

Alexandra Lidgett  
Roosevelt High School  
Des Moines, IA  
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### **Burma: Assisting vulnerable populations and improving the effectiveness of humanitarian relief**

Rambo, a movie that both stars and is directed by Sylvester Stallone, is a story with fictional events, but with an unfortunately accurate depiction of how brutal the military regime residing over the country is to its civilians. The movie depicts a picture of a humanitarian group of doctors and Christians who enter into Burma, unbeknownst to the Burmese government. The village they occupy is then bombed and raided by the ruling military regime so that they live and see firsthand what it is truly like living in a nation in civil war. Burma is a country who, 1000 years ago, was one of the most prosperous in the world. It has a large array of natural resources to rely on, as well as country full of 50.5 million hard working people. In order to fully understand the underdeveloped country of Burma, we must first take a look at the history and series of events that took place to land the country in its present state of utter disrepair. Burma has a past filled with war, civil uprisings, and climate disasters. Ever since it was granted independence from the British in 1948, the Burmese people have experienced decades of oppression under a succession of cruel military regimes. The country has been in one of the longest running civil wars that still, to this day, remain unresolved. This leaves behind a destroyed economy and a corrupt government, along with a massive population of people living in tragic poverty.

On a good day, a rural living farm worker would earn 1,000 kyats (\$0.80) for a full day of work. That type of salary would allow him to buy his family some poor quality rice, with little nutritional value. A 1999 UN survey found the functional literacy rate to be only 53%, and case studies from remote areas show figures as low as 10-20%. The birth rate in Burma still remains to be astronomically high, despite the Buddhist religion (that is commonly practiced) that believes celibacy gives spiritual growth. There are approximately 19 births, per every 1000 people. A government statistic shows that a child in Burma faces a 1 in 10 death rate before the age of 5 due to chronic malnutrition and other diseases that can be easily cured with proper health care. Surviving their 5th birthday is only a small part of the battle. Many young boys and girls face a multitude of protection risks, including trafficking, exploitative and harmful labor, forced recruitment into armed forces, and a poor education system. Child mortality death rates remain at 71 children per every 1000, with 32% of the children remaining undernourished and underweight.

Humanitarian aid has certainly seen its fair share of ups and downs on how well it is able to help the people of Burma. Usually, the ruling military generals in Burma are extraordinarily paranoid about foreign intervention in domestic affairs. On the other hand, international humanitarian relief organizations know very well about the government's habit of misusing public funds, corruption, bribery, and ineptitude. Because of this they understandably have mistrust in Burma's government as well. And because of the generals notoriety for brutality and human rights abuses, international governments are typically reluctant to be seen as giving a helping hand to the sadistic generals. All of these factors cause the typical Burmese family, whether they are effected by Cyclone Nirgris, or simply feeling the pain of poverty in Burma, to live in dire situations that could all be handled with more ease if there would be a government who would truly care about the future generations of the Burmese people living under their rule.

Recent trends shown by news reports of humanitarian relief in Burma have been as unsteady as its government. Currently, attacks by the army, human rights abuses, and troop movements are still continuing in ethnic areas. Burmese Military statistics, provided by NATO, show that the army is currently importing \$65,000,000 U.S dollars worth of conventional armed imports. Since June 2011, an estimated 50,000 people of the Kachin ethnicity, have been displaced due to fighting between the

Burmese army and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). Many of these people have lost their homes and sources of income. This puts them in a place of great need for humanitarian assistance. This example is only a small portion of the people who have had to undergo the strain of seeing their country and personal lives fall apart due to years of internal military conflict. In order for the people of this country to survive, there needs to be a government who would care about the success of its country beyond conquering a few more hills, more about its people and the lives that are affected by it. If the government would agree to be cooperative, then organizations such as Meals from the Heartland would be able to send food that was packaged right here in Des Moines, Iowa, over to Burma to help feed the starving mouths of the Burmese.

May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2008 was a day so terrible for the Burmese people that over 1.5 million people were left in severe straights. It almost seems as though god himself had it in for the Burmese people, as the storm had an unusual pattern and that it tracked through the most vulnerable part of the country, where most of the population lived and worked. The massive wave surged inland approximately 25 miles, wiping out 7 townships, and almost 95% of the areas houses and buildings. This left the lowest point in Burma, the Irraddy Delta, in complete disrepair. The official death toll for Burma's cyclone disaster is almost 80,000 people, with another 56,000 who went missing. Initially, Burmese authorities wouldn't allow foreign experts to officially work in the delta in the first three weeks after the cyclone because of their mistrust to any outsiders. According to the United Nations, the government spends nearly a quarter of its budget on the military, which is eight times what it spends on health care, and about one and a half times more than what it spends on health and education combined. In 2007, Burma received \$147 million in foreign aid, which is less than three dollars for every man, woman, and child. It is one of the lowest rates anywhere in the world. This statistic directly shows that the lives that are being directed by the poor decisions of the current military dictatorship do not matter to the people who are running the Burmese government.

The effects of cyclone Nigris are still being felt throughout the country. Even the people, who are further up north, away from the shore line and physically unaffected, still feel the blow. The price of food, which was already the main expenditure for 81% of households, still has not dropped to the rate it was sold at from before the disaster. Strategies to bring communities back on their feet absolutely have to focus on what it was that the people made their money off of, before the natural disaster struck. Humanitarian relief projects to restore their livelihoods for farmer will not only help them, but will also provide job opportunities for those who depend on casual labor to survive, as well as supplying more food to the surrounding area to once more lower the cost of food so that people may be able to afford more, and not be so far into debt as the 85% currently are.

Other issues that have been a problem in Burma for centuries seem to have taken a back seat in humanitarian relief urgency. The people experiencing disaster situations who are on the news, such as those affected by the cyclone, will of course be receiving more aid and attention then the groups of people in central Burma who often experience extreme droughts due to dry summers and scant rains that are so typical to their climate. The Burmese who live further inland are feeling the effects, through highly polluted water, which was again from when the cyclone came in and contaminated the rivers and water ways with all of the diseases that had previously been terrestrial, residing on the land.

In order to assist the vulnerable populations of Burma, and improve the effectiveness of humanitarian relief and food aid in conflict zones and disaster sites, we must focus on providing solutions that will sustain a community for many years to come, instead of continually handing out short term food packages that will only last a short while. For instance, restoring the 241 aquaculture ponds that were destroyed by the cyclone would support the long term livelihoods of the community. Rebuilding dams that had been wiped out, and that at one point protected the rice patty fields, would allow farmers to transform the land that is currently a barren mud pit, into the proper environment for successful food cultivation.

The phrase “You give a man a fish, he eats for an hour, but if you give him the pole and teach him how to fish, he eats for a lifetime” is an analogy that turns into something very literal when speaking of underdeveloped countries such as Burma. The Burmese community should take the initiative, a help the projects being put on by humanitarian groups. What really needs to happen is that when humanitarian groups come into an area, they shouldn’t have to be anything more than an organizing leader, and most likely a sponsor, for the community of people they are helping. Projects that rebuild infrastructure should be headed by the group, but the work should be done by the Burmese people so that they are able to take back, exactly what they put into the community. This will also build a stronger sense of pride so that they will take further responsibility, instead of laying in wait for the foreign groups to come and save them. The humanitarian group should provide the opportunity for success. Save the Children is a non-government organization that is worldwide. Its biggest base is located in Burma. It is a prime example of a group who believes in promoting sustainable practices. When the work is done by the people of Burma, the effort is also much more likely to be kept going for many years to come, because then it also gives them a sense of pride in their community that previously had been beaten down by so many years of oppression, cruel leaders, and natural disasters. This type of strategy would allow humanitarian groups to spread out their resources and number of hands coming into the country to help the cause.

Improving humanitarian relief and aid would increase the amount and quality of food, while also increasing income of the family. All three of the improvement factors are all intermingled, and affect each other. When the family has been given the resources and knowledge to rebuild what they need to sustain their farming livelihood, they then are able to once again have a steady income. A consistent source of money gives the family a chance to lower the astronomically high statistic stating 85% of Burmese are in debt, and more importantly, they will then have enough money to buy better quality of food for the family. Quality food with higher nutrition value will set back the chronic malnutrition that is so commonly seen in nearly every Burmese child. It is all one, large scale, positive chain of effects leading into having better lives.

In conclusion, the people who live in the country of Burma do have a sliver of hope. Their chance of survival relies on the caring people of this world who dedicate their lives to humanitarian relief. The military run government of Burma has proven to the Burmese communities that they cannot be relied on. Therefore, the survival of the people also relies on the initiative taken by the people to rebuild that they have lost, and to sustain their livelihoods that may have been lead off of the path to success through tragic events such as Cyclone Nigris so that they can set off the positive chain of effects. And to think, it can all start with giving a man a fishing pole.

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