the magnitude of this humanitarian crisis, is not the time when you are talking about politics. We are now talking only about saving human lives and how to stem the spread of diseases and how to keep humanitarian assistance flowing, as we have experienced in the case of the tsunami, which happened in Indonesia. We need to have constructive cooperation all throughout the international community. That is why publicly on many occasions, I have stated clearly that I will ensure that this will be a purely humanitarian operation, and we will be able to have an opportunity to discuss political issues or human rights issues. Thank you very much.