Myanmar Cyclone Response: Power-Lust and Lost Lives

As the world looks on to the tragedy in Myanmar and the coldhearted response of its government leaders, Byron Barlowe urges us to keep in mind that a humanitarian response is not a natural reaction.

Corrupted Power

Climate of Fear and Repression

Myanmar, traditionally known as Burma, is a country where ten percent of the population lives "without enough to eat" on a normal basis.{1} The brutal military government is best known for the repression of a democratically elected opposition candidate, Aung San Suu Kyi, now under long-term house arrest. Burma watchers blogs and sites show grisly photos of alleged brutality (one shows the carnage of soldiers running over political dissidents with ten-wheeled trucks). Last fall, the junta put down protest marches, killing at least 13 and jailing thousands. "Since then, the regime has continued to raid homes and monasteries and arrest persons suspected of participating in the pro-democracy protests."{2}

Now, a cyclone has inundated an entire region, the Irrawaddy Delta, killing tens of thousands, displacing at least a million and setting up a petri dish of putrid water and corpses where disease threatens to balloon the death toll. Within this maelstrom, the ruling generals who clutch political power at all costs refuse to allow experienced aid workers from around the world to help manage food distribution and relief efforts. The callousness of their stance has been decried on all fronts, including the often diplomatically soft United Nations (UN).

Feeding and assisting one's own countrymen seems to be such a basic value that it transcends almost all belief systems. However, the Burmese ruling junta is arrogantly defying not only this basic tenet of decency, but world opinion as well.

Failure to Allow Rendered Aid

"The United Nations said Tuesday that only a tiny portion of international aid needed for Myanmar's cyclone victims is making it into the country, amid reports that the military regime is hoarding good-quality foreign aid for itself and doling out rotten food," reports the Associated Press.

It's understandable if the government wants to lead in relieving victims of its own nation. Yet, characteristically, even in this dire situation the government is cracking down on anything not originating from its own authority while repressing its own people. Reports include:

> *Stockpiling of high-nutrition biscuits in government warehouses and distribution of low-quality biscuits made by the centralized Industry Ministry.*
>
> *Old, tainted, low-quality rice distributed in lieu of high-quality, nutritious rice offered by aid groups.*
>
> *Government demands of businesses in the capital to "donate" aid for victims to be distributed through the central government.{3} So much for central "planning." Were there a desire to provide relief, it could have been budgeted before now.*

Video feeds of military leaders show them in neat, trim uniforms placing relief boxes away from those in needthe very picture of micro-managing control, reminiscent of regimes like North Korea.

Like Cuba in its extreme isolationism, the interests of its people are at the bottom of the ruling partys priorities.

Global Chorus of Criticism

A global chorus of critics has castigated Myanmar for its delays and mixed messages regarding large-scale aid and foreign experts. In what appears to be a show of cooperation, but without the needed effect, more supply flights have been allowed, critical days after the cyclone hit. Yet at this writing, food and relief supplies continue to stack up at the capital's airport and, reportedly, in military storage facilities.

Aid offers from across the globe contrast starkly with the calculated deprivation and malfeasance exhibited by the military rulers. World leaders are simply appealing with the message, Let us help.

Another clear message to the leaders in Yangon: You are responsible for outcomes. "A natural disaster is turning into a humanitarian catastrophe of genuinely epic proportions in significant part because of the malign neglect of the regime," said British Foreign Secretary David Miliband.{4}

The United States has been direct in offering help. "What remains is for the Burmese government to allow the international community to help its people. It should be a simple matter. It is not a matter of politics," U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told reporters in Washington.{5}

Even the UN, often accused of appeasing dictatorial regimes, refused to allow the army-government to head up distribution efforts. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has said he is deeply concerned and immensely frustrated at the unacceptably slow response. 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," he said.{6}

The UN has learned lessons from past dicatorships' abuse of

privilege.The Oil-for-Food fiasco under Saddam Hussein provides reason enough for UN reticence. Past humanitarian disasters in Africa saw regimes mismanaging aid for political reasons as well. Good intentions of the aid-provider must meet with realistic views of human nature. The foibles and sin of men, especially those in power, tends to validate a biblical view of fallen man much like the physics of a concrete sidewalk demonstrates gravity pretty convincingly.

Some Worldview Implications

The heartlessness of Myanmars leaders evokes sympathy and indignation among most people. But why? A naturalistic worldviewneo-Darwinism taken to its logical end, for examplewould only be concerned with perpetuating those strong enough or "smart enough" to have survived. It might even be the case that the cyclone culled out the least-fit. This naturalistic worldview formed the basis of everything from the eugenics movement to Nazi death camps (not exactly consistent with an insistence on instant relief work).

The final goal of Theravada Buddhism, the strain claimed by 96 percent of the population of Myanmar, is complete detachment from the physical world, which is seen as illusory. Its practice is passive in nature; there is no ultimate reality, much less salvation or reward to attain. This is nothing like the practice of the Dali Lama, well-known the world over for human rights campaining. In his Buddhist sect, Lamaism or Tibetan Buddhism, acts of compassion make sense. Theravadic Buddhism as practiced in Burma, on the other hand, views man as an individual with no incentive for helping others. For Burmese monks and adherants alike, there is really no necessary motivation to provide aid in this or any situation.

Generally speaking, "According to Buddhist belief, man is worthless, having only temporary existence. In Christianity, man is of infinite worth, made in the image of God, and will exist eternally. Man's body is a hindrance to the Buddhist

while to the Christian it is an instrument to glorify God” {7}. While Christian missions like Food for the Hungry, Gospel for Asia, Samaritan’s Purse and others actively seek to assist the Burmese, few such wholesale efforts proceed from either Buddhist nations or in-country monks themselves.

A pantheistic view, rooted in Hinduism’s doctrine of *karma*, would only wonder what deeds were being dealt with in the recycling of life. This worldview provides no real cause for alarm or compassion at all.

Despite such competing underpinnings at a worldview level, something in the human spirit cries out for fellow humans who suffer. Unless tamped down or obliterated, natural sympathies exist. This leads to the inevitable question, “Why? From where does this universal reality spring?”

Persecution by the ruling junta in Myanmar against ethnic minorities has increased since their ascendancy in the 1960s. “The most affected ethnic minority is the mainly Christian Karen people. Large numbers have been forced to abandon their villages in the east of the country and many have fled to Thailand.”{8} Herein may lay a connection, although Christians are not alone in being oppressed there. Godless governments tend to hate or at least discriminate against Christians. Competing worldviews clash deeply.

Biblical Emphasis on Individuals, Human Dignity

“A Christian view of government should…be concerned with human rights…based on a biblical view of human dignity. A bill of rights, therefore, does not grant rights to individuals, but instead acknowledges these rights as always existing.”{9}

Of course the Myanmar government and culture does not recognize the biblical God, so this standard is not to be expected. However, such a presupposition grounds America’s reaction to Myanmar’s languid response to the cyclone. It also helps explain the rest of the world’s stance: the ideals of

democracy, rooted in a largely biblical worldview, have greatly affected world opinion on topics of relief and disaster response. One would be hard-pressed to find historical examples, I'm sure, of a consensus like that described above in centuries or even decades past. But since the Marshall Plan, Berlin airlifts, reconstruction in Japan and a parade of other compassionate rebuilding efforts, the rush to aid has become the global norm. Americas Judeo-Christian model has taken hold.

Christians in the early Church, in utter contrast to the Greco-Roman paganism that surrounded them, extended dignity to the suffering individual regardless of class status and whether or not it benefited them. This new ethic transformed the world and set the stage for the rule of law, compassionate charity and a host of other values taken for granted in Western and now other societies.

Proper View of Man, Need to Limit Power

"While the source of civil government is rooted in human responsibility, the need for government derives from the need to control human sinfulness. God ordained civil government to restrain evil…. {10} Of course, if the ruling government is corrupt, although some restraining occurs and it can look somewhat just, the evil simply becomes concentrated at the top while it leaks out naturally elsewhere despite external restrictions. We saw this in spades in Communist dictatorships like the USSR, which spawned the gulags, and Albania, where repression and elite privilege reached monumental proportions. And the military leaders of Myanmar continue this traditionevitably, given the fallen nature of man.

Government based on a proper understanding of man is the hallmark of American representative democracy. Unlike Myanmar's concentration of power into the hands of a few powerful elite, the American system makes room for the human dignity and rationality of the people while controlling human

sin and depravity. Neither utopian schemes, which are based on man's supposed innate goodness, nor controlling systems, which are built on sheer power, do right by human nature. Myanmar's example of an unworkable government is all too clear in its tragic reaction to a devastating natural disaster.

As Probe's *Mind Games* curriculum puts it, "In essence, a republic [like that of the United States] limits government, while a totalitarian government [like Myanmar's] limits citizens." And often, as with the estimated 170 million killed by regimes like those of Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Pol Pot and others who fly in the face of a right understanding of man, the limits to citizens includes their very lives.{11}

Sanctity of Human Life

What offficials do during a crisis exposes their worldview. Do authorities do all within their means to save lives? What about prevention? Do investments in infrastructure belie a preoccupation with commerce, power or prestigeas in the case of China's razing of entire neighborhoods to clear the way for the PR coup of the Olympics while political and religious dissidents are jailed? Are well-equipped fire and rescue, police, disaster recovery and even military personnel standing by to help at all costs to save even a few human lives? It seems obvious when certain governments act out of political peer pressure rather than a philosophy rooted in the value of every human being. And that value originates in the God in whose image humans are made. Without this doctrine as a basis for policy, people become mere workers, expendable state property and pawns for despots.

Nothing in Myanmar's delayed, heartless response to the storm's effects shows value of human life. In fact, the meager efforts of the regime in Rangoon (the capital, also called Yangon) have so far not only been ineffective in the immediate and for the future, but are insulting to human dignity.

Again, we can invoke first century parallels to help make the case that todays outcry stems from a Christian heritage. Whereas callous Roman elite threw babies into the Tiber River, Christians rescued and raised them as their own. So committed were they to the notion that all people have value as Gods image-bearers, that ancient Christ-followers risked deadly disease to treat strangers. Ancient pagans, not entirely unlike the Myanmar government, left even their own kin to die during plagues.

Biblical Imitation of a Giving God

Hurricane Katrina evoked not only an immediate and massive responsehowever incompetent it may have beenfrom the local, state and federal governments in the U.S. Expectations for relief were sky-high. And the groundswell of private and religious response left a worthy legacy.

So why, we may ask, were expectations so great? Some may say expectations grew from a sense of entitlement. Some folks just think a handout is due them, so in dire circumstances, it goes without saying. After all, the ambulance always comes when called.

A strong case can be made that people have grown to expect help due to a residue of Christian care and compassion that lingers on in what many call post-Christian times. The Churchs centuries-long heritage of innovating institutions like hospitals, orphanages and eldercare has overhauled the way people are treated.

That is, the biblical worldview has so saturated the culture of the West and has since so affected the rest of the world, that it would be unthinkable for most civilized societies not to respond to catastrophes with aid. Yet, this was not the case in ancient cultures unaffected by the radical ethic of Jesus Christ, who took Old Testament compassion for the stranger, widow and orphan to new extremes. (See my radio

transcript on the topic of *Compassion and Charity: Two More Reasons to Believe that Christianity is Good for Society* and listen online at *Probe.org* soon.)

As the world looks on to the tragedy in Myanmar and the coldhearted response of its government leaders, keep in mind that a humanitarian response is not a natural reaction. It is something introduced and modeled by the caring Creator of all men, Jesus Christ. A truly biblical worldview not only works, it works compassionately.

Notes

1. Reuters Foundation Alertnet, May 12, 2008, www.alertnet.org/db/crisisprofiles/MY_DIS.htm.
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3. AP report via tinyurl.com/4cas2g.
4. Houston Chronicle, May 11, 2008, www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/headline/world/5770860.html
5. Reuters Foundation Alertnet, Myanmar under pressure, death toll may rise sharply, May 7, 2008, http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/SP306038.htm
6. Reuters Foundation Alertnet, May 13, 2008, www.alertnet.org/db/crisisprofiles/MM_STO.htm
7. Josh McDowell and Don Stewart, *Handbook of Today's Religions*, Here's Life Publishers, San Bernardino, CA 1983, pps. 308-309.
8. Ibid, May 12, 2008, www.alertnet.org/db/crisisprofiles/MY_DIS.htm
9. Christian View of Politics, Government and Social Action, *Mind Games College Survival Course*, 1996, Probe Ministries.
10. Ibid, based on Romans 13: 1-7, NIV.
11. R. J. Rummel, Death by Government, Transaction Publishers, 1994, quoted in The Truth Project DVD-based curriculum, Focus on the Family, 2006. For partial online reading: tinyurl.com/3efqjr

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