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# International Humanitarian Assistance to Myanmar

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Paul Douglas Inwood

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## ABSTRACT

Myanmar is a country with many complex political and humanitarian issues. While it is rich in natural resources, it remains one of the poorest and most undemocratic countries in Asia. It has a history of ethnic and political division and many of the antagonists are still to find lasting reconciliation. Myanmar has been controlled by military juntas and former army generals since a coup in 1962. The focus of the regime is security and the preservation of its position as the ruling elite, at the expense of democracy and the humanitarian needs of the general population. The international response to the humanitarian plight of the Myanmar people has been mixed and the provision of international aid to Myanmar has become a highly contentious issue.

This thesis seeks to critically examine international aid to Myanmar so as to determine whether under present conditions humanitarian assistance should, and can, be effectively provided to the country. In doing so recent theories relating to humanitarian assistance and intervention are reviewed and the historical and political circumstances that have influenced the humanitarian situation in Myanmar are explored. A description of the current humanitarian situation and levels of international assistance is provided, and donor, practitioner and activist perspectives on international assistance are determined.

The results of this study show that Myanmar has serious humanitarian needs. Despite being a difficult environment in which to operate, with complex political problems, it is still possible to conduct effective programmes in the country. Existing programmes do not reach all those in need, nor do current programmes address many of the core problems. International assistance does help fill the gap left largely unattended by the junta. Any lasting political solution requires the participation of all stakeholders in the country, especially the military. As the junta is unlikely to relinquish political control, regardless of pressure levelled against the senior generals, the need for ongoing international aid remains obvious. When all the considerations about providing aid to Myanmar are taken into account, it is apparent from this research that the conditions are serious enough to justify that there is a humanitarian imperative to help, and that there are sound opportunities to do so.

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Finally, I would like to recognise the people of Myanmar who continue to suffer from the faults of others. While my aim was to analyse the complexities of providing humanitarian assistance in the difficult environment that is Myanmar I also hope I show that the need for international humanitarian assistance in the country is immediate, that aid can be delivered effectively, and should be made available in considerably greater amounts than is currently being given.

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## ABBREVIATIONS, ACRONYMS AND GLOSSARY

### Abbreviations and Acronyms

3-D Fund	Three Diseases Fund
AFPFL	Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League
AFP	Agence France Presse
ALTSEAN Burma	Alternative Asian Network on Burma
AP	Associated Press
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ATS	Amphetamine-type Substances
AusAID	Australian Agency for International Development
BCP	Burma Communist Party
CBO	Community-Based Organisations
DCD	Development Co-operation Directorate (OECD)
DFID	Department for International Development (United Kingdom)
ECHO	European Office for Humanitarian Aid
EU	European Union
FATF	Financial Action Task Force
FTUB	Federation of Trade Unions-Burma
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICG	International Crisis Group
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
ILO	International Labour Organisation
INGO	International Non-Government Organisation
KNU	Karen National Union
NLD	National League for Democracy
NUP	National Unity Party
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSI	Open Society Institute

MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NCGUB	National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
TBBC	Thailand Burma Border Consortium
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
USAID	United States Agency for International Assistance
USDA	Union Solidarity and Development Association
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organisation

**Glossary**

*Sangha* The order of Buddhist monks

*Tatmadaw* The Myanmar armed forces

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background and Context

Myanmar<sup>1</sup> is assessed to be one of the most difficult humanitarian operating environments in the world (Department for International Development, 2004, p. 9). The fact that Myanmar is a country rich in natural resources, but remains one of the poorest and most undemocratic countries in Asia is well covered by Steinberg (2001) and Fink (2001). It is also a country that has a long history of internal conflict and division and is still to find comprehensive reconciliation among the various political and ethnic groups (Smith, 1999). Myanmar has been controlled by military juntas and former army generals since a coup in 1962<sup>2</sup>. In 1990 the junta agreed to multi-party elections for a National Assembly but refused to handover power. The junta maintains a solid grip on the country through oppression and by a series of agreements with a number of ethnic ceasefire groups (International Crisis Group, 2003). Central to this control is a mix of force and fear, with the military moving quickly and aggressively against internal political opposition. The senior generals have shown limited regard for human rights or efforts to improve living conditions in country. Their primary focus is security and the preservation of their position as the ruling elite.

As a result of the junta's failure to honour the democratic process and its poor human rights record, many in the international community have minimized contact with the country and imposed a range of sanctions. On top of this is the junta's general inability to effectively govern the country. This has created grim humanitarian conditions for much of the population. Food security and health are the most urgent requirements and the junta restricts humanitarian access into the most in-need areas (Burma UN Service Office - New York, 2003; Shukla, 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> The military junta changed the name of the country from the Union of Burma to the Union of Myanmar in 1989. 'Burma' is used here for the pre-1989 period and in direct quotes.

<sup>2</sup> Following another military coup in 1988, the military junta formed a governing body called the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). In 1997, it changed the name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

Responses to the humanitarian requirements of Myanmar have been mixed and most contact with Myanmar is controversial. Although there is widespread agreement that there is a need for assistance, there is disagreement when it comes to defining how bad the situation is; whether or not there should be international intervention (despite the need); what levels of assistance should be provided; and, how this should be delivered. Overlaying this is the much wider debate on foreign relations with Myanmar, human rights and sanctions. As such, major international donors are not in agreement on how to engage Myanmar. There is also disagreement between political lobbyists, activists and humanitarian practitioners on these issues. This has led to misunderstandings, inconsistent support across sectors and a hampered humanitarian effort (Purcell, 1999).

### **Research Aim, Objectives and Scope of this Thesis**

The complexities of the situation in Myanmar, restrictions on access, the lack of objective and accurate information, and the often emotional political debate have added significantly to the difficulties in determining what is actually occurring there. As such, the purpose of this thesis is to research international aid in the country. The aim and overarching question this thesis seeks to consider is:

Under present conditions whether humanitarian assistance should, and can, be effectively provided to Myanmar.

To answer this question the following research objectives have been set:

1. to provide a review of recent theories relating to humanitarian assistance and intervention;
2. to examine the historical and political contexts that have influenced the humanitarian situation in Myanmar.
3. to describe the current humanitarian situation and levels of international assistance;

4. to determine current donor, practitioner and activist perspectives on international assistance.

A conclusion will then be drawn following a discussion of the combined results of the information gained. The study had a number of limitations which determined the scope of the thesis and these will now be discussed.

Some limitations have been set on the scope of this investigation. Firstly, the study focuses on assistance that is being provided through international agencies based in Yangon. This decision was made in order to frame the research into a concise topic that could be effectively studied within the academic requirements and the practicalities of time, security and access. This thesis will therefore not cover issues of displaced persons along Myanmar's borders or those living in other countries. Nor will this study consider cross-border humanitarian operations. The valuable work carried out by local non-government organisations (NGOs) is also not addressed in this study.

A further constraint and a key concern of how this study was undertaken and the findings presented was the safety of the persons who participated in the fieldwork, particularly those who continue to live and work in Myanmar. The potential risks to the people who participated cannot be overstated as the military junta has shown it is intolerant of criticism and can easily revoke the immigration status of international staff<sup>3</sup>. The fieldwork therefore involved private semi-structured interviews conducted in Myanmar and Thailand between the period May 2006 and May 2007 and the participants provided information on the grounds it would not be attributed to them. As such, those involved are not named and the information is presented in a manner that will protect their identities. A 12 month embargo is also placed on this thesis in keeping with Massey University protocol. Now that the scope of the study including limitations has been made clear, the thesis chapters will be outlined.

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<sup>3</sup> In November 2007 the Myanmar government announced it was not renewing the visa of Charles Petrie, the United Nations Resident Coordinator, because of his criticism of the regime (Fuller, 2007).

## **Chapters Outlined**

Chapter One has introduced the study. The background and context is articulated, and the aim and scope of the thesis and subsequent research objectives are made explicit. Chapter Two presents the research philosophy along with a discussion of methodology and approach. Following this, a review of literature relevant to this study will be carried out in three phases. Firstly, Chapter Three provides a discussion on current theories on humanitarianism and international assistance. Secondly, Chapter Four presents an introduction to Myanmar by describing the basic geography and demography of the country, and then highlights relevant aspects of Myanmar's history and past political influences that have shaped the present situation. Thirdly, Chapter Five reviews the current humanitarian situation. The results of the fieldwork are then presented in Chapter Six revealing the perspectives of many key persons directly involved in the provision of international humanitarian assistance to Myanmar. Chapter Seven discusses these results by combining them with the early literature. In the final chapter, Chapter Eight, the overall conclusions and recommendations in relation to practice and further research are made.

## CHAPTER TWO

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

There are challenges to studying most subjects related to Myanmar. Information, including statistical data, can be underdeveloped, opaque and subject to political manipulation (Steinberg, 2001). This is often the result of the junta's tight controls that limits access to certain regions in the country and constrains public availability of information. Added to this is the reluctance of people, including some outside the country, to discuss politically sensitive subjects and a trend by some organisations involved with Myanmar for self-censorship. These complications not only limit the breadth of what can be successfully studied, but also constrain research methods. As a basic example, the ability to conduct in-country surveys is very restricted and therefore studies usually researched by this method are not generally feasible. Nevertheless, there is still a large, be it often questionable, amount of information available. While data can be unreliable at times, and there is a continual need to establish its credibility, there is sufficient material for many studies to occur.

The aim of this chapter is to review the conduct and research methodology of this thesis. As a start point the underlying research philosophy will be presented. Following on from this will be an examination of the methodology and the methods used. There is further discussion on the literature review, an explanation of the interviewing process used during the fieldwork, and comment on some of the key issues pertaining to the analysis of the information. This also includes observations of how the divisions within the politicised debate on Myanmar have become personalised for researchers and academics. The chapter finishes with the conclusion that despite the difficulties, Myanmar is an interesting environment to investigate and that with care, research can be conducted<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Owing to the junta's increased sensitivities following the late-2007 anti-government protests research opportunities in-country are not recommended until the situation improves.



## **Research Philosophy, Methodology and Methods**

The underlying research philosophy used for this thesis was influenced by the work of Jonathan Grix (2004), a senior lecturer in research methodology at the University of Birmingham. He suggests that research methodology should follow a clear linear flow that distinctly links epistemology to methodology, methodology to methods, and finally methods to sources. Although he warns against it, he acknowledges that research may start at any point of this chain depending on the circumstances of the issue being investigated. Critically, however, he stresses the need to address each aspect so that the most appropriate research pathway is chosen. The research pathway for this study will now be discussed.

It was determined that the epistemological approach of this study is aligned with an interpretivist paradigm, with the conclusions drawn from the data collected and not related to the testing of a hypothesis. The restrictive environment in which the research was to be conducted was the most influential factor in choosing this manner of research. From the outset it was also apparent that the existing literature was often too conflicting to establish a satisfactory hypothesis and this approach could later prove to limit the necessary freedom to investigate issues which developed during the course of the study. The approach also lent itself well in conditions where an understanding of the situation is not easily measurable. The conclusions of the study are therefore essentially the opinion of the researcher based on all the influences encountered during the study.

The core methodology of the research was inductive and based on qualitative data, such as existing analysis or policies found in literature or the opinions of participants interviewed during the fieldwork. Some very basic quantitative analysis is presented in parts to demonstrate aspects of the humanitarian situation that can be shown numerically, such as levels of official development assistance provided. The primary method used to obtain data during the fieldwork was semi-structured interviews. Important impressions were also gained from observations made during visits to Myanmar. The key sources of information during the fieldwork were the participants who provided their perspectives on humanitarian assistance to Myanmar, as well as other issues found relevant to the study.

## Literature Review

The literature review forms both a considerable part of, and significant influence on, this thesis and it therefore justifies a separate comment. The fundamental reasons for the review were to assist in gaining a sound background understanding of the subject, to determine where the study would fit into existing work and to identify gaps in past studies<sup>5</sup>. Along with the background material on Myanmar in Chapter Four, the existing literature is in two general categories. The first area requiring evaluation was the general concepts relating to humanitarian assistance (Chapter Three). The second group of work discussed is that which has been produced specifically on humanitarian assistance to Myanmar (Chapter Five). This material primarily originates from humanitarian and other international agencies involved in Myanmar, but also from issue-motivated groups, lobbyists, media and political groups outside the country. Much of the background information required for this study, both from primary and secondary sources, proved to be available on the internet or in hardcopy publications. While there was often an easily accessible and large amount of information available not all of it could be relied upon to present an accurate and unbiased picture of what is occurring inside the country<sup>6</sup>.

Besides the material used to directly form the literature review, a good deal of study was required to develop enough knowledge on the wider issues and contexts of Myanmar to allow analysis to occur. This included more general literature on Myanmar and the reading of novels, newspapers and magazines, as well the monitoring of internet sites, and attendance at some presentations/discussions on Myanmar. Details of the material incorporated into this thesis are provided in the Bibliography.

## Fieldwork

Fieldwork was a crucial part of this project and was conducted in Thailand and Myanmar during the period May 2006 to May 2007. The aim of the fieldwork was to conduct interviews to gain perspectives on humanitarian assistance to Myanmar,

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<sup>5</sup> Gina Wisker's *The Postgraduate Research Handbook* (Wisker, 2001, pp. 127-136) was used as guidance for the literature review.

<sup>6</sup> See section on Analysis of Information and Personalisation of the Myanmar Debate (pp. 11-13)

experience firsthand the conditions in the country, and to confirm information found during the literature review.

The base for the study was Bangkok and three trips totalling 23 days were made to Myanmar. These included visits to the main urban areas of Yangon and Mandalay, and the administrative capital of Nay Pyi Taw. Visits were also made to rural areas in Bago Division, around Pyinmana, Bagan and Shan State. The travel provided the opportunity to observe a range of lifestyles in cities, areas frequently by foreign tourists and rural villages. Observations revealed that there is a range of conditions in the country. Many of the markets visited were well stocked with a variety of goods and active trading was taking place, although the effect of increasing inflation was apparent over each successive visit, particularly the price of transport and food. Conflict or remote areas were not visited, however, and it is here where the most serious humanitarian conditions exist.

Participants in the interviews were from a variety of organisations and agencies involved in humanitarian assistance to Myanmar and the range of those selected proved to be suitable in giving a balanced overall view. Participants included representatives from international non-government organisations (INGOs), international agencies, representatives from donor countries, journalists, members of exile groups, academics, and others with an involvement with Myanmar. All participants have remained anonymous and are not identified in the thesis. Fifteen formal interviews were conducted, amounting to around 12.5 hours of discussion. Two interviews involved groups. One was with seven people and the other with two. The seven-person interview was the least structured of all the interviews and would more accurately be described as a group discussion. It produced a large amount of information from the participants, but did not lend itself to detailed questioning of individuals. The two-person interview followed the pattern of other interviews and while involving two persons did numerically increase the possibility of obtaining more information, it was assessed that the individuals were more reserved in their replies and kept to what they were comfortable saying in front of the other person present. This generally resulted in them remaining close to their organisation's 'stated' position without offering much in the way of personal perspectives. The number of interviews was considered to be

appropriate as it was found during the latter interviews that only a limited amount of new information was being received.

The interviewing process was deliberately kept simple. Arrangements for the interviews were made either by email or telephone, although at times there were communication problems due to the unreliable telecommunications system in Myanmar. Care was also taken to not communicate any politically sensitive or compromising information over the internet or telephone. Some of the participants were known to me, while others were contacted through third parties, and some were 'cold-called'. Interviews were conducted in private and each lasted for 45 to 60 minutes.

The interviews were semi-structured. This method was well suited to obtaining information on complex issues from a range of individuals with differing backgrounds and involvement with the country. At times some participants provided spontaneous or unsolicited responses that were followed up with further questions. On these occasions the flexibility achievable with this method proved its worth. However, the interviewing was not without potential weaknesses. The success of each interview was largely dependent on the rapport established with the interviewee and their willingness to not only to undertake the interview, but to offer full and frank information. Despite the private nature of the interview there were instances where some interviewees acknowledged that they were not able to provide certain more sensitive information, or gave comment 'off-the-record' on the proviso that it would not be presented in the thesis. No 'off-the-record' information is provided in this paper, but it must be acknowledged that it has contributed to influencing the analysis.

The structure of the interview followed the general pattern of:

1. introductions and establishing rapport;
2. explanation of project and ethics considerations (including presentation of the projects Information Sheet, and the signing of the Participant Consent Form when appropriate—in some cases interviewees were willing to participate, but did not wish to sign a document);

3. general enquiry into the background of interviewees' involvement with Myanmar;
4. specific questions on perspectives on the humanitarian situation and activities;
5. additional general questions on Myanmar;
6. confirmation of areas of doubt and asking of follow-up questions (as needed);
7. conclusion, thanking participant, and reconfirmation of ethics process.

The information sheet describing the nature and method of the study proved to be a good document to present to participants. They were able to keep a copy for their own reference and it gave the interviews an official tone. The journalists who were interviewed were not overly interested in the information sheet, however. It is possible this was due to them not using such a procedure in their own interviews.

Prior to the completion of most interviews the participant was asked—as a way to neatly complete the interview—what they considered to be the main points the interviewer should take away from the interview. This question is worthy of note as it proved to be a very useful way of helping to confirm the general attitude of the participant and to ensure the key points of the interview were clearly drawn out.

Following the interview the notes taken were transcribed into individual reports. The information was then grouped thematically, analysed and is presented in Chapter Six.

The decision was made not to electronically record the interviews. It was assessed that a tape recorder would prove to be a barrier to obtaining free and frank information from participants. There is a general aversion to electronic recording of any kind in Myanmar due to its association with intelligence services. The weakness of relying on note taking is that some information may not be recorded and there is

potential for inaccuracies. To minimise the potential for errors, prior to the end of every interview confirmatory questions were asked when any doubt existed over the interviewees' answers. Publications and other hardcopy material were obtained where possible to support the data presented.

The research methods used were discussed with other persons studying or involved with Myanmar. All those spoken to who had gathered information in the country had used private semi-structured interviews as their prime method of research.

### **Analysis of Information**

The analysis of information followed a general process that incorporated the reduction of data by discarding material that was not relevant to the study and the collation and grouping of similar strands of information. Once information was collected an initial evaluation for relevance occurred and information was discarded if it was not related to the study. As an example, information on Myanmar refugees in camps in Thailand was not kept as this topic is outside the scope of the research. Discarding information reduced the amount of data held and collated. Collation involved sorting similar documents or pieces of information into hard-copy files or electronic folders and the placing of related material into single *Microsoft Word* documents. Here the material was reviewed and analysed for patterns and trends. As an example, all the interviewees' answers relating to international funding were placed together and then compared for common opinions or contrasting positions. In doing this it was established that while interviewees noted that funding had increased over the last five years, they remained frustrated that Myanmar received considerably less funding than some neighbouring countries and programmes were constrained due to most funding being fixed to a 12-month cycle. Following this stage the material was assessed for significance and implications. In simple terms this involved asking the 'so what' question and determining why activities had or were occurring and why. The material was then written up with the use of *Endnote* for referencing. At each stage the information was reviewed for the need for further data to be collected.

A number of difficulties were encountered. An early problem identified was my superficial level of general knowledge about Myanmar. Initial research revealed the

need for a comprehensive understanding of the historical and the contemporary contexts in order to appreciate the complexities of the political environment. Critical reflection and review of early entries in my personal research journal shows an initially unbalanced view of the Myanmar situation, and that my general engagement with literature was weak. It is estimated that it took approximately four months of general research before a satisfactory level of understanding was achieved.

Despite the volume of material available there was often a lack of quality information that could be considered reliable or easily verifiable. From the outset the importance of triangulating as much as possible all information was apparent, as the value of the available data varied considerably. In a number of cases information was found to be false, presented incorrectly or given out of context. Rumour and speculation form a significant part of the overall information picture on Myanmar. Nevertheless, there are many organisations that do provide accurate information that is professionally and objectively presented, although self-censorship by some organisations working within the country has the effect of softening some of the in-country reporting. Verifying information was not without problems as in many cases information was only available from a single source. This resulted in greater emphasis often being placed on establishing the reliability and credibility of the originator.

On a wider scale the scarcity of quality information appeared to create the risk of poor analysis of what limited material is available. My attendance in the audience of a number of presentations and panel discussions on Myanmar revealed that speculation was often bundled in with, or replaced, good analysis. A further problem encountered was the common practice of reliance on personal anecdotes, some of which did not accurately reflect the situation. The oversimplification of issues in some cases also did not assist in developing an understanding of the conditions in the country. An example of this is the numerous theories on why the junta shifted the capital from Yangon to Nay Pyi Taw in 2005. The true reason behind the move is probably only fully known or understood by a very small circle of senior members of the junta. It is also likely that there was not one single motive. Regardless of this, the randomness and conspiratorial nature of many of the theories hindered, rather than helped, determining the rationale for the move.

## Personalisation of the Myanmar Debate

A concerning characteristic of the debate on Myanmar is the personalisation of arguments and the often caustic reaction to some opinions<sup>7</sup>. Prejudice, preconceived ideas and political motivation feature strongly in some of the information found. The fact that the junta is undemocratic, governing the country badly and is responsible for many incidences of abuse can lead to a tendency to place more credence on anti-junta literature than differing views, such as from the pro-engagement lobby. A number of high-profile academics who have shown support for engagement with the regime have received personal abuse and have been labelled as apologists and lobbyists for the regime. Some have been especially singled out and placed on the list of *Enemies of the Burmese Revolution* compiled by a group calling themselves the Burma Compatriots (Burma Compatriots, 2006). While all participants in the interviews for this thesis raised concerns over the junta's attitudes and behaviour, many were also critical of some fringe members of the anti-junta lobby for their aggressiveness and political manipulation of information. I was advised on a number of occasions to avoid contact with certain fringe exile groups<sup>8</sup>. One interview participant from a well-respected aid agency reported to have received a considerable level of abuse from a group opposed to his position on humanitarian assistance and his need to deal on occasion with government officials. Such situations have led to some researchers, and more importantly persons involved in humanitarian activities, being caught between the junta and anti-junta extremists. This, along with concerns over repercussions from the junta, has also led to 'closed' conferences on Myanmar (including those run by academic institutions) and restrictions placed on the release of some publications. The result is a stifling of open debate and study.

A further research issue which has become personalised is what has been labelled as the 'insiders and outsiders' debate (Mathieson, 2006)<sup>9</sup>. This relates to a tension which has developed between those researchers with the access and inclination to conduct study inside Myanmar and those who, for practical or personal reasons,

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<sup>7</sup> See David S. Mathieson's *The Bonfire of the Vanities: What do opposing academic views on Burma achieve?* (Mathieson, 2005) for a fuller account of personalisation of the debate.

<sup>8</sup> All the individuals or groups the author met in the course of this study were friendly, helpful and professional. Their support was critical to this study.

<sup>9</sup> See David S. Mathieson's *The hollow 'insiders' of Burma* (Mathieson, 2006) for a fuller account of this aspect of Myanmar research.



decide to conduct their research from outside. Researchers who go into the country have been accused of not sharing information, while those outside are accused of not fully appreciating the situation in the country. In some isolated cases the accusations may have an element of truth, but such allegations are generally unhelpful to furthering understanding of the country and are also unlikely to improve collaboration between researchers. There are few indications that this tension or the personalisation of the Myanmar debate will go away in the near future. However, the current heightened levels of suspicions by the junta following the late-2007 protests has removed the opportunity for research to be conducted inside the country in the short-term.

### **Summary**

This study adopted an inductive approach and focussed on qualitative information. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data during the fieldwork. Although the restrictive environment forced the use of discreet semi-structured interviews, it is assessed that the method was effective in obtaining the type and quality of information needed to successfully conduct the study. Once the data was collected it was reduced and collated. It was then analysed for its significance and written up.

The variable quality of information available on Myanmar reinforced the need to give attention to the credibility of sources and to triangulate data. Research on Myanmar is controversial and often the debate has been personalised limiting the ability at times for open debate. The current level of suspicion by the junta following the late-2007 protests has removed, for now, the possibility of safely conducting research inside the country.

## CHAPTER THREE

### HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE IN DIFFICULT ENVIRONMENTS

#### Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of current topics concerning international humanitarian assistance. Where possible the literature is linked to what is occurring in Myanmar. This is done partly to form an association with other sections of the thesis, but also because many of the differing opinions on assistance to Myanmar have their grounding in disagreement over definition and context.

A number of key points are raised in this chapter. It will be shown that there is neither an agreed approach to international humanitarian assistance nor consensus on how to deal with the growing levels of political involvement and conditions placed on relief efforts. This situation is causing a blurring of the line between humanitarian assistance and development. Of note are the changes occurring with the philosophy behind the provision of aid, with the introduction of calls for providers of assistance to look beyond the simple objective of immediate life-saving, to address issues of long term development assistance and sustainability. The concept of 'Do No Harm' is discussed as is the need for a better understanding of the context under which humanitarian operations are occurring. The issue of rights-based approaches and New Humanitarianism are also critiqued. The final discussion reviews the rationale for, and benefits of, using a system of categorisation to assist in contextualising humanitarian environments. The terms 'difficult environment' and 'fragile state' are introduced with the principles for engagement in such places discussed.

#### Humanitarian Assistance

Finding an agreed position on the scope and objectives of humanitarian assistance is problematic despite a significant amount literature having been produced in this subject area. A major difficulty is resolving the place of political and non-political motives of donors, practitioners and recipients. Here it is argued that all forms of international assistance have a political context based on international relations, the

domestic concerns of donors and the complexities in the recipient country. A dilemma for all donors of assistance to Myanmar is that one of the main causes of the poor humanitarian conditions is the undemocratic and ineffective governance of the country. However, if an unbalanced level of attention is placed purely on the political nature of the Myanmar situation, without equal focus on the specific humanitarian needs of the population, this may lead to poor assessments and inappropriate responses. Within this context, reflection on the nature of humanitarianism is useful.

Humanitarian assistance can be considered to be the voluntary non-political provision of relief assistance to those suffering from conflict and natural disaster (Evans & Newnham, 1998, p. 231). However, scholars and practitioners alike are constantly examining this belief, as increasingly some government and humanitarian activities are seen to have political and security linkages (Vaux, 2006). This is occurring despite efforts in some quarters to disentangle politics from aid and moves by many countries to more poverty-focused policies driven by the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) (United Nations, 2000). The linkages being made can often be attributed to an increased international assertiveness on the part of some Western countries in the new international security environment following the attacks in New York on 11 September 2001 (Vaux, 2006). Recent evidence of this is the rise in the use of military personnel to carry out development and humanitarian work in places such as Afghanistan and Iraq. The role played by ex-military personnel, primarily logisticians, working within NGOs is also helping to make co-operation with Western armies seem more normal for NGOs (Rieff, 2002b).

Additionally, associations between governments and NGOs are strengthening because of greater alignment of humanitarian priorities, human rights and foreign policies (Rieff, 2002b; Weiss, 2001, p. 422). A further development is for donors to come under more pressure to fund programmes that, although having immediate humanitarian aims, also have longer-term sustainability and development goals. Vaux (2006) recognises this, but notes regardless of this pressure many NGOs continue to place greater concentration on what he describes as a 'minimalist' approach, focussing on saving lives rather than the more 'maximalist' and wider 'development' applications. While Vaux argues this may have resulted from NGOs' desire to avoid political association, he personally presses for aid agencies to better balance the 'minimalist'

approach with a more 'maximalist' involvement whereby 'development' and the cause of the humanitarian crisis are also addressed.

That humanitarian assistance alone can effectively deal with the root cause of a humanitarian crisis without integrating with a wide-range of political, economic, and social action is doubted by Joel R. Charny, vice president for policy of Refugees International (Charny, 2004, p. 15). This view is shared by Donald Brandt, a senior researcher with World Vision International (Brandt, 1997), although he discards the idea of traditional linear interventions (relief-rehabilitation-development) in favour of relief efforts that are combined at the same time with development activity. As will be shown the relief-rehabilitation-development model is not currently possible in Myanmar due to both donors and the junta restricting aid, most often, to non-developmental humanitarian assistance.

### **Do No Harm**

Linked to both humanitarian assistance and development is the theory of 'Do No Harm' which has become popular since the mid-1990s and spurred Anderson's 1999 book with the same name. 'Do No Harm' seeks to ensure assistance does not inadvertently worsen the situation it hopes to improve, and is based on the premise that aid agencies do have opportunity and responsibility to shape their relief and development goals to achieve sustainable outcomes (Anderson, 1999, p.146; Munslow & Brown, 1999, pp 210, 211). Anderson does caveat this position by maintaining that agencies should not drift off their original mandates and continue to 'do what they know best' (Anderson, 1999, p. 3). For example, food security experts involved in a humanitarian crisis need to understand both the political impact of their operations and long-term sustainability issues, but ensure that they do not creep away from their focus on food issues.

Despite calls for more analysis of working environments, there remains a problem that agencies will stay confined in the silo of their specialisation and will not develop the wider understanding of the context needed to operate more effectively than has hitherto been the case in many humanitarian activities (Uvin, 1999, p. 12). Having only a cursory or localised awareness of the local environment can lead to a distorted

picture of the political and security situation being formed. To get an accurate picture much effort is needed. Research on the humanitarian assistance provided to Sri Lanka after the 2004 tsunami shows that the real understanding needed to grasp what was occurring within the humanitarian space was only gained by obtaining the widest possible knowledge of the politics involved and how people's perceptions of politics coloured their interpretation of what happened around them (Fernando & Hilhorst, 2006, p. 297).

Anderson's research also draws the conclusion that 'it is a moral and logical fallacy to conclude that because aid can do harm, a decision not to give aid would do no harm' (Anderson, 1999, p. 2). This position can be linked to the objectives and principles of humanitarian action (discussed later in this chapter) and is backed up with Anderson providing numerous supporting cases where agencies have been able to successfully operate under difficult conditions without losing their sense of purpose of doing no harm. One of the most commonly made arguments for opposing aid to Myanmar is based on the premise that the regime is diverting assistance for its own use (ALTSEAN Burma, 2002, pp. 22-30). Another concern is that assistance provided by donors lets the government avoid taking responsibility for delivering services to its own people (Maung Maung, March 2006). These are legitimate concerns, but this study will show that for the most part, agencies have greatly reduced the possibility of this occurring by adopting a careful and transparent approach to operations.

Myanmar is not the only country where there is the potential for international humanitarian assistance to weaken local structures or for relief to be diverted to unscrupulous ends. There are numerous examples of this occurring in Africa in the 1980s, where grass root efforts were often undermined by the work of big international organisations and where regimes managed to take over considerable control of aid. As an example of how much aid can fall into unscrupulous hands, Munslow and Brown (1999, pp. 217-219) show that it is estimated that the Ethiopian *Dergue*<sup>10</sup> managed to control over 90 per cent of the international aid relief at that time, with the regime in Khartoum controlling a similar level in northern Sudan. They further note that even if aid was not being stolen, it was not uncommon for the weakest parts of society, who are

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<sup>10</sup> The *Dergue* was the military junta that came to power in Ethiopia following the ousting of Haile Selassie I in 1974. The *Dergue* controlled Ethiopia until 1987.

usually the most in need, to receive the least. This occurs in Myanmar with humanitarian agencies being denied access to some of the most at-risk ethnic minority groups living in the border areas where there is conflict between local armed groups and the Myanmar military.

### **Defining Humanitarian Assistance**

To obtain a more precise understanding of what is generally recognised as humanitarian assistance it is necessary to expand the discussion to look at a more detailed working definition. Doing so has direct relevance to some of the problems discovered during the fieldwork being experienced by aid agencies in Myanmar that choose terminology based on what is believed to be tolerated by local authorities. An example of this is that the term ‘development’ is often not used by aid agencies in Myanmar to describe their operations, as this term has been interpreted by the junta as indicating activities that go beyond humanitarian relief and could involve internal interference in the country. Instead, terms such as ‘ongoing relief’ are more likely to be used.

The standard idea of humanitarian action was usefully defined by representatives of governments and multilateral donors, United Nations institutions, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and other aid organisations in Stockholm on 16-17 June 2003. The agreed objectives and definition are as follows:

1. The objectives of humanitarian action are to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during and in the aftermath of man-made crises and natural disasters, as well as to prevent and strengthen preparedness for the occurrence of such situations.
2. Humanitarian action should be guided by the humanitarian principles of humanity, meaning the centrality of saving human lives and alleviating suffering wherever it is found; impartiality, meaning the implementation of actions solely on the basis of need, without discrimination between or within affected populations; neutrality, meaning that humanitarian action must not favour any side in an armed conflict or other dispute where such action is carried out; and independence, meaning the autonomy of humanitarian objectives from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented.

3. Humanitarian action includes the protection of civilians and those no longer taking part in hostilities, and the provision of food, water and sanitation, shelter, health services and other items of assistance, undertaken for the benefit of affected people and to facilitate the return to normal lives and livelihoods (International Meeting on Good Humanitarian Donorship, 2003).

As a basic definition the above paragraphs provide a useful template. Not all observers, however, are convinced that such principles can realistically be held to. Some, like Charny (2004, p. 16), believe that goals of this nature are unlikely to be achievable in the real world of 'humanitarian policy subservient to national security interests'. Nevertheless, Charny does support governments endorsing humanitarian principles on the grounds that it assists in advocating for them to be respected.

Placed into the context of Myanmar, the definition requires further critique. In the first instance, the explanation states that assistance is provided in the aftermath of man-made crises or natural disasters. Due to the absence of serious natural disaster, this definition frames the cause of the conditions in Myanmar as man-made. With consideration that only the regime has the power to affect any change in the country and has been in control for sufficient years to have created an environment to allow improvements to occur, there is little evidence to counter the claim that it is primarily responsible for the poor humanitarian situation in the country.

The second noteworthy item is the expectation that humanitarian action will prevent and strengthen preparedness for a crisis. In Myanmar as the suffering is ongoing and with no indication that any real political change is likely to occur soon, the outlook for macro-level improvements is bleak.

The final issue of relevance is independence. Although the definition expands on the meaning of independence to highlight the autonomy of humanitarian objectives, this does not take into account that independence may not occur throughout the full chain of assistance where donors select programmes based on their own agendas, even if the practitioner and sponsored programmes are operating independently in the field. With NGOs reliant on funding, those who want wide 'operational' independence have to achieve greater 'financial' independence first (Charny, 2004, p. 20).

How to remain independent while also contributing to a harmonised and aligned aid effort can be difficult for some NGOs. Aid harmonisation is one of the core goals of the Paris Declaration ("Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness", 2005) but has been challenged as undermining civil society groups and NGOs by its emphasis on state involvement in international assistance (Pratt, 2006). This dilemma most affects small NGOs with little political influence. It therefore can become a higher-level political task to balance the needs of all parties, including NGOs and government, in any assistance effort. The need for effective political leadership, often seen to be lacking, is critical in co-ordination, guidance and impetus to producing any synchronised response. (International Crisis Group, 2007; OECD, 2006).

Moving from the wider international stage to the country level, the Strategic Framework for the UN Agencies in Myanmar (United Nations, 2005) also provides a list of the humanitarian principles that the UN has chosen to guide its activities. The principles are:

1. The principle of humanity is based on the right of those in need to receive assistance as a fundamental human tenet, which should be enjoyed by all citizens of all countries.
2. The principle of impartiality is the condition for non-discriminatory assistance. Aid is provided regardless of the race, politics, religion and gender of the recipients. Aid priorities are calculated on the basis of need.
3. The principle of independence states that agencies are not instruments of individual governments' foreign policies (United Nations, 2005).

While these definitions may adequately describe the ideal for humanitarian action, many situations requiring intervention are not themselves so simple to allow this template to work without some compromise. Indeed in the case of Myanmar humanitarian action may be more a case of making the best out of a bad situation than achieving, in this sense, complete ideological purity. Although it should be recognised that every organisation or agency will have its own interpretation of acceptable limits of what it will tolerate in the areas of impartiality, neutrality, and independence.



An additional policy in the UN Framework (United Nations, 2005) is the adoption of the MDG. This is not controversial and is now an accepted global practice. However, it is worth noting that achieving the MDG in difficult environments or fragile states<sup>11</sup> is a significant challenge. Analysis of available data suggests that at the current rate of progress the MDG in difficult environments will not be met by 2015 (Branchflower, 2004). The very nature of fragile states makes them problematical to engage with, particularly when there are repressive politics, poor governance and low levels of trust between donors and recipient governments ("Achieving the Health Millennium Development Goals in Fragile States", 2004). In this regard, information gained during fieldwork show that in Myanmar's case there are often relatively good relationships between agencies and government officials at the working level. It is at the political level where most of the problems with interaction happen.

### **Intervention**

Humanitarian action allows donor governments to be involved in a crisis or conflict situation in a less complicated and safer way than taking a more forceful approach to political change (Harmer & Macrae, 2004). That the provision of humanitarian relief is frequently used as a means or substitute for political action has consequences, especially as it most often will not stop the cause of the crisis but only relieve immediate suffering (Vogel, 1996). Added to this is the potential—again highlighted by Vogel (1996)—for assistance to lessen the pressure on entities responsible for a crisis to correct their wrongs. Where this is an issue with Myanmar is the status of the junta. As discussed later in this thesis aid agencies are required to rely on the regime for approval for access to areas and for many other governmental functions. It has been argued by those opposed to most international engagement in Myanmar that any dealings with the military government cannot be transparent and further entrenches the junta's illegitimate position (ALTSEAN Burma, 2002). Agencies operating in the country interviewed during this study disagree with this argument, however.

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<sup>11</sup> See also the Difficult Environments and Fragile States section of this chapter (pages 26-30).

While humanitarian interventions can often be driven by the feeling of moral obligation and the political willingness of parties to be involved in such activities, there are legal aspects to be considered. No state has a direct legal right to humanitarian assistance and no government has the legal right to violate the sovereignty and political independence of another state in order to assist (Vogel, 1996, pp. 2-3). For any intervention to occur without the approval of the host government it must be based on either the right to self-defence or a threat to peace and security under article 52 of the UN Charter (in the case of unilateral action), or authorised by the UN Security Council (in the case of multilateral action) (Vogel, 1996, pp. 2-3): also see Weller (2000, pp. 5-10). In noting this, all international agencies and NGOs in Myanmar are operating with the consent of the government.

When humanitarian intervention occurs during a time of armed conflict the behaviour of those involved is governed by international humanitarian law (IHL), comprising mainly of the 1949 Geneva Conventions with the aim to limit and prevent human suffering in such times (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2004). This is applicable to Myanmar where there is armed conflict in parts of the country, particularly the border areas. People outside the areas of direct conflict are also suffering from the effects of hostilities and are being detained because of internal strife and other security issues. The ICRC has the mandated and legal status to act under the Geneva Conventions in Myanmar—which has been a signatory since 1992 (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2005). Although the role and high international standing of the ICRC appears not well understood by the leadership in Myanmar which has placed constraints on ICRC's operations (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2007b). Complementing IHL is international human rights law which is applicable both in times of conflict and peace. However, the combined issue of human rights and humanitarian assistance has become increasingly controversial, especially when it involves the placing of conditions on aid.

### **Human Rights and Conditionality**

With Myanmar's poor human rights record making the country a potential place where conditionality could be attached to aid, it is relevant to review this approach. As will be shown, since the mid-1990s various donors and practitioners have increasingly

linked humanitarian assistance to human rights. An example of this is a policy of 'conditionality' with the provision of aid dependent on an acceptable level of human rights in recipient countries. There is an immediate logic to this as it seems to address the dilemma of how not to give aid to perpetrators of human rights abuses, while at the same time assisting to improve the lives of those in need. The negative consequence, however, is that people will continue to suffer if a donor withholds aid while waiting for the conditions to be met. Conditionality also works on the premise that the abusers of human rights will care enough about receiving the assistance, and the plight of those they control, to improve their ways. A belief contested by those who oppose the approach (Dutton, 2001).

Disputing the use of conditionality, Dutton (2001) primarily opposes it on the grounds that saving lives and relieving suffering should be the overriding objective in humanitarian operations and joins the call that relief should not be used as an alternative to political engagement. Using the example of the British foreign and international development policies under Tony Blair's New Labour in the late-1990s, Dutton (2001) and Reiff (2002a, p. 314) present the case that conditionality eroded the distinction between relief and political foreign policy, which in turn undermined the purist life saving purpose of humanitarian relief. This is considered here to only be partially correct. Saving or improving life is always a priority, but it is as wrong to reject conditionality outright as it is to attach it to all policies. Doing either shows a lack of sophistication in policy options and a failure to appreciate and individually deal with the unique nature and political context of each situation.

It is argued here that the underlying issue of conditionality is not that politics should be separate from aid; but that politicians, who ultimately are responsible for a country's aid policy, should act with diligence and humanity. Sometimes this could involve applying conditions, sometimes it should not. Humanitarian policy does not drive humanitarian responses, people drive humanitarian responses. Policies are the instructions or guidelines resulting from the decisions made by a person, or persons, about how they wish an activity to be carried out. The more rigid a decision maker has made the policy, the less flexible the implementers of the response will be. Donors who make conditionality an intractable part of policy instead of a tool to be applied as needed remove the ability to tailor a specific response. A further weakness is the lack

of consistency of foreign policies towards regimes with horrible records of human rights. The weighting donors give to the protection of human rights in a particular country is at times prioritised on the basis of their own economic, security or political interests.

### **New Humanitarianism**

The connections between human rights and conditionality that are occurring have taken on the label of New Humanitarianism (Rieff, 2002a, pp. 315-316). For examples of a number of rights-based models see Ewert (n.d., pp. 12-21). A major proponent of rights-based humanitarianism is Hugo Slim (Slim, 2001), who strongly calls for the end of unconditional 'charity and philanthropy'. He makes the valid general observation that all humanitarian assistance is political and that humanitarian efforts could be improved. But his argument goes astray with the suggestion that assistance provided by 'rich givers without a real determination to engage just political relationships...is left free of any serious challenge to power' (Slim, 2001, p. 5). A position he admits is akin to the concerns of the past of Marx and Engels without showing how challenging power is a necessary requirement of humanitarian action. Slim's call for rights-based assistance goes further, describing unconditional philanthropy as an extension of colonialism in that the assistance is given without care for the consequence. Fox (2001), however, argues against this, stating that the rights-based approach inevitably uses Western concepts of human rights that are considered to be morally superior to local beliefs, and as such become a new form of colonialism. Slim (2001) further undermines his argument by proposing that the impartial political philosophy of humanitarians gives them the ability to advocate in some political circumstances. This may well be the case for groups not in a crisis area; but for those that are, the reality is quite different. It would be prudent of any agency in Myanmar considering adopting political advocacy to consider that the result is most likely to be the regime removing their ability to operate in the country rather than achieving political change.

Theoretical discourse aside, it is yet to be proven in practice that a rights-based approach or conditionality works. The findings from four case studies conducted in 1999 into the benefits of conditionality when applied to aid showed that in all cases

conditionality was more often than not ineffective (Uvin, 1999). Rieff—quoting Nicholas Stockton of Oxfam—points out that although few people would actively oppose aid in the most pressing situations, the withdrawing of aid under conditionality as part of the new humanitarianism creates a new class of ‘undeserving victims’ (Rieff, 2002b). Rieff suggests this leads to the most urgent question about the new humanitarianism: is there still anything humanitarian about it (Rieff, 2002b)? That said, there can come a point where it becomes clear that it is in the best interests of all, particularly those at risk, for aid to be withdrawn or not given; or there is no other option but to place conditions, including those that are rights-based, on its delivery (Chong, 2002). However, regardless of the justification for conditionality, in even seemingly legitimate cases, problems can develop with local resentment being directed at foreign donors who withhold aid, especially if comparisons with other countries show an unbalanced level of assistance. Often the amount of aid given to Myanmar is contrasted against the levels given to Cambodia and Laos, which are also widely considered to have problems with democracy and corruption.

### **Difficult Environments and Fragile States**

In trying to understand all the complexities of international engagement within Myanmar it becomes challenging to simplify the problems or describe the country in terms that can be understood by a wide audience and assist with coordination and harmonisation of programmes. The number of countries that donors have to deal with simultaneously amplifies this problem. To assist in the analysis of the different situations and to improve the delivery of assistance, it is now becoming common to have a system of categorisation which gives more readily an understanding of the general nature and context of particular operating environments. The system provided as an example here is one proposed by a DFID working paper to improve delivery of social services in ‘difficult environments’ (UK Department for International Development, 2004).

*Difficult Environments*

‘Difficult Environments’ can be defined as:

Those areas where the state is unwilling or unable to harness domestic and international resources for poverty reduction, including the delivery of basic services. Such areas typically have all or several of the following characteristics: weak governance, fragile political and economic institutions, conflict, poor economic management, or are suffering from the effects of a chronic humanitarian crisis such as high HIV and AIDS infection or repeated famine. (UK Department for International Development, 2004, p. 8)

Within environments seen as ‘difficult’ there are also considered to be a number of specific types. Based on the criteria set down<sup>12</sup>, Myanmar can be assessed as having a ‘low willingness and high capacity’ for the effective delivery of social services as it falls into the following category:

States that may be strong in terms of administrative capacity and territorial control, but they are unresponsive to the needs of the poor, either because of the neo-patrimonial nature of state politics or because a real or perceived external threat diverts the use of resources for other aims that do not tackle poverty reduction. There may be difficulties in negotiating any kind of access at all, and bilateral support from certain governments may not be acceptable. (UK Department for International Development, 2004)

The benefit of using such a system is the potential for a clearer, immediate, and shared understanding of the general need, which will in turn improve the chances of developing the most suitable approach to the needs of the local environment. Responses can be better shaped to not only meet the deficiencies in local systems, but help in the building of new capability. As shown in the case of Myanmar, there is strong government control, but a low willingness to provide for the poor. This indicates a complex response is needed that not only requires the involvement of non-state actors, but also the introduction of services that may offer an entry point for longer-term pro-poor social, economic, and political change.

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix Two (p. 106).

*Fragile states*

When countries have political and humanitarian problems such as in Myanmar, it is common to encounter reference to the terms ‘fragile state’ or ‘failed state’ and it is useful to study the terms to see if they are applicable here. While Myanmar has many problems it does not meet the definition of a ‘failed’ state, which suggests the ‘complete’ collapse of the elements of statehood, and as will be explained, neither does the country fully meet the definition of ‘fragile state’. DFID (UK Department for International Development, 2004) makes two important points regarding the definition of a fragile state. Firstly, while there are many differing precise definitions, in general, the majority of people have a similar understanding of what is meant by the term fragile state, and this usually is that the state systems are no longer functioning effectively. Secondly, a state’s core function depends on two structural features—that is to be able to exercise effective control over its sovereign territory and to possess the necessary administrative capacities to carry out its role as a government. When either or both of these capabilities are not present, the state can be considered fragile. In Myanmar the regime does have effective control over much of the country and performs many administrative functions, be it poorly and only in areas of its own choosing. Myanmar therefore cannot at present be considered a fragile state. There is, however, potential for Myanmar to become a fragile state should the junta lose control, as there is an underlying threat of instability from unresolved ethnic and separatist issues (International Crisis Group, 2003; Smith, 2006). Should the current enforced unity fall away, the country could descend into chaos (Len, 2007). Any major changes to the power structures (in countries like Myanmar) therefore need to be handled carefully and it is most important to understand how quickly such countries are moving to or from a state of stability (USAID, 2004).

*International Engagement in Fragile States*

Several sets of principles that outline the best practice for international engagement in fragile states have been created. While Myanmar is not classified here as a fragile state, the principles set out below do provide a useful guide for how to engage with the country. The Development Co-operation Directorate (DCD) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) produced a set of

principles for a Senior Level Forum on Development Effectiveness in Fragile States in London in January 2005 (OECD Development Co-operation Directorate, 2005)<sup>13</sup>.

The principles state that engagement should:

1. take context as the starting point, moving from reaction to prevention;
2. align with local priorities and/or systems;
3. recognise the political-security-development nexus;
4. promote coherence between donor government agencies;
5. agree on practical coordination mechanisms between international actors;
6. do no harm;
7. mix and sequence aid instruments to fit the context;
8. act fast...
9. ...but stay engaged long enough to give success a chance;
10. avoid pockets of exclusion.

The principles are similar to the theory of 'Do No Harm' (Anderson, 1999) discussed earlier, in that they aim to maximize the positive impact of engagement and minimise unintentional harm, while premised on achieving sound long-term results. Moreover, they also relate to Vaux's (2006) position discussed earlier, by better balancing the 'minimalist' and 'maximist' approaches to aid and development.

Another example worthy of note for principles for engagement with people affected by calamity or conflict is the Sphere Project. The Sphere principles are based on two core beliefs: firstly, that all possible steps should be taken to alleviate human suffering arising out of calamity and conflict, and secondly, that those affected by disaster have a right to life with dignity and therefore a right to assistance (The Sphere Project, 2004). The Sphere Project works through a global collaboration of over 400 organisations working towards operating to agreed minimum standards with indicators

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix Three (p. 107) for full text of each principle.



that effort can be judged against. The Sphere handbook (The Sphere Project, 2004) is central to the project and is primarily designed for disaster relief, but can be applied in a range of situations, including armed conflict and other situations requiring assistance.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an introduction to many humanitarian topics. The aim is to draw attention to some of the current approaches to humanitarian assistance and development, and create a starting point from which to examine the issues specific to Myanmar. In many cases the discussion has been combined with examples from what is occurring in the country.

A number of key points can be drawn out. It has been revealed that there are increasingly links between politics and aid. This can cause some blurring of humanitarian assistance and development programmes and the forming of the New Humanitarianism approach, with actors actively pursuing conditionally and a rights-based approach. However, it is yet to be proven that this system works. Harmonisation and alignment are also now entrenched in the assistance mechanism, although not all NGOs are fully comfortable with the two concepts due to the potential for a loss of independence. A final theme identified is the need for more examination of the context under which humanitarian agencies are working, which has seen the creation of more analytical tools, such as clearer categorisation of humanitarian environments.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE SHAPING OF MYANMAR

#### Introduction

Interest in Myanmar is often focussed narrowly on subjects presented by issue-motivated groups or based on what is shown in the international media at the expense of the development of a broader understanding of the country. The junta's restrictions on access for researchers and journalists have not assisted in encouraging comprehensive studies to be made. As a result there is often a lack of detailed knowledge of Myanmar internationally. Those who become interested in Myanmar can start from a very low base of knowledge. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a basic level of understanding of the historical and political contexts that have influenced the humanitarian situation in Myanmar to allow engagement with the discourse of the remainder of the thesis. As such the content leans towards summaries of general interpretations with references provided to guide readers seeking more in-depth source material. Observations and knowledge gained during visits to Myanmar are also presented<sup>14</sup>.

The chapter is structured around three elements that have determined the Myanmar of today: geography, people and circumstance. The pronounced physical geography of the country has shaped its historical development and interaction between the various ethnic groups. The nature of the relationships between ethnic groups is critical to the future of Myanmar and is viewed by some scholars as more of a concern than the democracy debate on which the international community mostly focuses its attention. Added to this is a need to understand the role of the military and how it sees itself as having a historical right and responsibility to rule. To determine why the military has this belief, it is necessary to review history. It will be shown that for generations the vast majority of the population have never had any real control over their destiny and it is elite classes that have created the circumstances that have fashioned today's conditions.

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<sup>14</sup> The author has made three visits to Myanmar travelling in the countryside and visiting the cities of Yangon, Mandalay and Nay Pyi Taw.

## Geography

At approximately 678,500 sq km, Myanmar<sup>15</sup> is the largest mainland Southeast Asian country and is more than twice the size of New Zealand (approx. 268,000 sq km). It has land borders with Bangladesh, India, China, Laos and Thailand and a southwestern coastline with the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea (Myanmar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2003b). The grain of the land channels the country north-south along a series of mountains, across which travel can be difficult, and the three largest rivers: the Ayeyawady (Irrawaddy), the Chindwin and the Salween, that flood during the wet season. This north-south flow also reflects the route of much of the country's early immigration (Tucker, 2001, p. 9) as well as the direction of the major battles of the Anglo-Burmese Wars<sup>16</sup> and World War II.

There are three general climatic zones, with the high country of the north often experiencing temperate weather, the flatter centre considered a dry zone, and the remaining area having a monsoonal pattern with heavy rains normally from June to September. The average temperature (in centigrade) for much of the country is in the high twenties and low thirties for most of the year, but rises to the high thirties around April and May (Central Intelligence Agency, 2006; Myanmar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2003a). During these months in the dry zone the temperature climbs to over forty affecting agriculture and making life difficult for the population.

There are three main cities: Yangon, Mandalay and since late-2005 Nay Pyi Taw. Yangon (formerly Rangoon) is located in the delta area of lower Myanmar and is the most populous centre. Despite its tired look, intermittent electricity supply and limited public utilities, it is a bustling city with a mix of old colonial and new buildings, markets, and places of Buddhist, Christian, Muslim and Hindu worship. It also continues to be the hub for both international and domestic air travel.

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<sup>15</sup> See map at Appendix One. Note it does not show the new Nay Pyi Taw Division which has newly been created from within the Mandalay Division.

<sup>16</sup> There were three Anglo-Burmese wars: 1824-26 (clashes between Burmese and British forces leading to Britain taking control of parts of Lower Burma (the bottom half centred on Rangoon), 1852-53 (the British taking of all of Lower Burma), and finally 1886 (the British taking of Upper Burma—the top half centred on Mandalay).

Mandalay on the banks of the Ayeyawady in central Myanmar has lost much of its past historical importance and although the famous fort where the British overthrew the last Burmese king has been rebuilt, the city is generally indistinct from many other Asian developing country cities. While it appears to have less functionary public services than Yangon (people can be seen washing clothes and drawing water on the streets in the centre of the city), the markets are busy and there is a good deal of traffic on the roads—including motorcycles which, apart from those owned by police, are not permitted in Yangon.

The government was relocated from Yangon to Nay Pyi Taw in lower-central Myanmar in late 2005. When visited in 2007, government buildings and infrastructure, which are spread out over a vast area, were still hastily being constructed<sup>17</sup>. The Nay Pyi Taw area is laid out in a series of zones according to function. Approximately 15-20 kilometres to the east of the city and sitting into the side of the surrounding hills is a restricted area that is the main home for the senior members of the *Tatmadaw* (the Myanmar military). With a lack of facilities, commercial enterprises and the harsh climate in the dry zone, it is well known that there has been little enthusiasm for the new capital among the government employees who have had to relocate there, usually leaving their families behind in Yangon. Domestic and foreign businesses have kept their offices in the old capital and it appears unlikely embassies will shift to the new capital despite being allocated land there.

The country is administratively divided into seven states and eight divisions. The mostly isolated states in the border areas are mainly populated by the ethnic minorities (Chin State, Kachin State, Kayin State, Kayah State, Mon State, Rakhine State and Shan State). The divisions in the centre of the country are home to the majority Burman population (Ayeyarwady Division, Bago Division, Magway Division, Mandalay Division, Sagaing Division, Tanintharyi Division, Yangon Division, and the newly created Nay Pyi Taw Division). Successive governments that have drawn the borders of the states and divisions have at times used boundaries as a mechanism to

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<sup>17</sup> The new capital is often wrongly called Pynmana, which is a town to the east of city. The reason for the move from Yangon is unclear, but theories include: the location was considered more defensible and strategically important than Yangon; a possible desire by Senior General Than Shwe to create a capital historically associated with him in the manner of past kings; or that it was following the advice of fortune-tellers.

control ethnic groups (Smith, 1999). Moreover, administrative boundaries are not always a clear reflection of the ethnicity of the area and in most cases states do not equate to an area with sufficient resources to lead to effective independence<sup>18</sup>.

## People

According to a number of scholars reconciliation of historical grievances between the various political and ethnics groups in the country is the central problem facing Myanmar today—not the better publicised struggle between Aung San Suu Kyi and the military junta (Gravers, 2007; Seekins, 2007; Smith, 1999). While the basis for this claim becomes clearer when Myanmar’s history is examined, it is first helpful to identify the demography behind the issue.

There is no fully reliable population data available for Myanmar, but most estimates, including official Myanmar government figures (Myanmar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2003c) place the total population at over 50 million, with 70 per cent generally thought to live in rural areas and involved in some form of agriculture. Central Intelligence Agency estimates report that the Burmans (who control the military and central government) make up over 65 per cent of the population, with the Karen and Shan both below 10 percent. The Chinese, Indian, Mon and Rakhine populations are assessed at each being below five percent. The remaining groups, when combined, only total an estimated five per cent (Central Intelligence Agency, 2006).

An important aspect often overlooked is that each ethnic group is not necessarily a monolithic entity (Gravers, 2007). Within a group there can be separate communities based on religion, political or family ties. An example is the Karen who are often considered as a single entity based on the predominate Christian grouping led by the Karen National Union (KNU), when the reality shows there are a number of subtly different and at times warring factions (Gravers, 2007, pp. 227-258; South, 2007). As reported in *The Irrawaddy* (Saw Yan Naing, 2008), these divisions have seen KNU leaders being targeted for assassination in 2008 by rival Karen factions. This was

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<sup>18</sup> As an example, Smith (1999) shows that in 1951 the Karenni State borders were adjusted and renamed the Kayin State, and in doing so removed the State’s name synonymous with Karenni independence. Under British rule, the Karenni State had been guaranteed independence in 1875 and the Union of Burma 1947 Constitution also provided for the possible secession after 10 years. The State’s name change has removed this possibility.

following the earlier 14 February 2008 assassination of Mahn Sha, the general secretary of the KNU, reportedly be a rival Karen faction backed by the Myanmar military (Saw Yan Naing, 2008).

Religion plays an important part of everyday life in Myanmar and is interwoven into all types of activity<sup>19</sup>. That nearly 90 per cent of the population is Buddhist is clearly evident across much of the country by the overwhelming number of pagodas and monasteries. It is widely claimed that there are approximately 300,000 monks at any one time (Fink, 2001, p. 217). Discussions with people in Myanmar reveal that the Buddhists, who are predominately of the Theravada school, are very proud of the Myanmar style of Buddhism, which they consider to be a greater spiritual and more correct interpretation of the faith than the populist form found in some other parts of Southeast Asia. Alongside Buddhism is the visible and widespread worship of Nats (spirits). Astrology and numerology also form an important part of the daily lives of many Myanmar<sup>20</sup>. There are also well-established and noticeable Christian communities in many towns throughout the country, as well as significant Muslim populations in some areas. Rakhine state, bordering Bangladesh, is predominately Muslim.

The relations between most religious faiths appears to an outside observer to be mostly one of tolerance, but underlying this is a tension that has led to discrimination and occasional unrest. Fink (2001, pp. 213-231) highlights that religion is a point of difference between the predominately Buddhist government and the Christian ethnic groups in the conflict areas of the borders. There are currently no non-Buddhist cabinet ministers or senior members of the military. The importance of religion to their own prestige is not lost on the senior generals and photographs of them 'making merit' adorn many pagodas. The military is mindful of the influence the *Sangha* (the order of Buddhist monks) has on the population and has imposed a strict code of conduct on their activities<sup>21</sup>. Still, as shown in the late-2007 protests, monks do become involved in protest activity and the state has used force against them (BBC, 2007). It should be

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<sup>19</sup> See US State Department report for details on current religious practice and activities (United States State Department, 2006). Also see Fink (2001, pp. 213-231) for an insightful critique of religious practice and nature of government involvement. Much of the general information provided here is drawn from observations and casual discussion during fieldwork.

<sup>20</sup> 'Myanmar' is the name given to the people of Myanmar.

<sup>21</sup> See Buckley (2007) for brief overview of Myanmar's monks and the *Sangha*.

noted that men can easily enter and leave the *Sangha*, and it is customary to do so for only a short period of time (Buckley, 2007).

### **Circumstance**

Throughout history power has been held by unelected and self-imposed leaders such as kings, colonialists, foreign military commanders, local political leaders and the current closed circle of senior generals. No properly functioning democratic political structure, including during the so-called ‘democratic years’ of the 1950s<sup>22</sup>, has existed effectively, or long enough to accurately represent the will of the people or to lay a foundation for a modern democracy. Myanmar is a country created by control and exploitation, and there is little to suggest this circumstance is likely to change significantly in the near future<sup>23</sup>.

#### *Pre-Colonial Kingdoms (pre-1886)*

The early history of Myanmar is no less important than more recent experiences in interpreting the internal dynamic of Myanmar and the country’s relationships with its neighbours. Stories of ancient kings are still popular among modern generations, including the current generals (Callahan, 2004, pp. 215-217; Thant Myint-U, 2006, pp. 62-71). It is also worth noting that a common belief encountered in discussion during fieldwork is that Senior General Than Shwe considers himself a leader following in the footsteps of the pre-colonial Burmese kings and that this was one of the reasons for the naming of Nay Pyi Taw or ‘the city where the king resides’.

The area which is now Myanmar was originally a collection of small kingdoms, and the Mon people are regarded as the first to have exercised noteworthy influence<sup>24</sup>. By 850 AD a Burmese kingdom centred on Bagan southwest of Mandalay was formed and then greatly expanded under the King Anawrahta (1044-77)<sup>25</sup> (Tucker, 2001, pp.

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<sup>22</sup> See Callahan (1998).

<sup>23</sup> See Tegenfeldt (2006) for discussion on challenges to achieving reconciliation and peace-building following Myanmar’s history of conflict and repression.

<sup>24</sup> See South (2005) for a detailed account of Mon history and current political and ethnic dynamics.

<sup>25</sup> Anawrahta was the first of the three kings (Anawrahta, Bayinnaung and Alaungpaya) now being used by the current military to portray the unifying influence of Burmese leadership (Callahan, 2004, p. 216). Their statues dominate the new parade ground in the military zone at Nay Pyi Taw and they are showcased at the Defense Services Museum in Yangon. The museum is accessible to the public and provides a valuable picture of how the military views the country’s history.

12-13). Following his death the empire slowly declined and in the late 1200s Bagan fell to the short-lived Mongol invasion of Kublai Khan (Thant Myint-U, 2006, pp. 60-61). By 1364, however, a new Burmese kingdom was established at Ava near Mandalay. Some of the void left by the departing Tartars was also filled by the expansion of the Shan (Tai) from the north and east who pillaged Ava in the early 1500s. In the mid-1550s King Bayinnaung created another unified kingdom, as well as conquering areas of Shan State, Siam (Thailand) and Laos<sup>26</sup> (Thant Myint-U, 2006, pp. 63-71). With Bayinnaung's death the empire fell away allowing the Mon to re-establish their influence. The final Burmese empire, the Konbaung Dynasty, was built-up in the late 1700s by King Alaungpaya. Although his personal reign only lasted for eight years, Alaungpaya re-established power over the land taken by the Mon, including capturing Dagon, which he renamed Yangon. He also laid siege to the Siamese capital, Ayutthaya, which was later levelled by his son, Hsinbyushin, forcing the Siamese to move their capital south to the area that eventually became Bangkok (Hall, 1981, pp. 429-434). The Alaungpaya dynasty continued until the reign of King Thibaw in the late 1880s.

#### *The British period (1885 – 1939)*

King Thibaw, who is often portrayed as being dominated by a ruthless wife and incapable of effectively governing (Marshall, 2003, pp. 42-43), was finally overthrown in Mandalay in 1885 by British military force and exiled to India (Blackburn, 2000)<sup>27</sup>. This had followed a gradual take over of the country since the early 1820s by the British as part of their expanding empire and to counter the French presence in other parts of Southeast Asia (Tarling, 1999). The British established their administrative capital in Rangoon (Yangon) with Burma governed as a province of India.

Colonisation led to significant changes and partitions that arguably continue to be felt today. The British used ethnic groups such as the Chin, Kachin and Karen to put down Burmese resistance in a policy that could be seen as typical of a British 'divide and rule' approach (Callahan, 2004, pp. 34-42). Graves (2007, p. 17) shows this added to the existing division among ethnic groups. According to Fink (2001, pp. 17-21), the British also removed many of the established leadership structures, introduced

<sup>26</sup> See Andaya (1999) for details of political developments between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.

<sup>27</sup> See Blackburn (2000) for a detailed account of the Anglo-Burmese wars including the final annexation.



Christianity and installed the practices of the British civil service, using English as the administrative language<sup>28</sup>. Under British rule Burma was governed along two lines which again contributed to divisions in the population: one being the Frontier Areas (the isolated border areas of the ethnic groups) and the other, Burma Proper (the accessible centre with a predominate Burman population) (Gravers, 2007, pp. 17-29). Demographic changes also occurred with an influx of Indian migrants, particularly into Rangoon, and Chinese immigrants already having established themselves in large numbers in Mandalay (Tucker, 2001, pp. 30-31). The arrival of both groups pushed many of the local population out of the commercial sector, creating resentment and ethnic tension that developed eventually into violent unrest (Fink, 2001, p. 20). From the early 1900s anti-colonial feelings began to grow and demands for separation from India turned some years later into the formation of a movement seeking full independence. The building of the independence movement coincided with the arrival of leftist literature into the country (Tucker, 2001, pp. 83-84).

#### *World War II (1939 – 1945)*

The coming of World War II<sup>29</sup> was seen as an opportunity for those seeking independence from Britain. The spread of Japanese militarism with its anti-colonist propaganda and promises of independence saw Aung San (Aung San Suu Kyi's father) assemble a 'Burmese' army in the belief that fighting on the side of the Japanese would lead to a free Burma. During this time and the early phases of the war Aung San and the group known as 'the Thirty Comrades', which became the leadership core of the early Burmese forces, received their training and much of their direction from members of the Japanese Imperial Army (Callahan, 2004, pp. 53-57). However, when it became apparent that independence under Japan was a sham and the tide of the war was turning, Aung San made contact with other local political movements in Burma and formed the Anti-Fascist Organisation, later changing the name to Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) to oppose the Japanese (Allen, 2000, p. 584).

By the time Aung San made formal contact with the Allied Forces in 1944 they did not need his help in fighting the Japanese (Allen, 2000, pp. 584-589). Indeed, the

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<sup>28</sup> 'Myanmar' is currently the official and administrative language, although English is used widely in commerce and for international purposes.

<sup>29</sup> See Allen (2000) for the most comprehensive single volume work on the Burma campaign during World War II.

role of Aung San's army (and that of Wingate's Chindits) in the defeat of the Japanese is often overplayed, with definitive accounts of the war showing credit for the Allied success resting primarily with the Indian Army (Allen, 2000, p. 118)<sup>30</sup>. Further controversies surround the fact that ethnic groups such as the Karen and Kachin, unlike the Burman forces, remained loyal to the Allied effort throughout the entire war (Smith, 1999, pp. 62-64).

Despite Aung San's army changing sides to connect with the British, it is the early period of association with Japanese militarism that is often considered to be the most formative time for shaping the Myanmar military of today (Seekins, 2007). Later during the Ne Win era, officers with British military links were removed from Ne Win's inner circle in favour of those who he had close connections from the Japanese period<sup>31</sup>.

#### *Independence (1945 – 1962)*

After the war de-colonisation and independence became a key focus across Asia, including Burma. Aung San continued to play the central local role in the independence movement, particularly in his efforts to unify the various ethnic groups, up until his assassination in July 1947<sup>32</sup>. Independence was gained in 1948 with U Nu, a close associate of Aung San, appointed Prime Minister. With large parts of the country lawless and awash with weapons, and numerous groups struggling to grab some post-colonial power, it was not long before the country descended into civil war. Daily clashes were occurring between the many groups, but the three main blocs involved were U Nu's AFPFL government, the Burma Communist Party (BCP) and the KNU. Separate hostilities also occurred against the Chinese Nationalist troops (backed by the United States) who had been forced out of China by the communists (Callahan, 2004), and Muslim *Mujahedins* fighting out of Rakhine State<sup>33</sup>. Many clashes escalated into

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<sup>30</sup> During the early stages of the Burma campaign resistance by Allied forces crumpled as they were easily pushed to the northern borders with India by advancing Japanese. Here the divisions from the Indian Army turned the battle around and the Japanese were driven south until they surrendered in 1945. The Burma campaign was the longest of the war. See Allen (2000).

<sup>31</sup> See Seekins (2007) for details of Japanese influence on the creation of the current military as well as a good summary of Myanmar's often close post-war relationship with Japan.

<sup>32</sup> Initially the British showed a reluctance to deal with Aung San due to him being wanted on a well substantiated charge of murdering a village headman. The charge was eventually overlooked in favour of Aung San's importance to the transition to independence. See Tucker (2001) for an overview of the early independence period, although note his view that Aung San's assassination involved Ne Win is not widely supported.

<sup>33</sup> See Smith (1999) for comprehensive work on post-war insurgency.

major battles with fighting reaching into Rangoon. Gradually the *Tatmadaw* established a degree of control of the situation and the various conflicts shifted from open warfare to insurgency. The restoring of order in times of crisis has added to the *Tatmadaw's* belief, based on its own interpretation of history, that it is the sole force that can be relied upon for the continued security of the country (Callahan, 2004, pp. 215-217)<sup>34</sup>.

In 1958 following a period of relative calm that was mainly kept by local political bosses and their personal armies, political unrest again began threaten U Nu's civilian government<sup>35</sup>. The military under General Ne Win, with agreement from U Nu, peacefully took over power as a caretaker government until fresh elections could be held to replace the struggling AFPFL government (Fink, 2001, p. 27). By some accounts the military carried out the task of governing effectively, although they did not gain much popularity with their firmness of approach (Fink, 2001, pp. 27-29). Elections were held in 1960 returning U Nu to power, but with a new government largely based on a faction that had spilt from within the old AFPFL government.

*The Ne Win era and 1998 Uprising (1962 – 1990)*<sup>36</sup>

The 'new' U Nu administration continued to face economic and political problems and when U Nu entered into negotiations with some of the armed ethnic groups he lost the critical support of senior generals who saw the move as premature and potentially leading to the break up of the country (Callahan, 2004, pp. 202-204). This concern eventually led to Ne Win's 1962 coup which put in place a military dominated government that by 1988 had mismanaged the country almost to the point of economic collapse and humanitarian crisis.

Most blame for the country's economic failure can be placed on Ne Win's hopelessly flawed nationalisation and centralised control under his strategy known as the 'Burmese Way to Socialism' (Seekins, 2007, pp. 88-92). Damage was also done by an unsound policy of self-imposed isolation. There were acts of total economic stupidity, such as Ne Win's sporadic demonetisation of the currency that caused

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<sup>34</sup> Also see Haacke (2006) for a comprehensive discussion on the development of the junta's attitudes and internal security policies.

<sup>35</sup> See Callahan (1998) for critique of Burma's 1950s politics.

<sup>36</sup> See Taylor (2005) for details of the Ne Win era.

massive loss of personal savings. On one occasion, as an attempt to stop black market trading of the currency (and due to his fixation with numerology), all bank notes were reissued in new denominations that could be divided by nine: Ne Win's lucky number! (BBC, 2002).

By late 1987 Ne Win had admitted his socialist experiment was not working and in July the following year he stepped down to be replaced by an interim government. Economic reform and fresh elections were promised with the creation of a multi-party system. But by then it was too late to calm the public discontent that was progressively becoming more visible and widespread and finally developed into what has become known as the 8888 Uprising, owing to the date being 8 August 1988. The military stepped in to restore order. It did so with much violence, leaving many people injured and dead—some estimates put the number of dead in the thousands. Thousands of student protesters were also forced to flee the country or join resistance groups in the border areas<sup>37</sup>. Once again the military regained control—the third time since independence—and a governing structure was formed called the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) led by General Saw Maung.

*Election and the current Military State (1990 – present)*

The SLORC attempted to continue with the earlier promises of the interim government for economic and political reform. This resulted in multiparty elections in May 1990 to select a National Assembly<sup>38</sup>. The election, which the military government appeared to have believed it would win with its own National Unity Party (NUP) was instead won by the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi<sup>39</sup>. The military government, however, did not allow the Assembly to convene and it continues to hold power in Myanmar arguing that it only agreed to pass over control once a constitution was written and approved, and a parliament elected under this new constitution (Tonkin, 2007). In April 1992 General Saw Maung was replaced by Senior General Than Shwe as head of the military government that was renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997.

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<sup>37</sup> The 88 Generation Students, as they are now called, remain an important opposition grouping.

<sup>38</sup> The facts surrounding what occurred with the 1990 election and the reason power was not handed over to the NLD are hard to now determine with most versions suffering considerable political bias. See Tonkin (2007) for a well-documented and considered position on what occurred with the 1990 elections.

<sup>39</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi was under house arrest at the time after having being arrested in July 1989 (Wintle, 2007). See Aung San Suu Kyi (1995) for an accessible example her personal writings on Myanmar.

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s the senior generals consolidated their hold on power including tightening the *Tatmadaw's* own internal unity to counter the possibility of division which could threaten its existence and ruling status (Selth, 1998). All effective political opposition was eliminated and the SPDC's own political organisation, the Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA), was created to which millions of people have subsequently been coerced into joining (Fink, 2001, pp. 95-96). Much pressure was directed at the NLD with many of its offices closed, members detained or forced to resign from the party. Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest in July 1995 (having been placed under arrest in July 1989). She was once more put under arrest from September 2000 to May 2002 (Wintle, 2007). In 2003, following an attack on her convoy by a pro-military/USDA mob, she was again placed under house arrest where she remains today<sup>40</sup>. The *Tatmadaw* also entered into ceasefire agreements with most armed ethnic groups, although not noticeably with the KNU and some armed groups in Shan State which continue to fight an active insurgency along the border with Thailand<sup>41</sup>. The *Tatmadaw's* efforts to deal with ethnic groups, while acknowledging Myanmar is multi-ethnic, is based on its own premise that the groups are all fundamentally the same and can be assimilated under the one Myanmar umbrella (Seekins, 2007, p. 25). Deals were also made with the drug lords who controlled the globally important opium trade<sup>42</sup>, leading to the surrender in late 1996 of the most infamous drug lord, Khun Sa (Fink, 2001, p. 240)<sup>43</sup>.

In 1993 Senior General Than Shwe approved the formation of a National Convention to draft a new constitution. The Convention was dominated by the military, frequently suspended, and dismissed in March 1996, having produced nothing. The NLD had already walked away from the Convention in late 1995. In 2003, Kyin Nyunt, at that time Prime Minister<sup>44</sup> and head of the then powerful military intelligence

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<sup>40</sup>During a tour of northern Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters were attacked by government militiamen/USDA in the town of Depayin. As many as 70 people were reported killed and over 100 people arrested, including Aung San Suu Kyi (Wintle, 2007, pp. 410-416).

<sup>41</sup> See Smith (2005) for status of ethnic groups, including ceasefire groups, and discussion of current ethnic issues.

<sup>42</sup> See Chapter Five for details of current opium production.

<sup>43</sup> See Lintner (1999) for comprehensive coverage of illegal drug trade and Khun Sa's activities. Khun Sa died in Yangon on 28 October 2007. Five major drug lords remain: Bao Youxiang, Wei Xuegang, Luo Xinghan, Lin Mingxian and Peng Jiasheng (The Star, 2008).

<sup>44</sup> The prime minister is the head of government, but the head of state, Senior General Than Shwe, in reality has total authority over all aspects of government. Khin Nyunt was 'permitted to retire on health grounds' in October 2004 by Than Shwe. In fact he was arrested at Mandalay Airport on 18 October on

organisation, announced a new seven-step ‘roadmap to democracy’<sup>45</sup> with the first step being to reinstitute the National Convention to determine the principles of a new constitution. The ‘road map’ is still the process the junta uses and after 14 years, the first step was completed with the final session of the Convention held in September 2007. This was followed in by the establishment of a Constitutional Drafting Committee and the announcement that a National Referendum will be held in May 2008, and a General Election in 2010 (State Peace and Development Council of the Union of Myanmar, 2008).

Constant delays in installing a democratic government and human rights abuses have led to the imposition of sanctions against Myanmar by Canada, the United States, and to a lesser extent the European Union and Australia. Some of these sanctions were, however, imposed after the harsh crackdown by the military on the protests of late-2007 which saw a renewed level of condemnation by many in the international community (International Crisis Group, 2008). Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members and other countries in the region, such as Japan with its own ‘quiet diplomacy’, have adopted an occasional tough-talking but less confrontational approach to dealing with the junta although this has proved no more effective in bringing about significant change (Seekins, 2007, p. 152). Nevertheless, while the top leadership remain mostly reclusive, in recent years Myanmar has become less isolated. Regional bilateral relationships have strengthened reflecting the strategic importance of Myanmar’s geographical position (Ganesan, 2005). It links North Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia through its many land borders and has a long coastline facing the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. Myanmar’s economic relationships with its neighbours

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charges of corruption. He and his loyalists were then purged from the administration. In July 2005 he was tried by a special tribunal and sentenced to 44 years in prison and is currently serving his sentence under home detention. The generally accepted reason behind Khin Nyunt’s removal is the belief that he had become a political threat to Than Shwe. Khin Nyunt was the most openly politically progressive senior member of the junta who supported the development of international connections. Along with this, his control of the powerful and corrupt military intelligence directorate made him a distinct rival for the leadership of the regime (Jagan, 2006).

<sup>45</sup> The 2003 seven-step ‘road map’: 1. Reconvening of the National Convention that has been adjourned since 1996; 2. After the successful holding of the National Convention, implementation of the process necessary for the emergence of a genuine and disciplined democratic state; 3. Drafting of a new constitution in accordance with basic principles laid down by the National Convention; 4. Adoption of the constitution through national referendum; 5. Holding of free and fair elections for *Pyithu Hluttaws* (Legislative bodies) according to the new constitution; 6. Convening of *Hluttaws* attended by Hluttaw members in accordance with the new constitution; 7. Building a modern, developed and democratic nation by the state leaders elected by the *Hluttaw*; and the government and other central organs formed by the *Hluttaw* (U Khin Maung Win, 2004).

have also evolved. With the opening up of the largely untapped energy and natural resources in the country there has been a rise in international economic engagement, most notably by Thailand, India and China (Fink, 2001, pp. 222-241). While this situation, particularly the influence of China, has created an environment where Western countries could consider reviewing how well their isolationist foreign policies fit with Myanmar's increasing regional engagement, it appears most are yet to do so (Ott, 1998).

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter is to examine the historical and political contexts that have influenced the humanitarian conditions in Myanmar. It has been determined that the situation in the country is more complex than the important, high-profile struggle for democracy since the 1990 elections. Myanmar has a diversity of ethnic groups with a long history of turbulent relations and conflict. The country's leaders have historically controlled the resources and population by force and there has been little opportunity for the people to have influence over the distanced elites, whose main concern has been maintaining power and personal enrichment.

One of the tragedies of Myanmar's history is that the people who suffered from colonialism and war have since independence suffered at the hands of those who should protect them—the *Tatmadaw*. The current 'road map' to democracy is widely regarded as primarily intended to guarantee that the senior generals retain political control. Despite seeing themselves as the only entity that can hold the country together it has been military leaders that have mismanaged the country to the verge of economic crisis and who are responsible for the serious humanitarian situation currently existing.

In recent years the country has gradually opened up, and although many Western countries constrain their engagement with Myanmar it can no longer be considered isolated. The extraction of energy and natural resources is a key feature of Myanmar's developing relationships with neighbouring countries, as well as its strategic importance.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN MYANMAR

#### Introduction

The humanitarian needs in Myanmar are such that there is a requirement for international assistance. The country sits within the bottom third of most scales of indicators used to measure social and economic conditions and it is one of the poorest countries in Asia despite being rich in natural resources<sup>46</sup>. The UN reported in mid-2005 that although data is lacking:

‘Surveys and substantial anecdotal evidence suggests that significant segments of the population are experiencing extremely difficult socio-economic conditions with a growing number of households living in acute poverty and facing other serious threats to their livelihood, including limited health care, insufficient education opportunities, and vulnerability to exploitation and abuse’ (United Nations, 2005).

The February 2006 report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights to the Economic and Social Council (Pinheiro, 2006, p. 3) recalled that as early as 2001 eight UN agencies in Yangon expressed their concern that Myanmar had a silent humanitarian crisis in the making, noting particularly the serious situation in the ethnic minority and conflict areas. While the UN concluded that the situation was not yet at a point of acute crisis, a continuing and significant deterioration in conditions was affecting the population on a wide scale.

The situation inside the country is difficult to accurately visualise and assess. Presenting a precise and full picture on conditions in Myanmar is hampered by a shortage of useable data. In many cases annual statistics do not exist or are dated. Myanmar government figures are generally viewed with suspicion. This hinders the ability to produce accurate assessments of humanitarian requirements and the lack of a

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<sup>46</sup> Steinberg (2001) and Fink (2001) provide varying and worthwhile perspectives on social and economic conditions in the country. An additional perspective from the pro-democracy movement can be found in a report by the Burma UN Service Office (2003), the New York office of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB).



common understanding of the political economy in the country is seen as a constraint to aid effectiveness (Igboemeka, 2005, p. 4).

The aim of this chapter is to describe the current humanitarian situation and levels of international assistance in Myanmar. Primarily the information is drawn from existing literature, but on occasion the discussion is assisted with information gained during fieldwork. The chapter will provide an overview of the debate surrounding aid to Myanmar revealing the often polarised nature of the discourse. Included will be discussion on the controversial withdrawal of the Global Fund. Following this some specific details on the humanitarian and economic conditions in the country will be presented. It will highlight the grave situation in most sectors where decline is occurring, but this will be balanced by revealing where there has been some noteworthy improvements, particularly in areas such as HIV/AIDS<sup>47</sup>. Finally there will be a review of what is being reported as the key issues affecting humanitarian operations.

### **The Aid Debate**

The issue of aid<sup>48</sup> to Myanmar remains heavily politicised despite some international agencies having had a presence in the country for nearly 20 years. Prior to 1988 the self imposed isolation of the junta led to little in the way of associations between international aid agencies and the government, although there were some direct funding relationships with local NGOs, church groups and hospitals (Purcell, 1999, pp. 76-77). Following the 1988 uprising and the 1990 election, even the limited international assistance being provided dropped right away with many countries suspending official development assistance (ODA). Over time there has been a gradual re-engagement with Myanmar and now around 50 INGOs and various UN agencies operate there (NGOs in the Golden Land of Myanmar, 2007).

There is still, nevertheless, controversy over whether or not aid should be given. The competing positions are often not understood, poorly analysed and inaccurately represented. The main argument supporting the provision of assistance centres on the

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<sup>47</sup> See pp. 53-54 regarding HIV/AIDS.

<sup>48</sup> 'Humanitarian assistance' and 'development' are often regarded as separate entities, especially for political and budgetary reasons. In the context of international assistance to Myanmar, arguably, the distinction has become blurred. The terms are intermingled, as is the use of the term 'aid'.

humanitarian belief that donors need to look beyond the risks of dealing with the junta as the situation cannot wait for a change in government before assistance is provided (Pinheiro, 2006, p. 20). Most pro-aid standpoints are also similar to that provided in a 2006 Refugees International paper which presents the case that aid is needed to control the spread of the humanitarian crisis; to build local NGO capacity due to their access to local communities; that aid may promote 'bottom-up' political transition; and, aid can be used to help conflict-resolution and build a national identity with the various ethnic groups (Shukla, 2006).

The anti-aid lobby, which in the main consists of the more extreme political activists and anti-junta lobby groups outside Myanmar, are of the view that aid: strengthens the junta; undermines the desire for political change; can be manipulated by the junta for its own gain; and there is insufficient transparency to account for its delivery. Typical of the Myanmar anti-aid position is that espoused in mid-2006 by the internationally-known exiled labour activist and general secretary of the Federation of Trade Unions-Burma (FTUB), Maung Maung, that as the humanitarian crisis was brought about by the regime it was its responsibility and therefore nothing should be given (Maung Maung, March 2006). Taking a hard-line position is not uncommon among many exile groups globally. As Anderson notes diaspora can sometimes make finding resolution to complex problems more difficult as they are often more rigid in their demands for conditions than their fellow country-people who live within the setting (Anderson, 1999, p. 18). Although it should be noted that most exile groups are now conditionally supportive of humanitarian assistance and most are now actively seeking funding for their own projects (House of Commons International Development Committee, 2007, pp. 13-15). These projects are not necessarily always humanitarian in nature and can be for covert political training inside Myanmar such as run by the FTUB (House of Commons International Development Committee, 2007, 14-15).

In the early 2000s the International Crisis Group (ICG) produced a number of reports on the humanitarian situation in Myanmar and the difficulties in providing assistance<sup>49</sup>. The document most relevant to this study is *Myanmar: The Politics of Humanitarian Aid* (International Crisis Group, 2002). The key points drawn were that

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<sup>49</sup> See <http://www.crisisgroup.org>

international assistance was making a difference and therefore aid should continue to be given. The report went further and discussed the main political concerns. These were the arguments against increased aid then being made by Aung San Suu Kyi<sup>50</sup> and groups such as the NLD; and that the NCGUB had called for a boycott of aid in the early 1990s (International Crisis Group, 2002, p. 4). The 1995 Bommersvik Declaration (National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, 1995) sets out the NCGUB position at that time and requests that there should be no increase in aid given. This was based on the premise that no aid could be delivered without indirectly supporting the junta. The NCGUB also opposed the US government's assistance with drug eradication. Aung San Suu Kyi and the NCGUB, however, subsequently softened their stance in the early 2000s under a banner that aid should be delivered to 'the right people in the right way' (Burma UN Service Office - New York, 2003).

Ambiguity over what positions on aid are held remains today with many pro-democracy groups acknowledging that there have been 'attempts to portray key Burma campaign organisations and the NLD as opposed to humanitarian assistance' (Burma Campaign (UK), 2006, p. 4). As a result, in 2006 the Burma Campaign (UK) produced a position paper (Burma Campaign (UK), 2006) endorsed by most of the main pro-democracy organisations, including the NCGUB, calling for immediate attention to be given to humanitarian needs. On 20 April 2006 the NLD issued its *Special Statement – 3104/06* (National League for Democracy, 2006) highlighting the crisis in Myanmar and calling for international assistance, although, and as with the Burma Campaign (UK), with conditions relating to interaction with the regime.

### **The ICG Myanmar Briefing and the Global Fund Pullout**

A dispute over the position of some groups towards aid arose in 2007 from an ICG Asia Briefing, *Myanmar: New Threats to Humanitarian Aid* (International Crisis Group, 2006). The ICG briefing's main aim was to highlight that although there has been a period of expanded humanitarian space in Myanmar, aid agencies were coming under renewed threats from not just the military regime, but from pro-democracy activists abroad who ICG accused of seeking to curtail or control assistance programs.

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<sup>50</sup> Also see ALTSEAN Burma (2002, p. 7).

ICG used as an example the withdrawal of the Global Fund in 2005, which ICG said occurred after the Fund came under intense pressure from US-based groups. A further point made in the ICG paper was that the Global Fund withdrew hastily and without making sufficient efforts to resolve the situation, putting thousands of lives at risk (ICG/OSI, 2007, p. 2). The Global Fund's official position was that the pullout was for technical reasons. It released a fact sheet in August 2005 stating that due to its own additional financial safeguards and new restrictions set down by the Myanmar government, the Fund could not implement its programme effectively (Global Fund, 2005). The Open Society Institute, a US grant-making foundation, disputes that there was pressure on funding from within the US (ICG/OSI, 2007). However, there are documented calls by US senators for the Global Fund to limit its operations in Myanmar. A press release available on Republican Senator and Chairman of the East Asia Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Sam Brownback's, own website, shows a level of pressure from within the US Senate was brought to bear on Global Fund operations. The release of 5 October 2004 states in part:

‘We strongly encourage the Global Fund to withhold the disbursement of additional funds to Burma, and we request an explanation of the substantial amount—\$2.4 million—processed in the initial disbursement. This is more than one-third of the total amount of the grant, and seems particularly reckless given the difficulties of conducting programs in a repressive environment created and perpetuated by the SPDC.’ (Brownback, 2004).

The Global Fund is not the only international agency that has withdrawn from Myanmar. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) – France withdrew in March 2006 stating that ‘MSF has left because of unacceptable conditions imposed by the authorities on how to provide relief to people living in war-affected areas’ and that if MSF ‘accept the restrictions imposed on us today, we would become nothing more than a technical service provider subject to the political priorities of the junta’ (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2006). It is worth noting that Médecins Sans Frontières – Switzerland, and Artsen zonder Grenzen (MSF Holland) continue to work in Myanmar (NGOs in the Golden Land of Myanmar, 2007).

Another organisation which has faced significant constraints on its operations is the ICRC. The Committee's status and methods of operation mean that it must be

viewed as a completely separate case from other international organisations working in Myanmar. As shown earlier<sup>51</sup>, the ICRC has a special role under international humanitarian law and unique level of international status. The junta seems not to understand this and appears to have chosen to treat the organisation in a similar manner to INGOs. The current access restrictions placed on ICRC are seriously affecting the Committee's ability to operate. In 2005 prison visits by the ICRC were stopped; in 2006/07 it cut its international staff from 56 to 16; and by March 2007 it had closed two of its offices—one in Mawlamyine (Mon State) and the other in Kyaing Tong (East Shan State) (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2007b; Reuters, 2007). Some of the long-term Myanmar observers spoken to during this study are of the belief that the restrictions on ICRC are likely to continue. Despite issuing a denunciation against the Myanmar government for violations of IHL in June 2007 (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2007a), the ICRC continues to maintain some activities in the country.

### **Conditions in Myanmar**

As with most other 'difficult environments'<sup>52</sup> Myanmar will not meet the MDG by 2015 (Department for International Development, 2004, p. 3), nor does it seem likely given the junta's current priorities to be in a position to be close to achieving the international goals in the foreseeable future. Estimates show high levels of poverty (United Nations Development Programme, 2006a) and health indicators (World Health Organisation, 2006) are poor in many areas. There is major population displacement (Thailand Burma Border Consortium, 2007) and the economy has stagnated (Department for International Development, 2004, p. 5). A common complaint is that the government does not publish a budget which prevents accurate tracking of the junta's spending. It is widely accepted that the military take a large part of government revenue at the expense of many more critical needs, such as health and education, creating significant deficiencies in these sectors. Even without reliable figures being available it can be assumed that the move of the capital to Nay Pyi Taw had a substantial price tag, diverting money away from those in need.

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<sup>51</sup> See p. 23.

<sup>52</sup> See pp. 26-27.

*Poverty and Malnutrition*

Most people in Myanmar are poor and in the more remote regions many people do not have an adequate diet. The country ranks, on a descending scale, 130 out of 177 countries in terms of quality of life on the UNDP's 2006 Human Development Index (United Nations Development Programme, 2006a). This position is one place below Cambodia (129) and two below Solomon Islands (128), but ahead of Laos (133), Papua New Guinea (139), Timor-Leste (142), and Zimbabwe (151). New Zealand sits at 20<sup>th</sup> position. Although Myanmar produces a surplus of rice on a national basis according to the World Food Programme (WFP) some of its regions do not have enough (World Food Programme, 2006). Furthermore child malnutrition of under five year olds is estimated at 32 per cent (World Food Programme, 2006). Five per cent of the total population is possibly undernourished (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2006) and approximately 15 per cent face immediate food security issues (Matthews, 2006, p. 211). This situation lends weight to the claim that the most serious threat to the authority of the junta may not necessarily originate from purely political quarters, but could come from the potential for civil disturbance due to a lack of, or high price of, basic food stuffs, mainly rice and cooking oil (Matthews, 2006, p. 211)<sup>53</sup>. It is worth noting that it was the government's decision to remove subsidies on fuel that triggered the street protests in late 2007, although the protests never seriously threatened the junta's hold on power (Cho & Paung, 2008, p. 26).

*Education*

The education sector requires substantial investment and has reached a point where many students are leaving school too early and ill-prepared. A 2002 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report (Middelborg, 2002, p. 3) showed that in 2001 five per cent of primary school age children did not enrol in Year One and approximately 25 per cent of the pupils dropped out before they reached Year Five with generally an insufficient level of education to stay fully literate. The same UNESCO report shows the enrolment levels for secondary school drops to 40.3 per cent and 11.3 per cent for tertiary schooling<sup>54</sup>. World Bank

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<sup>53</sup> The price of rice has long been considered a touchstone for political unrest (Smith, 1999, p. 3).

<sup>54</sup> Tertiary figure is from 2001.

figures<sup>55</sup> (World Bank Group, 2006) show an improvement for primary enrolment in 2005, with 99.6 per cent of children enrolled for primary school, although only 77.8 per cent finish.

What these figures do not reveal is the standard of instruction or the curriculum which is strictly controlled by the regime. According information obtained during fieldwork NGO assistance in schools helps with the basic needs such as desks, paper, school buildings, and the feeding of teachers and students, but there is no involvement with the syllabus. It was also reported that the quality of university study is generally seen as having been in a slow decline from the Ne Win era of the 1960s till the 1990s. Information obtained during fieldwork showed that since the 1990s the situation has markedly worsened with campus closures commonplace and a further tightening of government restrictions and monitoring. Current programmes are mainly technical and administratively focussed. Medicine was widely considered by many people spoken to during fieldwork as one of the few options available for talented students with students wanting a broad, varied and quality education needing to leave the country.

#### *General Health and Child Mortality*

Most of the estimated 50 (plus) million people do not have adequate health care. Government health spending only equated to 2.8 per cent of the 2003 gross domestic product (GDP) (World Health Organisation, 2003). WHO statistics show life expectancy at birth in 2004 was 56 years for males and 63 for females (World Health Organisation, 2006). Save the Children UK figures show some 28,000 children under five die each year from mainly preventable diseases (Save the Children UK, 2005). Government leaders and senior military officers go abroad, mostly to Singapore, for medical treatment (Agence France Presse, 2007a)—an option not available to the majority of the population. According to information gained in discussions during fieldwork, while the government is relatively open to receiving international assistance in the health sector, particularly in the area of communicable diseases, there remain considerable gaps as government spending is allocated elsewhere. As with education, the government contribution tends to be limited to providing hospital staff and

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<sup>55</sup> The World Bank does not have an in-country presence, but is a useful source of data on Myanmar.

infrastructure. The cost of treatment, surgery and medical supplies must be met by the patient, who also must be fed by their family. Patients are treated based on their ability to pay, not their condition, and even in cases of a life-threatening condition, will be left to die if funds are not available<sup>56</sup>.

### *HIV/AIDS, Malaria and Tuberculosis*

The Three Diseases (3-D) Fund is the most recent significant international effort to help in the health sector. The Fund (Three Diseases Fund, 2007) has been set up by six major donors in conjunction with the UN, independent experts, NGOs, community-based organisations (CBOs) and other administrators to reduce the communicable diseases of malaria, HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis. The fund has a budget of US\$100 million over five years from 2007.

According to the WHO (World Health Organisation, 2005), malaria is the most important public health problem in Myanmar and is the first priority in health planning. The number of people living in malarious areas is estimated by the WHO to be 39 million. WHO (2005) also report that there has been a significant worsening in malarial conditions over recent decades. In 1974, less than 9500 cases of malaria were reported<sup>57</sup>. In 2005, there were 1,707 confirmed deaths, 151,508 confirmed cases and 506,041 probable cases. Furthermore, WHO (2005) state frequent major outbreaks and epidemics occur almost every year. Chin and Rakhine states are the worst affected areas followed by Kayah state. Kayin State and Tanintharyi Division also have a serious morbidity rate. Least affected are the central areas.

HIV/AIDS remains another of the most pressing issues in the country (International Crisis Group, 2004). According to the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) data (UNAIDS, 2006b), the national adult prevalence of HIV infection is estimated at 1.3 per cent. UNAIDS (2006b) also show that the main types of transmission are the heterosexual route (65 per cent), injecting drug use (26 per cent) and contaminated blood (5 per cent). On a positive note, UNAIDS (2006b) reports the rate of infection reached a plateau in early 2000 and that the Ministry of Health and its

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<sup>56</sup> A local person told the author that his wife had died in hospital once the family could no longer afford to pay for treatment.

<sup>57</sup> The accuracy of figures from 1974 has not been determined.



subsidiary, the National AIDS Programme, have been supportive of most HIV/AIDS activities.

The final 3-D Fund disease is Tuberculosis. According to the WHO (World Health Organisation, 2004), there has been an approximate three-fold increase in new cases over the last 10 years. WHO (2004) show that in 2004 an estimated 85,464 new cases were reported. Of those 4.4 per cent were multi-drug resistant.

### *Deforestation*

Myanmar's deforestation problems are similar to other countries in the region. Forests cover about 498,600 square kilometres or 74 per cent of the whole country. The UN reports that the total forest area is reducing at over 220,000 hectares per year (United Nations Environment Programme, 2004). The UN Environment Programme (2004) further notes that deforestation in Myanmar, unlike in some other developing countries, is not the primary result of commercial extraction of timber (although illegal logging is an issue that is not quantified), but due to shifting cultivation, fuel-wood problems, and to a certain extent, population growth. Few rural homes have a supply of gas or electricity so there is heavy reliance on fuel-wood resulting in depletion of cover in marginal forests outside reserve areas.

### *Pollution*

The extent of industrial pollution and accompanying environmental degradation is highly localised according to the UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme, 2004). The UNEP (2004) assess this to be the result of deliberate policy measures taken by the government to incorporate environmental considerations, albeit informally, in the national planning process. It is also attributable to the low rate of industrialisation. Considerable levels of household and personal waste, particularly plastics, are observable in and around the major townships.

### *Water*

Only around 80 per cent of the overall population have access to an improved water source (World Bank Group, 2006). The same data shows that in urban areas only

88 per cent of the population have access to improved sanitation facilities. It is common to see in many of the main towns and cities, including Yangon and Mandalay, people fetching water from a public supply and washing clothes at public wash points.

### *Displacement*

The displacement of large numbers of the Myanmar population is a significant and well-established problem. The Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) (Thailand Burma Border Consortium, 2007) estimated in 2006 that there were 500,000 internally displaced people in eastern Myanmar, including some 12,000 Mon in resettlement sites. The TBBC further report that in Thailand there are 154,000 refugees in camps, and over 200,000 refugees outside camps. TBBC also assess that there are in excess of two million migrant Myanmar workers in Thailand. According to Refugees International (2006) there are also approximately 20,000 Muslim Rohingya refugees officially in the border area with Bangladesh, although Refugees International estimate the actual number to be somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 (Refugees International, 2006).

Displacement has added to the problem of human trafficking. The movement of women to Thailand for sexual exploitation and to China for forced marriages, and men to neighbouring countries for cheap labour is assessed as widespread; although accurate figures are not available (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2005). Trafficking in children is also a serious problem, particularly across the eastern border into Thailand (Save the Children UK, 2005).

### *Human Rights*

It is impossible to consider the humanitarian situation in Myanmar without specific reference to human rights, but to cover the issue fully would require a substantial separate study. Details of violations are widely available in hardcopy and electronically from international and regional human rights organisations, as well as numerous exile groups. The areas of concern include: forced labour; arbitrary abuse by security forces; failure to follow the recognised rule of law; forced relocation of populations; denial of freedom of expression; discrimination against ethnic and

religious groups; and, restriction on political activity<sup>58</sup>. This is overlaid by a lack of accountability at all levels of leadership, with the military and police operating with impunity.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) (International Labour Organization, 2007) there have been some minor inroads made with the agreement between the ILO and the military junta signed in February 2007. This allows victims of forced labour to have full freedom to submit complaints to the ILO, with the guarantee that no retaliatory action will be taken against complainants. Since the agreement was reached cases have been referred for investigation and action has been taken (International Labour Organization, 2007). As reported by the Associated Press (AP) (2007c) a court in central Myanmar found two officials guilty of forcing villagers to repair a road and sentenced the officials to six months in prison. Although the number of cases received by the ILO to date is small, the agreement is significant in that it reveals an acknowledgement by the regime that forced labour occurs and should be addressed. It also shows the benefit of the ILO having remained engaged with the junta, despite the lengthy effort required to reach the 2007 agreement.

## **Economy**

The state of the Myanmar economy is difficult to assess due to the lack of accurate data, widespread corruption and illegal activities, and the large number of people in subsistence lifestyles who operate within informal economic structures. The US government estimated Myanmar's GDP in 2005 at US\$80.11 billion with agriculture thought to account for around 60 per cent. (Central Intelligence Agency, 2006).

There is growing trade with Myanmar, primarily from Asian countries. Figures for 2005 show oil and gas made up 33.6 per cent of foreign direct investment, followed by manufacturing at 20.7, real estate at 13.6, hotels/tourism at 13.3, mining at 6.9, and

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<sup>58</sup> For a comprehensive human rights summary on Myanmar see the report of the Special Rapporteur, Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro (Pinheiro, 2007).

other minor sectors taking up the remaining 11.9 per cent (Than, 2006, p. 199)<sup>59</sup>. Imported commodities include fabrics, petroleum products, plastics, machinery, transport equipment, construction equipment and food stuffs (Central Intelligence Agency, 2006). The main import partners in 2005 were China (28.8%), Thailand (21.8%), Singapore (18.3%) and Malaysia (7.6%) (Central Intelligence Agency, 2006). Exported products include natural gas, rice, clothing, wood products, pulses and beans. The main export partners in 2005 were Thailand (44.3%), India (12.3%), China (6.8%) and Japan (5%) (Central Intelligence Agency, 2006).

Despite efforts by lobby groups to dissuade tourism, Agence France Presse (AFP) (Agence France Presse, 2007b) report that official figures show some 630,060 foreigners visited the country in 2006, although this was down five per cent from 2005. AFP further reveal the 2006 revenue from tourism was estimated at US\$164 million. The number of visitors crossing land borders is not available, but according to AFP (2007b) of those arriving at the airport in Yangon most were Thai nationals, at 30,400 visitors. China ranked second with 24,893, followed by 18,945 Japanese and 18,265 Koreans. Among European visitors, Germany ranked top with 18,003, followed by 15,498 French nationals. The number of American visitors totalled 18,052 (Agence France Presse, 2007b). Tourism numbers were adversely affected by the late-2007 protests (IOL Travel, 2008).

The rate of inflation is rising fast and there is rationing on some essential commodities, such as fuel. Media reports (Janssen, 2007) state that it is estimated that the price of high-quality rice rose 100 per cent in 2006 with the price of chillies rising 200 per cent, pepper 300 per cent and onions 250 per cent. Rice in January 2007 was selling for 1,800 kyat (\$US1.4) per *pyi* (1.6 kilograms) (Paung, 2007). The removal of fuel subsidies in August 2007 has had an inflationary impact for most goods and services (Jagan, 2007). Despite inflation, salaries for non-government workers remain unchanged at an average of around 25,000 kyat a month. AFP report that government employees received a 10-fold pay rise in April 2006 as an incentive, and compensation, for the move to Nay Pyi Taw. Prior to the rise, their average monthly salaries were reported to be only 5,000 to 10,000 kyats (Agence France Presse, 2006).

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<sup>59</sup> Also see Than (2006, pp. 197-201) for further analysis of the economy.

Some other specific financial areas merit mention as they are often raised in discourse on international assistance to the country. They are: energy, illegal revenues, and migrant remittances. Associated with this is the cost of the military and the percentage of GDP being spent on the armed forces.

### *Energy*

The poverty experienced by much of the population, and the lack of electricity<sup>60</sup>, does not sit well with the fact that Myanmar is a developing net exporter of energy. Natural gas has replaced rice as the primary export (Matthews, 2006, p. 210) and US government estimates from 2005 show oil was exported at 3,356 barrels per day (Central Intelligence Agency, 2006).

Regional interest in Myanmar's energy exports continues to grow<sup>61</sup>. Thailand is the main buyer of Myanmar's natural gas, reportedly purchasing up to US\$578 million worth in 2004 (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2005). The Thai MDX Corporation has announced plans to invest US\$6 billion in building a 7,110 megawatt hydroelectric plant at Ta Seng in the southern Shan State (Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2006). The Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand has also been touting at least five dams on the Salween River, the longest free-flowing river in Southeast Asia. Salween Watch, an organisation opposed to the projects, says that a conservative estimate suggest that at least 83,000 people will be displaced as a result (Deetes, 2007).

Also being developed are the Shwe National Gas Fields off the coast of Rakhine State. This is being done by a partnership of the South Korean-based company Daewoo International Corporation, India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation, Gas Authority of India Limited and Korea Gas Corporation (Daewoo International Corporation, 2006). Daewoo estimate the three fields, which may hold up to 10 trillion cubic feet of gas, will cost a total of US\$2-3 billion to develop (Daewoo International Corporation, 2006). A consortium of Chinese and Singaporean companies has also joined with the government Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise for exploration in the Shwe fields (Shwe

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<sup>60</sup> For those fortunate to have mains electricity, outages are a common occurrence. People who can afford to, have backup generators.

<sup>61</sup> See International Atomic Energy Agency (2005) for additional energy indicators and statistical data.

Gas Movement, 2007). Further international connections are with the Australian company, Danford Equities Corporation, which has signed a production-sharing contract with the Myanmar government (International Business Times, 2006); and the Norwegian company Frontier Drilling, which has a drilling assignment with Daewoo (Norwatch, 2006).

### *Migrant Remittances*

There is a general level of acceptance that remittances from diaspora abroad make an importance contribution to the welfare of many families and to the economy. Levels of remittances are especially hard to judge since much of the money returning to the country is not recorded because of international restrictions on financial transactions and the Myanmar government's interference with foreign exchange, forcing the activity underground. Estimates vary, but one assessment showed remittances in 2004 as possibly reaching US\$1.8 billion (Rockefeller Foundation, 2004).

### *Illegal Revenues*

A significant level of income is generated by illegal and corrupt means. Transparency International assessed in 2005 that Myanmar is one of the most corrupt countries in the world (Transparency International, 2005). Only Bangladesh and Chad were rated lower. There is, however, a relatively low-level of common crime and it is noteworthy that in 2006 FATF (Financial Action Task Force), the inter-governmental body that deals with money laundering, removed Myanmar from its list of countries not cooperating in the international fight against money laundering. It was determined that Myanmar had made good progress in implementing its anti-money laundering system (FATF, 2006).

While a main area of ongoing concern is illegal financial gain from drug production and trafficking, there was an 83 per cent reduction in opium cultivation between 1998 and 2006, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2007). UNODC also report that although Myanmar is the world's second largest producer of illicit opium, production levels in 2006 only accounted for five per cent of global production

(Afghanistan produces an astounding 92 per cent). Most cultivation in Myanmar in 2006 (72 per cent) occurred in southern Shan State.

UNODC report that the rapid reduction in opium growing has caused a localised economic crisis due to a severe drop in income for farmers. There is now an imminent danger that without a timely effort on the part of governments, donors and aid agencies, the gains achieved over the last decade in terms of poverty alleviation and opium poppy reduction will be lost (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2006).

Seizures of amphetamine-type substances (ATS) fell from 34 million units in 1998 to eight million in 2004, but UNODC considered it premature to read this as indicating ATS production is declining (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2005, p. 18). ATS abuse is a major problem in neighbouring Thailand.

### *The Cost of the Military*

The amount of money spent on the military is controversial as it takes away funding from areas of humanitarian need. Senior officers of the *Tatmadaw* control directly or by proxy nearly all official funds and a significant amount is spent to develop and maintain the security—in the broadest sense—of the regime. A considerable amount also ends up for the leadership's personal use. This is evident in the enormous social, political and monetary void between the Myanmar poor and the privileged elite who live a separate ostentatious lifestyle<sup>62</sup>.

Annual military expenditure is estimated to have averaged 2.7 per cent of GDP between the years 1998 and 2002 (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2006). US government figures support this, with an estimate of military spending in 1997 at 2.1 per cent of GDP (Central Intelligence Agency, 2006). Estimates of 2005 spending suggest a level somewhere near US\$6.9 billion (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2007, p. 408). Using the US government (Central Intelligence Agency, 2006) GDP estimate of US\$80.11 billion for 2006, military spending could

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<sup>62</sup> An example of this lifestyle is shown in a 10-minute video clip of the lavish July 2006 wedding of Thandar Shwe, the daughter of Senior General Than Shwe, which appeared on the internet in late-2006 ("Than Shwe's daughter wedding", 2006).

have risen as high as 8.6 per cent of GDP. In another estimate, the NCGUB placed military spending at around 60 per cent of the total state budget in 2005/06 (Htay, 2007, pp. 36-37).

### **Operational Issues**

Given the significant need for assistance, many well-known and reputable international agencies are undertaking programmes in the country. A major question is how effectively can they operate. Under former Prime Minister, Khin Nyunt, the humanitarian space expanded significantly, however, following his demise<sup>63</sup> international agencies have come under new pressures (International Crisis Group, 2006). As an example, a WFP report shows that while the organisation is now able to move more food commodities from surplus areas to a greater number of remote areas, local policies are still impeding the free movement of people and food. A multitude of permits and clearances are required to operate in sensitive areas and one of the main causes of food insecurity is the tight controls imposed by the central authorities (World Food Programme, 2006).

Other influences were discovered in discussions during fieldwork. It was widely thought that the effects of the purge of Khin Nyunt and his supporters were still being felt, making parts of the government cautious in dealing with foreigners and anyone with past connections to Khin Nyunt. The shift of the administrative capital to Nay Pyi Taw has geographically separated the administration from the headquarters of humanitarian agencies and donors resident in Yangon making liaison difficult. Along with this is a move by the junta to slowly exercise some political power and increase involvement in social services through the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA).

#### *Agency Independence and the 2006 Guidelines*

The independence of NGOs and international agencies has been raised by some groups outside of Myanmar who claim that the 'restrictions from the authorities make it almost impossible for international humanitarian agencies to be able to design and

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<sup>63</sup> See pp. 42-43.



implement appropriate programmes' (ALTSEAN Burma, 2002, p. 20). But as Anderson notes the problem of operating in difficult environments is not about totally avoiding controlling entities, as this is generally impossible. The real issue is how to interact with them (Anderson, 1999, p. 51).

The introduction by the regime in earlier 2006 of new operating guidelines for humanitarian agencies has been widely reported as adding to the functional complexities aid agencies are required to work under. Complicating the issue is the presence of two versions of the guidelines: one in English, the other in Myanmar<sup>64</sup>. The Myanmar version (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2006a) is more restrictive than the English document (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2006b). Although as the ICG reports (International Crisis Group, 2006, p. 9), international agencies have been advised to only use the English version.

While the ICG (International Crisis Group, 2006) report that most of the requirements in the guidelines are not essentially new and any efforts to improve agency and program coordination are a sound practice, they assess that by formally outlining the requirements the regime may cause a restriction of activity, particularly if the main objective of the guidelines is political control. ALTSEAN Burma has a harder view and sees the new guidelines as causing severe constraints on the work of aid agencies. It has particular concerns over the formulation of a Central Coordination Committee and interference with the selection of both local and international staff (ALTSEAN Burma, 2006, p. 63). Further local reaction to the guidelines is revealed in Chapter Six.

### *Harmonisation and Interagency Cooperation*

In a complex operating environment such as Myanmar where an undercurrent of caution and suspicion exists in daily life, achieving a successful degree of harmonisation or cooperation across projects is difficult. Laid over this is the added burden of differing donor policies and the ever present official restrictions. Research carried out in 2005 shows that there is generally a consistent understanding among the international aid community in Myanmar of the concept of harmonisation and a belief in

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<sup>64</sup> 'Myanmar', as well as being the name of the country and the nationality of the people, refers to the national language, formerly known as Burmese.

its importance (Igboemeka, 2005). However, Igboemeka (2005) also notes that this can be offset by the increase in bureaucratic costs needed to support joint programs and the limited number of agencies that have adequate internal procedures that support harmonisation efforts.

Nevertheless there has been efforts to develop better donor and agency co-ordination and the UN notes that there are many improved opportunities for joint programmes (United Nations, 2005, pp. 8-9). The UN reports this has included commitments from within some parts of the government, as well as local and international agencies, to work more closely together. The UN also states the success of the UN/Myanmar Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS. At the country level the UN is taking an active role in creating structures to support better co-ordination among programmes. One initiative was the appointment of the UN Resident Coordinator as the Humanitarian Coordinator to see the formal engagement of the humanitarian sector of the UN providing stronger support to operations in the country (Pinheiro, 2007, p. 17).

#### *Official Development Assistance*

Myanmar's often self imposed isolation, the political situation inside the country, donor policies, and the difficult operating environment have been hindrances to the flow of aid into the country. Myanmar is given considerably less ODA in comparison to neighbouring countries. According to DFID, in 2002 Cambodia was receiving \$US39 per person, compared to \$US2.5 for Myanmar (Department for International Development, 2004, p. 7). Two years later (2004) UNDP figures on total ODA received show a similar picture with Cambodia having received US\$478.3 million in comparison to US\$121.1 million for Myanmar. (United Nations Development Programme, 2006b). This is despite Cambodia having a population of less than 14 million, while Myanmar has a population of over 50 million and that it sits below Cambodia on the UNDP's Human Development Index<sup>65</sup>.

The Chinese newspaper Xinhua (Xinhua, 2006) report that prior to the stopping of aid following the 1988 student uprising, Japan was Myanmar's biggest aid donor<sup>66</sup>.

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<sup>65</sup> See p. 51.

<sup>66</sup> Also see Seekins (2007) for comprehensive details of the relationship between Myanmar and Japan since 1940.

Japan resumed ODA in 2001 but again terminated it following the 30 May 2003 attack on Aung San Suu Kyi's convoy and her supporters (Seekins, 2007, pp. 55-87, 144-145)<sup>67</sup>. Aid was, however, resumed later that year. Japan is still the largest aid contributor having provided grants estimated at US\$29.3 million dollars from 1999 to 2005, including funding projects in conjunction with the Myanmar Ministry of Health (Xinhua, 2006). In the 2006 fiscal year Japan provided grants and technical assistance totalling US\$26.1 million, but cancelled a US\$4.7 million grant for a business education centre for the Yangon University campus following the fatal shooting of a Japanese journalist by security forces during the late-2007 protests (Associated Press, 2007b).

According to the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) (AusAID, 2006), Australian assistance to Myanmar is mainly humanitarian, targeting vulnerable populations, including women and children, ethnic minorities and refugees. Australia's assistance addresses immediate needs in the areas of basic health, livelihoods and protection. Australia's regional program also provides help to address significant trans-boundary development issues such as HIV/AIDS, people trafficking and illicit drugs. Funding also goes to the 3-D Fund, ICRC, a range of UN agencies and a number of other regional initiatives.

According to Europa (Europa, 2006) from 1992 to 1996 the European Union (EU) provided over €106 million in humanitarian assistance inside Myanmar and along the Myanmar-Thai border. Europa also shows that in the period 2007-2013, EU assistance will expand, most notably in the health and education sectors. Support is given to a number of NGO and UN projects in areas populated by ethnic groups. Substantial assistance is also provided for Myanmar refugees in Thailand and Bangladesh<sup>68</sup>. Individual EU countries manage their own bilateral assistance programs on top of the assistance managed by ECHO, the European Office for Humanitarian Aid.

The United Kingdom's expenditure on bilateral aid rose from around **£K3** million in 2000/1 to **£K7** million in 2003, and continues to rise (Department for International Development, 2004). Priorities for UK aid are poverty reduction and the promotion of human rights.

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<sup>67</sup> See p. 42.

<sup>68</sup> Also see Phyoo Win Latt's study on the EU's humanitarian assistance policy and strategy for Myanmar (2006).

The US government is an ardent supporter for the resumption of democracy in Myanmar and holds a hard-line against the regime. According to USAID the US supports work in a range of sectors including education programmes, democracy and governance initiatives, and health services (USAID, 2007). It also provides funds for non-humanitarian activity such as journalist training and makes small grants to media groups. USAID's Regional Development Mission/Asia manages these activities with a total funding in 2006 of US\$10.9 million and US\$7 million for the 2007 financial year (USAID, 2007).

While some donors seem willing in recent years to slowly raise ODA from the lows of the late 1990s and early 2000s, there is no indication that the increases will be sufficient to meet growing humanitarian needs. In the absence of an active constituency pushing effectively for increased assistance to Myanmar many donors will continue to give inadequate levels of aid inconsistent with what they provide to Myanmar's neighbours.

#### *Myanmar Government Attitudes and Likelihood for Change*

Permanent improvement in the humanitarian situation is dependent on improvement in the political conditions in the country. In the short-term, and most probably in the long-term, without some significant and currently unexpected catalyst, political power will continue to be held by the military. Even the death of a senior figure, such as Senior General Than Shwe, seems unlikely to bring about significant change to power structures. Although the 'road map' to democracy is underway, it is controlled by the regime and there are no indications that the junta has any real desire to make the fundamental changes that would see the military relinquish control.

In 2001 the ICG produced an assessment on the military regime's view of the world that presents a bleak outlook for international actors hoping for liberalised conditions in the country. In summary, the ICG (International Crisis Group, 2001) stated that Myanmar's rulers have shown they are unlikely to bow to outside pressure and have displayed little inclination to take foreign advice. The junta views most outside involvement in the country with suspicion, interpreting a good deal of foreign activity as a threat. In response to this perceived threat, senior generals isolate

themselves, upholding a belief in the ability of their own self-reliance. Solutions are mostly inward looking, with little influence played by foreign intellectual trends. Few governments or organisations have the access and goodwill necessary to manipulate the country's leaders. The few foreigners who have established positive rapport have done so as individuals and are inevitably sworn to secrecy. (International Crisis Group, 2001)

Kyaw Yin Hlaing<sup>69</sup> also assesses that military rule is likely to remain essentially unchanged for the foreseeable future. However, he does not discount the possibility of some political change coming from the 'road map', but does caveat this by stating any changes that do occur will be well short of the changes the majority of people are yearning to see (Kyaw Yin, 2005, pp. 254-255).

## **Conclusion**

Myanmar sits well down on international scales of social and economic performance, despite being a country with plentiful natural resources. In most cases proper governance could have prevented the current poor conditions. The situation is made worse by the regime providing disproportionate funding to the military and establishing a costly new capital at the expense of supporting the social sectors. This gap is partially addressed by international donors, although Myanmar receives markedly less aid than other similar less developed countries. The internal political situation has also led to difficulties in acquiring international assistance. Least of which is the complex political argument of whether aid should, or should not, be given to a country like Myanmar. The anti-aid lobby believe that assistance cannot be provided with transparency and that it legitimises the junta responsible for much of the crisis, while the supporters of aid say that the humanitarian conditions demand more assistance without waiting until there is an improvement in the political situation. There are varying degrees of truth to both arguments, but the critical consideration is that despite international pressure, in the short-term it is unlikely that there will be any significant improvement in government services or political change. The people will therefore continue to suffer. On this basis, the argument to increase aid is strong.

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<sup>69</sup> Kyaw Yin Hlaing, Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science, National University of Singapore provides a useful insight into why military rule continues in Myanmar (Kyaw Yin, 2005)

## CHAPTER SIX

### RESULTS: PERSPECTIVES ON HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE TO MYANMAR

#### Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of the perspectives on humanitarian assistance of representatives from international agencies, INGOs, donor governments and practitioners in Myanmar. A number of Thailand-based journalists, representatives from donor governments, international agencies and Burmese<sup>70</sup> exiles/activists also provided information. No Myanmar government officials were involved in the study. The material was obtained from 15 semi-structured interviews carried out during fieldwork in Myanmar and Thailand during the period May 2006 to May 2007. The participants interviewed were experienced members of their respective organisations, with comprehensive personal knowledge of Myanmar.

The data collected has been grouped thematically and, while some specific comments are provided, where possible the results have been generalised to show the overall nature of responses. As such, issues that were found to have commonality, show a trend, or be representative of the general position of most participants, are given prominence. Generalisation has further been used to assist in protecting the anonymity of participants.

Semi-structured interviews are a good method for obtaining complex information. The interviewer can immediately clarify ambiguous answers and if the interviews are conducted in private, the interviewee may provide information that they may not be willing to provide publicly. Semi-structured interviews do, however, also have inherent weakness<sup>71</sup>. Participants' responses are based on many influences. They will respond based on, *inter alia*, what they understand the question to be about, how they are feeling when the question is asked, how they relate to the interviewer, their opinion at the moment they answer the question and what they assess to be the best

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<sup>70</sup> The term 'Burmese' reflects how these groups wish to be referred to.

<sup>71</sup> Further discussion can be found in the Research Methodology chapter.

answer—which may not be the truth. The interviewer also adds to potential inaccuracy, as they may interpret the answer wrongly, make an error in note taking, or have a bias that affects the accuracy of the data. Additionally concerns about the personal security of those participating in the study prevented the use of an electronic recording device to tape the interviews.

The material shown here has been taken from the interviews with the results reflecting what issues were important to the participants at that time. In places comment is made on the responses, but fuller analysis can be found in the Discussion Chapter. In the first instance the main position on international humanitarian assistance is shown with comments covering the general situation. This leads into reflections on some of the current policies, attitudes and funding issues. Participants' experiences of some of the in-country restrictions and freedoms are then provided. The chapter is closed with a brief summary of the perspectives gained, highlighting the current situation and possibilities for change.

### **The Humanitarian Situation**

This first section will present perspectives on subjects of a general nature that affect humanitarian conditions in Myanmar. There is little disparity in the responses and therefore the information provided can be considered to be the position held by the majority of people interviewed in the project.

All participants were strongly of the view that the humanitarian situation in Myanmar required international intervention. Central to this belief was that there is a humanitarian imperative to provide assistance to people in need. Nearly all who were directly involved in assistance delivery stated that the main issue was not whether they should be working in Myanmar (as they believed they should) but whether their operations were effective, transparent and accountable. These responses are understandable and expected, as it is doubtful people committed to assisting in Myanmar will state that their own efforts are not worthwhile. Other than a small number of organisations, such as the ICRC which has publicly stated that it is unable undertake its full range of activities due to government restrictions (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2007b), international agencies report that they run

generally successful programmes within the constraints of the environment, such as limited access.

Many of the participants in Yangon from INGOs made the point that publicly available data often understated the gravity of the humanitarian situation, particularly in geographic locations where assistance was not being provided. A common statement by those working in Myanmar was that it is in the areas where humanitarian agencies did not have access that human rights and labour law abuses were mostly occurring. These areas are predominately conflict zones where the military do not allow outsiders. The same participants thought their presence in an area was beneficial in preventing abuse. Additional concerns were raised over the reliability of government information. The head of an INGO in Yangon registered disapproval that one of the UN agencies had incorporated official Myanmar government figures in its reports as the data falsely under-represented the poor state of the humanitarian situation. A small number of participants who had access to information from persons in the areas where there is no international access made generalised comparisons with the poor humanitarian situation often found in southern Africa.

Health and food security were identified as areas having the most immediate needs. However, the long-term concern was overwhelmingly thought to be in the education field. This sector was reported to be tightly controlled by the government and most participants stated that the standard and availability of schooling was poor, financially unaffordable for many, and that the overall system was failing the majority of children. At no time during this study was there any evidence to challenge these opinions and it is reflective of the most common position on public sectors in Myanmar.

A few of the Yangon-based participants, including a Western government representative and some from INGOs, spoke out against a common media reference that Myanmar was ‘failed state’<sup>72</sup>. It was considered that although the country was at the lower end of most international scales measuring performance (such as the UNDP Development Index) there was insufficient evidence to suggest Myanmar warranted the label. The criticism of the use of the term ‘failed state’ in relation to Myanmar is

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<sup>72</sup> Refer to p. 28 for discussion on failed and fragile states.



noteworthy, as the term appears to be overly used by media commentators to describe any country with internal strife. However, it was common for participants to refer to Myanmar as a ‘difficult environment’ to operate in<sup>73</sup>. While the use of the term ‘difficult environment’ was a casual reference to the operating environment and not part of a formal classification system, it does show the potential for agreement in the use of ‘difficult environment’ as an official description. This thesis classifies Myanmar as a ‘difficult environment’ under the DFID definition (UK Department for International Development, 2004).

Most participants noted there was no indication that there was any risk of the current military leadership being successfully challenged for control of the country. A small number of both Yangon and Bangkok-based participants, including persons from the media and foreign governments, suggested that the most probable threat to the military leadership could come from unrest driven by economic hardship over inflationary prices of critical goods, such as rice and cooking oil. The assessment is not without basis, as the most visible public protests during this study were a result of the sudden August 2007 increase in the price of fuel. But it was also a common assessment that the government had eliminated all effective political opposition. This was also evident by the efficiency in which the regime was able to stop the 2007 protests (BBC, 2007). The ongoing resistance and fighting in some of the ethnic areas, while a concern, was also not seen as posing any significant threat to the junta<sup>74</sup>.

### **International Policies and Relationships**

Reflecting the wider view of most observers, over half the participants commented on the lack of effectiveness of past and current policies of many Western countries and ASEAN to bring about political change in Myanmar. Criticism of sanctions, particularly those of the United States, was common. A small number of participants said they had observed that the isolationist policy of some Western governments was being questioned by development practitioners, some Western

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<sup>73</sup> Refer to pp. 26-27 for discussion on ‘difficult environments’.

<sup>74</sup> During October 2007 there were reports from within Myanmar that some ethnic groups were rearming and had increased training (Harding, 2007). However, the same reports do not indicate that the armies were likely to be able to develop a capability that would threaten the existence of the regime. It should be noted the ethnic groups did little to support the 2007 protests (Cho & Paung, 2008).

government officials, and academics with experience in Myanmar. Many participants, including UN staff and members of INGOs in Yangon, were critical of what they perceived to be a ‘zero-sum’<sup>75</sup> approach by some Western governments and lobbyists, with policies of sanctions and tourism bans that no longer reflected the reality of the situation. It was further stated that the senior leadership in Myanmar were unconcerned with being isolated by the West as they have good contact with their less demanding neighbours. Most participants who were working inside the country stated they thought political change would only come about by the international community interacting with the regime (and all other interested groups). The call for a change in the current international approach to Myanmar reflects not only the failure of policies to achieve any tangible results, but also worries that the humanitarian situation may worsen. Despite this there is little indication that there will be any significant change to how the international community deals with the junta, at least in the short-term.

Nearly all participants made reference to the relationship between China and the Myanmar government. While most expressed some concern about the poorly understood nature of the China/Myanmar relationship, some participants also stated that China was the most important external player with apparent influence in the country, and as such is critical to any political change. However, such broad statements about the role that China can play in helping to bring improvements to Myanmar assume that China does have a level of influence and that, more importantly, it is prepared to use this. Such assumptions may not be true of the highly complex relationship. There are many groups in Myanmar other than the government who have relationships with the Chinese, including business people and the ethnic groups along the Chinese border (Shan Herald Agency for News, 2006)<sup>76</sup>. The nature of these relationships, how the different groups interact, and what interest they have in changing the status quo are unclear. Additionally, it is not clear exactly what level of persuasion the Chinese can bring to bear on the often unresponsive and stubborn Myanmar generals.

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<sup>75</sup> The term ‘zero-sum’ was used by many participants in Yangon to describe the situation where one side of the Myanmar debate sought to harm the other side and no compromise was considered.

<sup>76</sup> Also see Haacke (2006) for review of Myanmar’s foreign policy towards China.

Linked to the issue of Western and Chinese engagement with the Myanmar government, a small number of participants running programmes from Yangon spoke out against Western donors that restricted or prevented the availability of courses and training to Myanmar government officials and their children. The participants considered that training abroad of these people was necessary to open up the country to external ideas and practices, particularly in the area of governance, which was assessed as the key to political change. Some participants also suggested it would be better to allow the training of Myanmar officials to occur in countries with a proven record of democratic governance than forcing them to find training in countries where there is little democracy.

### **Funding**

A common complaint from most participants from agencies in Yangon was that the level of funding given to Myanmar's neighbours, where the humanitarian situation was similar or not as bad, far exceeded the amount given to Myanmar where considerably more money was needed. The participants also commented that a number of other countries in the region were, at best, equally corrupt, or lacked democratic processes, but were not penalised by limited aid and isolation by the West. Cambodia and to a lesser extent, Laos and Viet Nam, were commonly used as examples.

It was, however, noted that funding had slowly increased over the last five years, with many participants hopeful this trend would continue. Nevertheless, most of the Yangon-based participants raised concerns over the short funding cycle of some donors, who only granted funds on a 12-monthly basis and the reluctance of donors to become associated with long-term projects, as opposed to short-term relief efforts. This was seen as a hindrance to the planning and delivery of effective programmes. One official from a donor country stated the 12-month funding cycle was unlikely to change.

The establishment of the Three Diseases Fund<sup>77</sup> was viewed very positively with most participants assessing it as a viable structure for donors to provide funding to. An

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<sup>77</sup> See pp. 53-54.

official from a country active in Myanmar stated that the fund could easily absorb a considerably larger amount of funding than it currently was receiving.

Many of the participants who run programmes from Yangon noted that the building of the new capital, Nay Pyi Taw had made obtaining funds more difficult. This was due to donors questioning why they should be providing assistance when the junta was placing financial priority on what was generally considered an unnecessary move and a significant waste of resources.

### **Access to Humanitarian Space**

All participants stated that gaining access to humanitarian space remains a challenge. While most in-country participants reported they were able to work in up to 10 of the 14 states and divisions, access was either difficult to obtain or not granted to operate in the more sensitive geographical areas. These areas were generally in the Kachin, Chin and Karen states, as well as some areas in Shan State.

Many participants who run programmes in remote areas reported that obtaining travel authority to visit project sites continues to be a problem, with permission to travel needed from the counterpart ministry, often senior members of the military, and usually the local military commander. The length of time required to obtain permission for in-country staff to travel to an area where a project is underway varies, but is generally a fortnight. Obtaining visas for out-of-country consultants to enter Myanmar was said to be a particularly slow process, with visas taking sometimes two to three months to obtain, which could then be followed by a one to two month delay to get permission for in-country travel. However, the same participants reported that most visas applied for, had been granted. The delays nevertheless were seen as placing considerable strain on guaranteeing the employment of specialist international consultants.

One INGO in Myanmar said that travel restrictions were not new and that the degree of access granted fluctuated. Many participants from Yangon noted it was not always obvious why the granting of permission to travel was delayed, nor why restrictions were imposed (except in conflict areas). Overall, most participants stated

that the current level of access was more restrictive than during the Khin Nyunt era of the early 2000s, but less restrictive than in the 1990s.

Gaining initial access to geographical areas, particularly for new agencies, was reported as very difficult. A UN official noted that one method that had been successful in opening space was to work with an organisation already established in a location until the new agency had built up sufficient local support and the confidence of officials to operate independently.

Most participants were of the belief that small grassroots projects were an effective manner in which to deliver assistance. It was felt that these were more acceptable to the regime as they did not attract the same level of attention as a country-wide programme. Most participants operating programmes across the country felt that to successfully work in Myanmar it was necessary (in the words of many participants) 'to operate below the radar'. A small number of participants noted that most people in Myanmar in fact lived their lives 'below the radar' trying to avoid the attention of the regime. One senior UN official suggested that delivery models, such as that used in difficult environments like Afghanistan under the Taliban, or used in the early 1990s during the conflict in Somalia, may prove effective in Myanmar. A government official with experience in Afghanistan stated that low-profile funding had proved successful there when helping with the education of women.

There were mixed opinions over cross-border programmes such as the use of 'back-pack medics'<sup>78</sup>. Most who commented on cross-border programmes thought they were necessary as they were the only available method of access to those areas, although one UN official had concerns over the level of coordination, particularly with vaccination programmes.

### **Myanmar Government Officials**

Most participants in Yangon, particularly those who had regular interaction with Myanmar officials in the health sector, reported that their direct (mid-level) civilian

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<sup>78</sup> Back-pack medics operate in border areas crossing into Myanmar on foot to provide medical attention to some communities who do not receive medical attention from the Myanmar government.

counterparts within the Myanmar government were, in the main, competent, qualified and genuinely willing to facilitate humanitarian assistance programs. The difficulty with the relationships between agencies and the government was reported to exist mostly with senior figures and the military, who exercise overall control. Two participants reported that it was common to receive little or no response to formal communications with senior members of the junta.

Access issues aside, and although most participants did find operating in Myanmar difficult, many reported that they had limited day-to-day interference from the government. Participants who were running nationwide programmes stated that they did not usually seek any approval for specific programmes or projects in the geographical areas they were already established in. This was qualified by the acknowledgement that this was only possible if they remained focussed on what was known would be acceptable to the regime. Where an organisation sought to venture into sensitive areas of work or operate in the more controlled geographical locations, they expected to encounter official resistance to the point that operations may not be able to be conducted effectively.

A small number of Yangon-based participants from a range of programmes reported that they had noticed a reduction in the number of ‘uniformed’ military personnel they came in contact with and that they were now encountering more military personnel either in civilian dress or with the USDA<sup>79</sup>. While many of the participants considered this to be a possible strategy to ‘civilianise’ the regime presence, so far the USDA had not placed any additional constraints on participants’ work. There was a growing concern, however, over the possibility of new restrictions being placed on local NGOs, particularly where the USDA had sought to take over the NGO’s role. But, it was also noted by the head of a major INGO that so far the USDA had not sought any resources or contributions from the participant’s own programmes.

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<sup>79</sup> See p. 42 for details of the USDA.

## Self-censorship

Many participants in Yangon admitted to self-censoring their public information so as to not attract adverse attention of officials. Some participants also noted that they were unable to lobby the government in a manner considered normal in most other countries. While participants were uncomfortable with self-censorship and saw it as an operational constraint, they were resigned to this being a condition of working in Myanmar. A clear example of self-censorship is the private versus public acknowledgement of the main cause of the humanitarian situation in Myanmar. During the interviews—which were private—most participants stated categorically that poor governance was the central cause of the poor conditions in the country and that the situation was symptomatic of the government placing priority on directing funds for the military's use, at the expense of all other sectors. The level of criticism of the military given in the interviews is not found in the same participants' publicly available information.

A further example of self-censorship is the labelling of activity. Although most participants based in Yangon noted that their operations remained within the purview of humanitarian assistance or reconstruction, some participants commented that should they be seen to become involved with projects labelled using terms suggesting 'development' or with a more complex objective than 'relief', this could attract government attention and lead to that activity being stopped. Many participants made the observation that the line between 'humanitarian assistance' and 'development' had become blurred. Regardless of this, a number of participants, including a Western government official, made the assessment that under the current restrictions and with the possibility of increased controls, the country was not conducive to major sustainable development programmes anyway, and at best, only programmes addressing the most immediate needs were possible.

A participant from a Yangon-based INGO, who admitted to conducting self-censorship, wondered whether organisations were too sensitive to adverse government reactions and that the limited number of organisations that had felt they could not work in the country may suggest that humanitarian agencies could do more to challenge the

government. Nevertheless, the participant did not consider any change in behaviour was likely.

### **Interagency Relations**

Comments made on the issue of self-censorship often overlapped with discussions on the varying levels of trust between agencies and professional disagreements over individual agency's operational approaches, including at the country level<sup>80</sup>. Most participants from humanitarian agencies in Yangon, including the UN, commented that there could be improvements made to the working relationships between agencies in Myanmar. Many stated that members of the assistance community were often guarded about sharing information and that, in general terms, donor coordination and harmonisation needed to be improved.

### **The 2006 Guidelines**

There were mixed responses in regard to the affect on humanitarian operations of the Myanmar government's 'Guidelines for UN Agencies, International Organisations and INGOs/NGOs' released in February 2006<sup>81</sup>. Some participants expressed concern that the guideline may bring about further operational restrictions, and some participants reported they had already experienced some difficulties due to the uneven manner that some government officials have interpreted and applied the guidelines. A small number of participants were frustrated that many senior officials did not understand the principle of independence that most agencies worked under and how such guidelines were inconsistent with their work. Mostly, however, it was reported that the guidelines were not 'currently' having a significant impact. One international relief agency went as far as suggesting there was a positive angle to their introduction, as they gave more status to the relationship between officials and agencies. When there had been incidents of confusion over which version was to be used (the English or the more restrictive Myanmar version), the same participant stated that this was resolved quickly by informing the official that the agency was using the English

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<sup>80</sup> It was not clear if this rivalry was greater than could be normally expected, particularly in an environment where competition for funding is so great and information is not always freely made available.

<sup>81</sup> See pp. 61-62.



version that had been supplied by a government minister. This was accepted by the Myanmar official.

Another area where there were differing responses among participants was the subject of agencies having a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the government. Although agencies are required to have a MOU to operate in Myanmar, not all agencies have one. Those that did, stated it had proved to be beneficial in that it gave them official status. Those that did not, often stated that it was too difficult to arrange, and trying to do so could bring them unnecessarily to the attention of the government. Related to this, a number of participants, including a relief agency in Yangon, said that it appeared that a number of government ministries also did not want to sign a MOU with international agencies as this would make them responsible to the senior generals for that agency's behaviour and activities—something ministries wanted to avoid.

### **Relations with Opposition Groups, the Pro-democracy Movement, and the NLD**

All participants actively engaged in aid delivery inside Myanmar acknowledged their relationship with opposition groups and the pro-democracy movement in and outside the country was a particularly sensitive issue. Nearly all participants<sup>82</sup> stated that they were willing, if practical, to enter into dialogue with all interested parties, however, most said they would not do so at the expense of their own operations or the independence of their work. Although there have been calls from some sectors of the pro-democracy movement to include the NLD in programme planning, many of the participants involved in humanitarian programmes across Myanmar did not consider it necessary to consult with them (or the government, other than for necessary administrative or technical needs) and that the only essential group requiring consultation for projects was the communities with whom they worked. Moreover, it was believed that under current circumstances there was insufficient benefit or cause to liaise with the NLD. The reasons presented were primarily practical. The first was the belief that holding dialogue or liaising with the NLD would more than likely lead to the government suspending an agency's operation. Secondly, there was limited operational

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<sup>82</sup> One interviewee stated that disagreements with some opposition groups over his agency's operations had caused him to avoid further contact with some specific groups.

need to include the NLD in any project, as they were not considered to hold sufficient technical skill or capacity. It was also suggested that as the NLD was a political party, its focus was more political than on humanitarian assistance. All participants, both in Yangon and Bangkok, including Burmese<sup>83</sup> activists, were however in favour of more aid to help improve humanitarian conditions in the country.

A small number of Yangon-based participants expressed disapproval at opposition groups and the pro-democracy movement's historical lack of support towards humanitarian assistance, stating that some groups had only recently adjusted their policy from opposing aid to now supporting it with conditions. The same participants also held the belief that past policies continued to have an effect on the level of assistance being provided with some participants using, as an example, the Global Fund withdrawal, which they consider resulted from pressure from opposition/pro-democracy lobbyists in the United States.

### **Local Staff**

A common theme with most participants, particularly those from agencies in Yangon, was the value they placed on the use of local Myanmar staff. A number of participants went as far as stating that their operations would cease to exist without them and many expressed concern over any possible government interference in the selection of local staff. Central to the praise of local staff was recognition of their ability to devise ways of solving operational problems and successfully dealing with constraints. Many participants also reported that their organisations placed considerable effort in developing the decision making and initiative of local staff—an area that a number of participants considered was often hampered by what they viewed as strong behavioural restraints within Myanmar's rigid social hierarchy. Some participants stated that the employment of local staff helped build capability for individuals to go on and form their own organisations. A major INGO reported that some local staff members had already left international organisations to form their own local NGOs.

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<sup>83</sup> 'Burmese' is the manner in which the activists interviewed wish to be referred to.

### **Awareness of Political Impact**

Most of the practitioners directly involved in delivery of assistance in Myanmar stated that they attempted to remain as fully aware of the political situation as possible and tried to maintain a 'Do No Harm' philosophy. A small number of participants in Yangon indicated that they were less inclined to monitor political developments with the aim of remaining as apolitical as possible and to keep aid separate from politics.

No participant indicated support for placing conditionality on the provision of humanitarian assistance, with a small number, including one Western government official, stating they felt this type of approach had lost support in the wider development community in recent years. Some participants stated that conditionality would not work with Myanmar, as the government had shown it is largely unresponsive to international pressure.

### **Summary**

The information obtained during the fieldwork provided a valuable insight into the attitudes of most of the main actors involved in humanitarian assistance to Myanmar. While the participants came from a broad range of backgrounds and organisations, and there was not full agreement on some issues, there was a fair degree of consensus in many areas. All participants agreed that international humanitarian assistance should be provided to Myanmar, and that the level should be increased. Most participants acknowledged a need to deal with the Myanmar government as part of an overall engagement with all interested parties to improve conditions in the country. Many participants noted the isolationist approach of some Western governments was not producing the results sought by policy makers, especially with Myanmar developing stronger relationships with its immediate neighbours. It was generally accepted that despite the restrictions, it was still currently possible to conduct operations in Myanmar that were effective, transparent and accountable. However, programs were only possible in geographical areas and public sectors which were agreeable to the government. This situation, as well as external influences such as the limited and often short-term nature of funding available, was often viewed as not having created an environment that lends itself well to moving beyond immediate humanitarian

requirements to broader and more sustainable development programmes. Key to changing this position was thought to be helping to improve the governance of Myanmar, increasing access to those in need, and greater international support for agencies working in the country.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

This chapter will bring together information presented in earlier parts of the thesis. The aim is to expand and reinforce previous analysis and to clarify aspects of material that will contribute in part to the overall conclusions made in the following chapter. The discussion begins by presenting the case that Myanmar is by definition a ‘difficult environment’ in which to provide humanitarian assistance<sup>84</sup>. Central causes of the poor humanitarian conditions in the country are bad governance, the lack of a democratic political system, and the need for national reconciliation. Under present circumstances there is little chance of political power being relinquished by the military junta, despite the gradual opening up of the country and the slow progress being made on the ‘road map’ to democracy. These actions have coincided with mixed signs of the possibility of more humanitarian space being available. Donor concerns over human rights abuses and the need for democracy along with pressure from lobbyists continue to see limitations placed on aid. There are also ongoing worries about the ability of humanitarian agencies to maintain their independence. The junta could at any time increase restrictions on humanitarian access. This could seriously harm the ability of agencies to operate in the country where the needs are great and there is an imperative to help.

#### Myanmar: A ‘Difficult Environment’

Myanmar is a ‘difficult environment’ in which to provide humanitarian assistance if the DFID (2004) definition is applied. This definition covers states that may be strong in terms of territorial control, but that are indifferent to the needs of the poor, either because of the nature of state politics or because a perceived external threat diverts the use of resources for other aims that do not tackle poverty reduction. There

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<sup>84</sup> See pp. 26-27 for further discussion regarding a ‘difficult environment’.

are also difficulties with gaining access to those in need (UK Department for International Development, 2004).

The military government has almost total control of all Myanmar, apart from some of the isolated border areas, but it is mostly unresponsive to the requirements of the people and the poor humanitarian conditions experienced across the country. Humanitarian agencies report restrictions in gaining access to some areas, despite there being clearly identifiable humanitarian needs that are not being met by the government (World Food Programme, 2006). Some of the participants interviewed during the fieldwork stated that they had personally found Myanmar to be one of the most complicated operating environments they had worked in. The key problem they noted was working with the complexities of the political situation.

Poor governance, no functioning democratic political system and ongoing human rights issues are the most visible dynamic affecting the humanitarian situation in Myanmar. Behind this, however, sits the suppressed problem of national reconciliation between ethnic groups (Gravers, 2007; Seekins, 2007; Smith, 1999). These issues make the country a difficult environment for international engagement, but it is not a failed state. It is a country with a long history of conflict with the general population having nearly always been ruled by elites whose aims have mostly been the preservation of their own power and the exploitation of the country's resources for their own personal benefit. This situation is unlikely to change while those who currently control the country—the senior generals—continue to hold on to power. The generals are of the belief that they are the only group that can be relied upon to maintain security within the country, particularly from the threat of fragmentation along ethnic lines (Callahan, 2004; Gravers, 2007; Seekins, 2007; Smith, 1999). Although there is speculation over the possibility of splits within the military leadership, the senior generals have shown they are prepared to purge any officer who is seen as a threat—Khin Nyint being the most significant in recent years (Jagan, 2006). Likewise the scenario put forward whereby mass protests over economic hardship develop into a situation that leads to the collapse of the regime remains unlikely as shown with the failure of the late-2007 protests. One of the benefits to the regime from the move of the capital to Nay Pyi Taw is that it physically prevents government employees from joining large-scale protests in Yangon. They did so during the 1988 uprising (Fink, 2001, pp. 55-58). Despite

widespread opposition to the junta, the military has effectively closed down all major political opposition inside the country, and there is no evidence of any serious challenge to the continued reign of the generals, including from the pro-democracy movement or the small number of armed ethnic groups who have not entered into a ceasefire agreement.

International pressure continues to be applied in the hope of forcing change upon the regime, but so far this has had minimal effect. As discussed in Chapter Four, the imposition by some Western countries of restrictions such as travel bans on junta leaders and targeted economic and financial sanctions has not achieved any major results in speeding up the process of democratic reform or improving the humanitarian situation in the country.

The military, along with the pro-democracy movement and all the ethnic groups will need to be included in any long-term plan to improve conditions in the country. Any policy which is premised on isolating or sanctioning the regime is unlikely to be effective since to date there is no evidence that this approach has achieved the desired outcome (Thant Myint-U, 2006, pp. 344-348). During the interviews the point was made that the assumption that sanctions will bring about change in Myanmar was now being challenged by an increasing number of academics, humanitarian practitioners, government officials, and lobbyists. However, the general view of participants in this study was that increased engagement should also not occur at the expense of action over the lack of democracy or human rights abuses. The almost universal international condemnation of the violent crackdown by the government on the late-2007 protests shows how this can be done. But it is important to note that although the UN was critical of the regime it also takes care to also acknowledge any positive moves made by the Myanmar government (Gambari, 2007).

While ASEAN countries at times condemn Myanmar's behaviour, they do not follow through with active censure of members of the junta. As an example, Singapore allows the senior generals responsible for the poor health system in Myanmar to have their own medical treatment in Singapore (Agence France Presse, 2007a)<sup>85</sup>.

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<sup>85</sup> In recent years, there have been frequent media reports of senior Myanmar generals seeking medical attention in Singapore (Agence France Presse, 2007a).

Additionally some government leaders from the region pay regular official visits to Myanmar, receive the senior generals in their own countries and are publicly supportive of each other (Associated Press, 2007a). The softer ‘constructive engagement’ by regional neighbours has not been notably more successful than the policies of Western governments at bringing about substantive change. However, membership of ASEAN has forced Myanmar to engage within the region and beyond through groupings to which ASEAN belongs<sup>86</sup> thereby bringing Myanmar government ministers and officials into contact with the wider international community where they can be called to account for their internal policies (ASEAN, 2007; Joint Co-Chairmen of the 16th EU-ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, 2007).

A slow opening up of parts of the country is occurring—but at the junta’s own pace, for its own benefit, and under its own conditions. This is taking place through a slow increase in humanitarian assistance (Department for International Development, 2004; Europa, 2006), tourism (Agence France Presse, 2007b), and despite the risks, growing international business development (Than, 2006, p. 199). It is therefore possible to now make the assessment that Myanmar is no longer an isolated country as it was in the past such as during the reign of Ne Win.

The process the junta claims will return the country to democracy—the ‘road map’—has moved along with the completion (after 14 years) of step one, a national convention to determine principles of a new constitution. The government has also announced that a referendum on the new constitution will be held in May 2008 (State Peace and Development Council of the Union of Myanmar, 2008). The junta appears to be of the belief it will eventually gain legitimacy from the process. However, it is considered to lack the necessary inclusiveness and transparency to create a credible democratic system (Gambari, 2007). Nevertheless, should the process help bring about more engagement abroad and a government more comfortable with international assistance, it may lead to better humanitarian access to those in need.

Alternatively, and as reported both by the ICG (International Crisis Group, 2006) and participants in this study, the junta’s release in 2006 of guidelines for

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<sup>86</sup> As an ASEAN member, Myanmar is invited to regular meetings of international groupings such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, Asia Europe Meetings and East Asia Summit.



humanitarian agencies increases the risk that restrictions may be applied to aid programmes. The issuing of guidelines has also created fears that this could be a precursor to the actual tightening of overall humanitarian access. So far the effects of the guidelines are unclear with most participants, while worried, stating that as yet there had been no significant impact noted. What is causing concern is the increase in activity of the USDA, including reports that it may seek to take control of, or replace, the work carried out by local NGOs (Ye Kaung Myint Maung & Aung Tun, 2006). As there is little true insight into the junta's decision making, it is not known why local NGOs may be targeted. It could be possible the junta is hoping to improve the standing of the USDA, which is in effect the civilian political arm of the SPDC, in advance of any future general election. The regime may also be positioning the USDA to take over more humanitarian activity as a measure to control such activities in the country. None of this speculation can be confirmed. The lack of information on the junta's policies and decisions adds to the general fear and pessimism many people have for the future (Fink, 2001). It also creates an environment where many people, both inside and outside the country, have serious concerns about the state of the humanitarian conditions and the ability to help.

The results from the fieldwork conducted for this thesis and numerous reports (Burma Campaign (UK), 2006; Department for International Development, 2004; Save the Children UK, 2005; United Nations, 2005) all indicate that based on authoritative assessments of the needs of the people, and assuming that there is a moral humanitarian imperative to help, there is a requirement for a complex humanitarian response in Myanmar. All public sectors need assistance with the participants in this study either concurring with the publicly available reports or stating that the humanitarian situation was worse than being reported, particularly in some of the inaccessible geographical areas. There was also general agreement between the fieldwork results and the literature to show that along with the poor state of the economy, health and food security were the most immediate concerns, with the dismal conditions in the education sector a significant long-term issue. When discussion of the requirement for humanitarian assistance is lifted above simply what people need on the ground, to consider the moral perspective, participants involved in humanitarian operations in Myanmar had a shared belief in humanitarian values, such as can be found with the

UN's own humanitarian principles (United Nations, 2005)<sup>87</sup>. Central to this is the stated objective of humanitarian action to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during and in the aftermath of man-made crises—which Myanmar is currently experiencing (International Meeting on Good Humanitarian Donorship, 2003).

### **The Aid Debate**

Regardless of the growing humanitarian need and some recent increases in aid levels, there remains some international reluctance for the provision of assistance to Myanmar. The ICG findings relating to the 2005 withdrawal of a major humanitarian agency, the Global Fund (International Crisis Group, 2006), was that this was due to political pressure in the United States. It was apparent during the fieldwork that this is also the common opinion among practitioners in Myanmar. That political pressure caused the Global Fund withdrawal is rejected by the OSI, who is the most significant critic of the 2006 ICG report. Setting aside the specific example of the Global Fund, the ICG's report reveals the possible overall negative effect that political pressure from some lobby groups was having on humanitarian assistance. Again, information obtained from the interviews in Yangon reveal that many inside the assistance community are of the view that some Western and exile political groups are hampering the overall effort to get aid into the country. Indeed, it appears that there is some division between parts of the humanitarian/development community and a number of politically-based exile groups and their supporters. However, there has been a change in attitude towards the provision of aid within mainstream pro-democracy groups, from opposition in the past (National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, 1995) to many now supporting aid with conditions (Burma UN Service Office - New York, 2003). It is possible that this has occurred because the limited prospect of political change in the near future has made it difficult for donors and opposition groups to ignore the continuing suffering of the local population.

A significant problem that has hardened the political argument regarding aid is what has been described by some participants as the 'zero-sum' approach taken by some individuals and groups towards Myanmar. This is mainly evident among the more

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<sup>87</sup> See p. 21 for list of UN humanitarian principles.

vocal commentators who are not necessarily the most representative, and are often at the far ends of the debate. An example shown in earlier literature is the uncompromising position taken by the well connected exiled labour activist and general secretary of the FTUB, Maung Maung, who in a 2006 interview in the *Irrawaddy* stated that no aid should be going into Myanmar (Maung Maung, March 2006). While his opinion is not reflective of many exile groups and it is difficult to judge his level of sway, as a labour leader he has connections to the influential international trade union movement that may be able to bring pressure to bear on some Western governments.

In order to understand more about how donors may be influenced there is value in briefly discussing what information is available to donors<sup>88</sup>. To fully appreciate the nature and level of influence that information is having on donors goes beyond this study, but a number of points can still be made. A significant amount of the current information that is available in the public arena originates from opposition groups who play a critical role in continuing to bring to world attention the conditions inside the country. Without their efforts the problems of Myanmar would be even less known and it is lobbying donors and policy makers that keeps attention on the plight of the country. Official Myanmar government information is usually considered unreliable, so even when it may be correct, it is often discounted. Some Yangon-based participants in this study were open in their criticism of government figures. Although to balance this discussion, it is difficult to find many rigorous critiques of the information exile groups provide. The other significant sources of information are the media, academia, policy institutes, and organisations working in Myanmar. All of which provide valuable contributions, but are not without their own specific problems. The media has restricted access in the country, but journalists still manage to produce news articles in a timely manner. From within academia there is a small, but steady flow of material being produced on Myanmar. It is difficult, however, to determine how useful academic work is to donors or those running programmes in the country as the material is not always readily accessible. It may be telling that while a number of interviewees in this study made recommendations on further reading, no academic work was suggested. Academia is often divided along pro-engagement and opposition lines (Mathieson, 2005) and some scholars have been placed on black lists for being seen to support some

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<sup>88</sup> See Research Methodology chapter for more discussion on information used for this thesis.

forms of engagement (Burma Compatriots, 2006). Policy institutes, such as the ICG, Human Rights Watch and Transparency International, have been important assets in the production of material on Myanmar. One of their main benefits is the accessibility of the material they produce. Organisations, both local and international, working inside the country provide a readily available source of first-hand information, but their reporting can be constrained by self-censorship and the general restrictions of operating in Myanmar.

## **Funding**

With international concern about human rights and the political situation in Myanmar, the debate over whether aid funding should be tied to the junta making improvements to conditions in the country is inescapable. This approach, either as a direct policy or implied, parallels the use of conditionality with aid, as found with the theory of New Humanitarianism<sup>89</sup> (Ewert, n.d.; Slim, 2000, 2001). Within the literature presented here, there was no consensus as to the usefulness of conditionality as a policy tool. The use of it was rejected outright by most persons interviewed due to the junta's proven history of not responding to such pressure. Some interviewees suggested that placing conditions on aid was incompatible with humanitarian principles. It is argued here that consideration should be given to the use of conditionality if it can be determined that a positive outcome can be sufficiently guaranteed. But aid should not be stopped or restricted where this would threaten human life or dignity.

There are other reasons for donors limiting, or at least tightly controlling, the flow of aid into Myanmar. A key worry is the possibility that aid will be diverted away from those it is intended for. With the amount of corruption in Myanmar (Transparency International, 2005), this is a justifiable anxiety. But as aid is normally channelled through or under the supervision of a third party, such as the UN or a recognised INGO or CBO, this risk can be reduced to a tolerable minimum. The information gained from interviews with agencies operating in Myanmar shows assistance programmes can be effectively delivered in a transparent and accountable manner.

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<sup>89</sup> New Humanitarianism is the theory relating to the provision of aid being conditional on a certain standard of human rights being achieved in the recipient country.

Another reason often given for limiting aid is that the government itself should be providing assistance for basic services such as health. The common argument is that if the public sectors are already being substantially supported by international assistance, the junta is then able to divert government funding for its own causes, for example the establishment of Nay Pyi Taw and military spending. However, the reality is that the junta has a history of putting its own needs before those of the people and if international donors did not provide aid, then in many cases assistance would not be available.

Concerns over the delivery of aid do not, however, fully explain why some donors are reluctant to support programmes in Myanmar. A contrast can be made to Myanmar's neighbours, such as Cambodia, which receives considerably more aid while sharing problems with corruption and governance (Department for International Development, 2004, p. 7). The iconic status of Aung San Suu Kyi and the high profile of groups campaigning against the Myanmar regime are probably key factors as the country is treated differently in nearly all circumstances to many other countries with poor human rights records. As an example, international criticism of Thailand was muted—compared to what Myanmar routinely receives—following the democratically elected Thaksin government's 2003 three-month 'War on Drugs' campaign which resulted in more than an estimated 2,000 extrajudicial killings by security forces (Human Rights Watch, 2004) and more than 90,000 arrests (United States State Department, 2004). This argument is not intended to diminish the unacceptable behaviour of the Myanmar junta and its security arms which are widely reported as responsible for, *inter alia*, extrajudicial killings, rapes, and detention without trial, but to show that the level of engagement can not always be attributed fully to what is occurring inside the country. This is also likely to be a reflection of donors' wider international relationships and their own domestic politics, which may include pressure from lobbyists.

### **The Complexities of Humanitarian Operations in Myanmar**

The sensitive nature of the internal political situation presents special challenges to working in Myanmar and provides a useful case study for examining the need for humanitarian agencies to remain politically neutral. It is argued here that it is in an

agency's best interest, and in the interests of those it is supporting, not to become involved in political activity. Most of the agencies spoken to in Myanmar reported that they attempted to be political aware, but sought to remain neutrally aligned with the approach of 'Do no harm' (Anderson, 1999). Any individual or agency that may have an even discreet political agenda does so at a considerable risk. Involvement in the political aspects of the country, particularly association with the pro-democracy movement, will certainly attract the immediate attention of authorities who have organisations like the NLD under constant surveillance<sup>90</sup>. In the past individuals who have formed relationships with opposition groups or criticised the junta have either been detained, expelled from the country or their visas not renewed (Fuller, 2007). It is worth noting that many of the participants in the study saw little value in liaising with the opposition groups in Yangon<sup>91</sup> as, given the political consequences, they were of the opinion that the practical and technical benefits were insufficient to warrant the risks of such a relationship. In Myanmar political neutrality can be both a principle of humanitarian operations and a practical necessity.

While it is easier not to have dealings with opposition groups, maintaining a level of detachment is more complex in respect of the unavoidable need to have some relationship or interaction with the junta or to use their business interests. The generals who control the country are in the strongest position they have been in since the 1990 election and because of this any agency who wishes to operate in Myanmar must also have some form of contact with them or their associates. This can be direct, through a formal relationship with the government, such as an MOU, or indirect by the use of a government owned or backed airline such as Air Bagan (Wai Moe, 2007) or the use of a government owned guest house in an area a humanitarian agency is visiting. These actions can bring criticism against the agency on the grounds that any engagement with the regime gives the junta recognition, and therefore undermines pro-democracy efforts. This in turn can be seen as compromising the principle of 'Do No Harm'. Regardless of any action that an agency may take to avoid acknowledging the current ruling status of

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<sup>90</sup> It is well known in Yangon that government security personnel maintain a presence in the tea shop across the road from the NLD headquarters. All foreigners who visit there are photographed and then are usually followed. Diplomats are the few non-Myanmar individuals who are not expelled after visiting the office. They, however, have their name, photo and details of the visit printed and condemned in the local government controlled newspapers (Maung Pho Hmat, 2006; Soe Mya Kyaw & Saw Mya Aung, 2006).

<sup>91</sup> The relationships with opposition groups in the border areas with Thailand or outside the country are not covered by this thesis.

the military, compliance with the structures or regulations they impose does confer some level of recognition of their position of being in power. As an example, official entry to the country is only obtained by compliance with the immigration regulations set down by the government. If an individual chooses to completely reject the current government they therefore will also have to refuse to comply with any laws its tries to impose, including immigration laws, meaning they could not gain entry to Myanmar. However, as revealed during the interviews, many agencies do selectively choose whether or not to comply with some directives, such as obtaining MOUs. No agency spoken to approved of the current military government being in power and all wanted a fully democratic civilian-led government in its place. In all cases, it is the humanitarian imperative of involvement in Myanmar that outweighs the cost of giving possible recognition to the junta.

The difficulties in dealing with the government, along with the repressive nature of the environment, that as Fink (2001) has shown have created an undercurrent of fear, shape not only how agencies manage their relationships with Myanmar authorities but also how they conduct their operations. Although the restrictions under which agencies operate in Myanmar are in no way as severe as those which impact on local people, interviews with persons in Yangon showed they often adopt similar behavioural patterns as the people they work amongst. The most noticeable feature drawn from the fieldwork was that of self-censorship and operating, in the words of many participants, 'below the radar' of the government. Many agencies reported that they were conscious when producing reports to be careful not to unnecessarily upset the junta.

In addition to maintaining a low-profile, many participants reported they found it difficult to lobby or challenge the government in the way they would in most other countries. Although one interviewee suggested that agencies working in Myanmar should be more assertive in lobbying or challenging the government on a range of issues, it was acknowledged that this was unlikely to happen. Generally agencies do not push hard against the government out of concern there will be negative results for themselves without achieving anything. This current predicament is unlikely to change soon, so the decision to challenge the government is a cost/benefit equation based on whether or not the action is worth the consequence. With the consequence likely to be restrictions placed on their activities, or even expulsion, it becomes a serious decision.

Organisations that have tackled the regime have encountered restrictions on their operations and not had immigration visas renewed (Fuller, 2007). However, the 2007 ICRC denunciation (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2007b) of the junta appears to have had no effect beyond the already imposed restrictions on their activities.

Most humanitarian agencies working in Myanmar can do so with a satisfactory level of independence, including when they have an association with a government department, although only if their activities remain within accepted operational limits. There are successfully coordinated government/agency programmes—HIV/AIDS being one<sup>92</sup>, and there are government officials committed to working for the benefit of their country. Information received during the interviews showed many of the mid-level officials that the humanitarian agencies were required to work with were capable and willing to cooperate, although they work in a climate of fear. Once an issue came to the attention of a senior official or the military, resistance was more often encountered. Generally agencies try to avoid unwanted government attention and maintain independence, although they do not actively seek to conduct activities outside what they assess themselves will be acceptable to the government. So from this position, even when direct interference does not occur, there is implied interference, which affects the belief that there can be full independence in their activities. Taking this discourse further it must be asked whether the level of implied or direct interference is such that it damages the overall objectives of the agencies, and their independence. The results from fieldwork show that agencies are prepared to work within the constraints set and do not believe that their independence is challenged to a level that compromises their work. Most participants in Yangon who were spoken to stated that they were capable of operating effectively and were more constrained by a lack of funding than a loss of independence.

Even with some donors investigating the possibility of providing more funding (Department for International Development, 2004; Europa, 2006), participants report there are many more opportunities for additional assistance and for agencies to increase their operations. However, this does not suggest that it is now an environment suitable

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<sup>92</sup> Part of the purpose of cooperation between UNAIDS and the Myanmar government is to develop local capacity within the administration, primarily the Ministry of Health, to deal with HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS, 2006a).



for an inexperienced agency or individual. Myanmar will remain a 'difficult environment' for the foreseeable future and the most suitable way of building up the capacity within the humanitarian and development community in the country is by alignment with current programmes. This is the same method as reported during the interviews of how some organisations were gaining access to wider geographical areas. This can be done by conducting cooperative programmes with existing agencies in a region until they had built up sufficient local support and confidence to start their own operations. This integrated method of expansion may also assist with the coordination of aid programmes, an area that participants have reported has improved in recent times, but is still yet to meet the needs of many practitioners.

## **Summary**

This chapter brings together material from early chapters and discusses it as a whole. It expands and reinforces previous analysis, clarifying aspects of material that will contribute in part to the overall conclusions made in the following chapter. It has shown that Myanmar is a difficult environment for humanitarian operations. The main causes for the difficult environment are the complex political situation brought about by bad governance, the junta's failure to honour democratic principles and to address properly national reconciliation. This situation is unlikely to change soon, despite the junta's 'road map' to democracy. Any lasting political solution will require the participation of all stakeholders in the country, especially the military. The country has started to move away from its past isolation and this could assist the expansion of the humanitarian space available to international agencies. There are noticeable signs, regionally, of a move to more engagement with the junta, and internationally of potential for an increase in funding for humanitarian assistance. Aid levels are still, however, likely to remain considerably lower than those of Myanmar's neighbours. This situation is a consequence of the negative profile of Myanmar, continued abuses by the junta and the effectiveness of opposition and lobby groups.

Despite the need to manage funding arrangements carefully and the loss of some independence, agencies in Yangon report it is still possible to conduct transparent, accountable and effective programmes in the country. The environment is, however, still not suited to inexperienced aid agencies or individuals. Currently the most valuable

contribution that can be made is the support of established programmes. The possibility of more humanitarian funding being made available will be helpful if the humanitarian space does expand, but there remains a concern that increased restrictions could be imposed at any time by the junta. This situation comes back to the overarching problem in Myanmar—that the junta has near total control over all activities in the country, and anyone who wishes to provide humanitarian assistance must comply with government directives or leave. At present, the humanitarian imperative to assist outweighs the costs of being involved, and there are effective programmes that require additional support.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### CONCLUSION

#### **Introduction**

This thesis has critically examined international aid to Myanmar to determine whether under present conditions humanitarian assistance should, and can, be effectively provided to the country. It adds to the body of work addressing the general situation in Myanmar as well as providing specific case material on humanitarian activity.

This research sought to identify the overarching issues with international aid to Myanmar, focusing on international activity provided by organisations based in Yangon. Cross-border humanitarian operations to areas that cannot be accessed easily from within the country and relief activity directed at refugees in neighbouring countries were not researched. The essential activity of local NGOs was also not a focus of this thesis.

It is noteworthy that fieldwork for this study was successfully conducted inside the country, allowing first-hand experience of the nature and influences of the environment. This also created a useful opportunity to develop an understanding of the challenges of conducting research under restricted conditions. The research used private semi-structured interviews to collect information. This method was effective in gaining sensitive information on a range of subjects from participants, particularly as the nature of the data was often their own personal perspectives and not necessarily the official views of the organisations they represented.

In fulfilling the four research objectives set out in Chapter One, this thesis firstly reviewed recent theories relating to humanitarian assistance and intervention. Secondly, it examined the historical and political contexts that have influenced the current situation in Myanmar. Thirdly, it described the humanitarian conditions and nature of international assistance and finally donor, practitioner and activist perspectives on international assistance were determined. The Discussion Chapter combined findings

relating to each objective and discussed them as a whole. This final chapter will present the overall conclusions of the thesis.

### **Current Humanitarian Theory**

The first objective of this thesis was to review current theories relating to humanitarian assistance and intervention. In support of recent scholarship such as that of Vaux (2006) this study has shown that there are increasingly visible links between politics and aid. Agreement how this association should best be handled is yet to be determined, however, it is worth noting that this connection is resulting in the distinction between humanitarian assistance and development programmes becoming less clear (Rieff, 2002b; Weiss, 2001). While this intersection has seen the growth of proponents (Slim, 2001) of 'New Humanitarianism' with donors attaching conditions to aid, particularly in the area of human rights, others (Fox, 2001) suggest there is no clear resolution in the theory that conditionality can work. The idea of conditionality has also not been fully resolved in practice. A point evident in this study with no support for the withholding or placing of conditions on aid found among the members of the humanitarian assistance community in Yangon. Additionally, while harmonisation and alignment of aid programmes are entrenched in many assistance mechanisms, some NGOs have concerns about a potential loss of independence (Pratt, 2006).

This thesis agrees with the findings of Fernando and Hilhorst (2006, p. 297) from their study of the response to the 2004 Sri Lanka tsunami that there is greater need for examination of the context under which humanitarian agencies are working. This will improve the understanding of humanitarian situations, better align responses and increase effective harmonisation. As such, a clearer assessment and categorisation of humanitarian environments is hence fundamental.

### **Historical and Political Influences**

The second objective of this thesis, as well as complying with the call for better understanding of the context of humanitarian situations, was to examine the historical and political contexts that have influenced the humanitarian situation in Myanmar. An awareness of Myanmar's history and political situation is critical to understanding the

current operating environment and it places in perspective the conclusions which are to follow.

Myanmar is a country where political power has never effectively been in the hands of the people. They have been largely ruled by a series of kings, colonialists, foreign military commanders, local political leaders and the current closed circle of senior generals. The central controlling political entity currently in Myanmar is the junta. The military leadership is in its strongest position since the 1990 election and it is unlikely that it will give up power over the country (International Crisis Group, 2001, 2008). The 'road map' the junta has stated it is using to develop a democratic government is aimed at securing continued military control and there is little prospect for political change in the foreseeable future (Kyaw Yin, 2005). The political opposition in the country while unquestionably brave and committed, is not effective nor sufficiently coordinated to remove the junta from power. The junta does not allow any form of political confrontation and has shown it is prepared to use deadly force and long incarceration against anyone it perceives to be a threat. As an example, the late-2007 anti-government protests saw a number of unsuccessful attempts to incite a national uprising with the junta moving aggressively against those involved (International Crisis Group, 2008). The senior generals have also shown that they are prepared to crush any internal threats within the military (Jagan, 2006).

Myanmar's political problems go beyond the high-profile concerns about democracy (Gravers, 2007). There are a number of armed ethnic groups that are still conducting insurgencies against the government from their strongholds in some of the border areas (Smith, 1999). However, they have not shown any well-developed capability to operate effectively outside their immediate area of operations and as such they do not pose a nationwide threat to the junta. Nevertheless, their existence and refusal to disarm, and the government's failure to find national reconciliation with the groups is an ongoing problem for the junta. This also impacts on the humanitarian situation, as it is mostly in the conflict zones where access is restricted, that the population has the greatest needs.

### **Current Humanitarian Situation and Levels of International Assistance**

The third objective of this thesis was to describe the humanitarian conditions and nature of international assistance in the country. The people of Myanmar continue to suffer chronic economic and humanitarian problems despite the country having plentiful natural resources. Myanmar ranks 130 out of 177 (on a descending scale) on the UNDP's Human Development Index (United Nations Development Programme, 2006a). The education system has a high level of students not finishing school and is failing to prepare the remaining students adequately (World Bank Group, 2006). government spending on health is estimated to be only 2.8 percent of GDP (World Health Organisation, 2003) and 28,000 children under the age of five years die annually from mainly preventable diseases (Save the Children UK, 2005). The WFP report that there is sufficient food in the country to feed the population, but due to government restrictions on transportation and access there are serious problems with food security (World Food Programme, 2006). Most other humanitarian and economic indicators are similarly grave. These dire humanitarian problems could be improved though proper governance and the required expenditure being made in social sectors. However, the junta continues to take much of the available public funding for defence spending, to utilise for its own projects (such as the building of Nay Pyi Taw), or for the leadership's own personal use.

This study has determined that the country is, by definition, a 'difficult environment'<sup>93</sup> in which to provide assistance. Defining the country in this way simplifies the overall framing of the problem and provides an increased ability to compare Myanmar to other complex humanitarian situations. The definition succinctly fits Myanmar as a state that is strong, but is unresponsive to the needs of the poor by diverting resources to aims that do not tackle poverty (OECD Development Co-operation Directorate, 2005).

Although international donors are helping to meet some of the humanitarian needs, aid remains insufficient with Myanmar receiving considerably less aid than other countries with a similar standard of living. For example, in 2002 Cambodia was

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<sup>93</sup> See pp. 26-27.

receiving \$US39 per person, compared to \$US2.5 for Myanmar (Department for International Development, 2004, p. 7). Little has changed since then and Myanmar remains seriously neglected in terms of aid. This is due to a lack of trust in the regime, limited international engagement and the many other complex political influences, including domestic pressure from lobby groups in donor countries that has resulted in an often discreet reluctance to provide assistance.

Aid to Myanmar remains a sensitive political issue in many quarters. There are hard-line activists working internationally who do not support humanitarian assistance going to Myanmar and there are certainly incidences where political pressure may have stopped or limited aid. The junta's poor human rights record and lack of positive steps towards democracy make any engagement, including aid, with the country contentious. Making this situation worse, donors with available funds do not need to look far to find other less controversial countries where they can provide support.

### **Perspectives on Humanitarian Assistance to Myanmar**

The fourth objective of this thesis was to determine current donor, practitioner and activist perspectives on international assistance. The overarching impression gained from participants that has influenced and fashioned the thesis's analysis and conclusions is that the country is more complex than it initially appears. There is no simple solution to its problems. In this sense it is an environment where humanitarian organisations are attempting to make the best of a bad situation by balancing multiple considerations into their decision making. Even seemingly straightforward actions are influenced by issues such as personal security, political ramifications, and relationships with donors, the authorities and aid recipients.

Much of the information gained from participants echo ideas which can be found in literature. The interviews suggest that despite present efforts, the current level and nature of international intervention in Myanmar will not bring any long-term improvements in the humanitarian conditions in the country. In the area of political reform, the use of restrictive measures such as targeted sanctions and travel bans have not encouraged democratic change in the country. Softer approaches have also led to little significant transformation in terms of how the senior generals govern. At the same

time, the past isolation of the country is lessening as tourism increases, and regional engagement and business connections are fostered. Regardless of the lack of political change, it will require the full cooperation and involvement of the military, the pro-democracy movement and all the ethnic groups if any long-term solution is to be found to improve the political and humanitarian conditions in the country.

Participants report that the stubbornness of the junta and its resistance to many forms of outside involvement in the country undermines humanitarian and development efforts. The inability to pressure the senior generals also makes the use of conditionality on humanitarian assistance ineffective. While international assistance efforts are alleviating some of the population's suffering where there is access, the core problem of bad governance is not being addressed. Furthermore, most aid is confined to immediate humanitarian needs. As securing long-term funding is difficult and the junta places major restrictions on any activity it interprets as having 'developmental' goals, it is unlikely Myanmar will be able to move beyond the current cycle of aid dependence in the foreseeable future.

As noted above, providing international humanitarian assistance to Myanmar is problematic and carries many risks, but reports from humanitarian agencies in Yangon show it is still possible for international agencies inside the country to operate effective, transparent, accountable programmes. With the level of corruption in Myanmar and the government's history of diverting the country's revenue away from humanitarian needs, there are concerns over accountability. Donors have, however, taken steps to reduce the possibility of money being misappropriated by directly funding NGOs and international programmes themselves.

Participants report that humanitarian operations in Myanmar will continue to be subject to the unpredictability of the junta's decision making and the possibility that increased restrictions could be introduced without warning. The rigid top-down system of leadership hinders initiative. The fear held by government officials of getting into trouble with superiors can hamper the development of new humanitarian efforts. Many of the mid-level Myanmar government officials that interact directly with humanitarian agencies are, however, reportedly competent and do try to assist within the limits of their authority and constraints of the government system. Most of the difficulties and



restrictions are encountered when dealing with officials at the higher echelons of the government or the military. As the government has near total control over the country, agencies have limited options but to comply with the conditions the junta sets or cease operations. Nevertheless, most agencies are generally of the opinion they can still operate with sufficient independence so as to not compromise their mandates.

While the Myanmar government's issuing in 2006 of guidelines for humanitarian operations has so far not significantly impacted on agencies activities, there are concerns among participants that this may signal the government's intention to exert more controls over international assistance. Increased involvement by the government-backed USDA in humanitarian activity has added to this concern. It could be argued that uncertainty is the nature of most types of operations in difficult environments. By itself this uncertainty is manageable as experienced agencies are accustomed to this and shape their operations to account for a range of eventualities. International agencies report that they are also supported by committed and talented local Myanmar staff who have shown great problem-solving abilities.

The restrictive environment in Myanmar results in agencies exercising a certain degree of self-censorship and attempting to operate their programmes without attracting any negative attention from the government. This is similar to how local people generally live and work. The ability to effectively campaign the government on humanitarian issues is also limited. Agencies that do challenge the junta encounter major problems and restrictions and in some cases they are forced to stop particular activities.

Although there is a need and space for more humanitarian assistance to be provided into Myanmar, it is an unsuitable environment for inexperienced humanitarian agencies or personnel. The most appropriate manner to provide additional assistance is around current programmes or in consultation with existing agencies and structures.

### **Further Research Possibilities**

Myanmar remains a subject with many opportunities for further study, but with the widespread lack of understanding about the country it can be difficult to identify

worthwhile avenues for investigation. Although it is currently not possible to conduct research inside the country following the crackdown to the late-2007 anti-government protests, field research can still be made from neighbouring countries, or depending on the topic, further abroad. A useful contribution could be made by investigating the nature and effects of the literature concerning Myanmar on donors and public opinion. Comparisons could be made regarding the differences in how material is reported by the media, by exile groups and the Myanmar government. A detailed comparison could be carried out to determine the circumstances and level of aid being provided to Myanmar and other countries with similar problems with democracy, corruption and human rights. Important work can be done in investigating the effectiveness of cross-border humanitarian activities. This could be carried out effectively from Thailand. The role of exile groups in providing assistance has many potential avenues of study, as is research into the value of funding of exile groups for political activism. Until national reconciliation is achieved between all ethnic groups there will remain possibilities to uncover the extent of differences as well as what the opportunities are for settlement. A final area of investigation could be the complex association Myanmar has with its ASEAN neighbours and the multifaceted relationship with China which is touted as the most influential international actor.

### **Concluding Summary**

This study set out to determine whether under present conditions humanitarian assistance should, and can, be effectively provided to Myanmar. The country's highly politicised environment is a prime example of where there are strong political connections made to assistance and the context under which aid is given is complex and not well understood. The study has shown that Myanmar has serious humanitarian needs and there is room for more donor funding to be absorbed into existing programmes. Despite being a difficult environment in which to operate with multifarious political considerations, unhelpful restrictions and administrative risks, all participants in this study reported it was possible to conduct effective assistance programmes. Although existing programmes will not reach all those in need, nor can they currently address wider social development issues and core problems such as bad governance, international assistance is required to help fill the gap left unattended by the junta. The regime is unlikely to relinquish control any time soon, regardless of

pressures levelled against the senior generals, but along with the pro-democracy movement and all the ethnic groups it will need to be included in any long-term plan to improve the political and humanitarian conditions in the country. For now, the conditions in Myanmar are serious enough to justify that there is a humanitarian imperative to help, and there are sound opportunities to do so.

APPENDICES

Appendix One

United Nations Map of Myanmar (United Nations, 2004)<sup>94</sup>



<sup>94</sup> Note: Map does not include the new Nay Pyi Taw Division in the vicinity of Pynmana.

## Appendix Two

*Difficult Environments: Types of Environment* (UK Department for International Development, 2004)

### *Political will but weak capacity*

This includes environments that may be challenged in their mobilisation of resources for poverty reduction due to any or several of the following: lack of basic fiscal and monetary building blocks; challenges to the state's territorial control and presence; and unstable or weak (but legitimate) political institutions with a commitment to poverty reduction. However, despite these weaknesses, these states are considered responsive to the poor. Malawi and Zambia could be seen as examples of high willingness but low capacity. Some countries emerging from conflict may be a subset of this category where the international community seeks to support and strengthen nascent governments. Examples include Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, and DRC (although in some cases, the legitimacy of the government remains contested which affects the way in which the international community can engage).

### *Low willingness and high capacity*

In this type are states that may be strong in terms of administrative capacity and territorial control, but they are unresponsive to the needs of the poor, either because of the neo patrimonial nature of state politics (as in the case of Zimbabwe and possibly Nigeria) or because a real or perceived external threat diverts the use of resources for other aims that do not tackle poverty reduction (as in North Korea). There may be difficulties in negotiating any kind of access at all, and bilateral support from certain governments may not be acceptable.

### *Lack of political will and low capacity*

This type of state may suffer from lack of international recognition or a contested territory, limited administrative capacity for policy development and implementation, and is seen as unresponsive to the needs of certain groups (including the poor). Southern Sudan, Somalia, and (possibly) Nepal can be considered as cases in point. All of these examples are in conflict. Infrastructure has been destroyed, there is mass displacement of people, levels of insecurity are high, and the government is contested.

### *States with willingness and stronger capacity*

These states have strong state presence and territory control; some degree of competence in fiscal and monetary policy or a strong administrative capacity and public institutions that are fairly committed to development. These states are good partners for poverty reduction, and are likely to have Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) in place, but may have structural risk factors for state weakness that warrant specific attention.

## Appendix Three

*OCED Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States* (OECD Development Co-operation Directorate, 2005)

**Take context as the starting point.** All fragile states require sustained international engagement, but analysis and action must be calibrated to particular country circumstances. It is particularly important to recognize different constraints of *capacity* and *political will* and the different needs of: (i) countries *recovering* from conflict, political crisis or poor governance; (ii) those facing *declining* governance environments, and; (iii) those where the state has partially or wholly *collapsed*. Sound political analysis is needed to adapt international responses to country context, above and beyond quantitative indicators of conflict, governance or institutional strength.

**Move from reaction to prevention.** Action today can reduce the risk of future outbreaks of conflict and other types of crises, and contribute to long-term global development and security. A shift from reaction to prevention should include sharing risk analyses; acting rapidly where risk is high; looking beyond quick-fix solutions to address the root causes of state fragility; strengthening the capacity of regional organizations to prevent and resolve conflicts; and helping fragile states themselves to establish resilient institutions which can withstand political and economic pressures.

**Focus on state-building as the central objective.** States are fragile when governments and state structures lack capacity – or in some cases, political will - to deliver public safety and security, good governance and poverty reduction to their citizens. The long-term vision for international engagement in these situations must focus on supporting viable sovereign states. State-building rests on three pillars: the capacity of state structures to perform core functions; their legitimacy and accountability; and ability to provide an enabling environment for strong economic performance to generate incomes, employment and domestic revenues. Demand for good governance from civil society is a vital component of a healthy state. State-building in the most fragile countries is about depth, not breadth – international engagement should maintain a tight focus on improving governance and capacity in the most basic security, justice, economic and service delivery functions.

**Align with local priorities and/or systems.** Where governments demonstrate political will to foster their countries' development but lack capacity, international actors should fully align assistance behind government strategies. Where alignment behind government-led strategies is not possible due to particularly weak governance, international actors should nevertheless consult with a range of national stakeholders in the partner country, and seek opportunities for partial alignment at the sectoral or regional level. Another approach is to use 'shadow alignment' – which helps to build the base for fuller government ownership and alignment in the future - by ensuring that donor programs comply as far as possible with government procedures and systems. This can be done for example by providing information in appropriate budget years and classifications, or by operating within existing administrative boundaries.

**Recognise the political-security-development nexus.** The political, security, economic and social spheres are interdependent: failure in one risks failure in all others. International actors should move to support national reformers in developing unified planning frameworks for political, security, humanitarian, economic and development activities at a country level. The use of simple integrated planning tools in fragile states, such as the transitional results matrix, can help set and monitor realistic priorities and improve the coherence of international support across the political, security, economic, development and humanitarian arenas.

**Promote coherence between donor government agencies.** Close links on the ground between the political, security, economic and social spheres also require policy coherence within the administration of each international actor. What is necessary is a whole of government approach, involving those responsible for security, political and economic affairs, as well as those responsible for development aid and humanitarian assistance. Recipient governments too need to ensure coherence between different government ministries in the priorities they convey to the international community.

**Agree on practical coordination mechanisms between international actors.** This can happen even in the absence of strong government leadership. In these fragile contexts, it is important to work together on upstream analysis; joint assessments; shared strategies; coordination of political engagement; multi-donor trust funds; and practical initiatives such as the establishment of joint donor offices and common reporting and financial requirements. Wherever possible, international actors should work jointly with national reformers in government and civil society to develop a shared analysis of challenges and priorities.

**Do no harm.** International actors should especially seek to avoid activities which undermine national institution-building, such as bypassing national budget processes<sup>95</sup> or setting high salaries for local staff which undermine recruitment and retention in national institutions. Donors should work out cost norms for local staff remuneration in consultation with government and other national stakeholders.

**Mix and sequence aid instruments to fit the context.** Fragile states require a mix of aid instruments, including, in particular for countries in promising but high risk transitions, support to recurrent financing. Instruments to provide long-term support to health, education and other basic services are needed in countries facing stalled or deteriorating governance – but careful consideration must be given to how service delivery channels are designed to avoid long-term dependence on parallel, unsustainable structures while at the same time providing sufficient scaling up to meet urgent basic and humanitarian needs. A vibrant civil society is important for healthy government and may also play a critical transitional role in providing services, particularly when the government lacks will and/or capacity.

**Act fast...** Assistance to fragile states needs to be capable of flexibility at short notice to take advantage of windows of opportunity and respond to changing conditions on the ground.

**...but stay engaged long enough to give success a chance.** Given low capacity and the extent of the challenges facing fragile states, investments in development, diplomatic and security engagement may need to be of longer-duration than in other low-income countries: capacity development in core institutions will normally require an engagement of at least ten years. Since volatility of engagement (not only aid volumes, but also diplomatic engagement and field presence) is potentially destabilizing for fragile states, international actors commit to improving aid predictability in these countries, by developing a system of mutual consultation and coordination prior to a significant reduction in programming.

**Avoid pockets of exclusion.** International engagement in fragile states needs to address the problems of “**aid orphans**” - states where there are no significant political barriers to engagement but few donors are now engaged and aid volumes are low. To avoid an unintentional exclusionary effect of moves by many donors to be more selective in the partner countries for their aid programs, coordination on field presence and aid flows, and mechanisms to finance promising developments in these countries are essential.

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<sup>95</sup> The Addis Ababa principle developed in November 2001 as part of the Strategic Partnership for Africa Initiative states: ‘All donor assistance should be delivered through government systems unless there are compelling reasons to the contrary; where this is not possible, any alternative mechanisms or safeguards must be time-limited and develop and build, rather than undermine or bypass, governmental systems.’

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