

A close-up photograph of a woman with dark hair, smiling warmly as she holds a young child. The child is wrapped in a dark, multi-colored striped cloth. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with greenery and a building.

THE STORY
OF THE ASEAN-LED
COORDINATION IN MYANMAR

COMPASSION IN ACTION



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The Story of the ASEAN-led Coordination in Myanmar





The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established on 8 August 1967. The Member States of the Association are Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam. The ASEAN Secretariat is based in Jakarta, Indonesia

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We thank the ASEAN Member States for their unwavering support during such a critical juncture. Our experiences over the course of the Task Force's two-year mandate are certain to shape ASEAN's approach to disaster management and humanitarian relief for generations to come.

It is due to our collective efforts that two years after Cyclone Nargis we now see signs of recovery in Myanmar's Ayeyarwady Delta. Rice farmers plant seeds where rice fields once stood fallow, brand new school-cum-cyclone shelters dot the landscape and bamboo plants and mangrove bushes are sprouting up around the once devastated areas.

This book is dedicated to the survivors of Cyclone Nargis, whose strength, courage and resilience in the face of unimaginable adversity is at once humbling and inspiring and, no doubt, will spur the ongoing recovery effort in the months ahead.

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Foreword by the Secretary-General of ASEAN

Death, destruction and despair followed in the path of Cyclone Nargis. As news spread that the Cyclone had flattened entire villages, killing or injuring hundreds of thousands of people, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) felt compelled, out of a sense of compassion, urgency and fraternity, to support one of our Member States. The ASEAN community immediately reached out to help Myanmar recover from the worst natural disaster in the country's recorded history.

The complexity of the emerging tragedy called for a cohesive and coordinated plan. ASEAN was urged to take the lead. Never before had we carried out such an ambitious and large-scale undertaking. But buttressed by the Government of Myanmar and the international community, ASEAN's confidence grew and our association was "baptised" by the Cyclone that wreaked havoc on one of our Member States.

Cyclone Nargis occurred at a pivotal time, when ASEAN Member States were embracing the ASEAN Charter and the association was striving to become a more collective, dynamic and inclusive entity. The disaster provided ASEAN with a window of opportunity to make meaningful progress on the goals of the Charter to bring ASEAN closer to the people, enhance the well-being and livelihood of ASEAN peoples, and alleviate poverty and narrow development gaps through close cooperation with the Government of Myanmar.

Experience from Nargis demonstrates that ASEAN, with support from partners, can strengthen disaster risk reduction among Member States and provide an effective coordinating mechanism to facilitate the delivery of international assistance in a Member State during the post-disaster relief and recovery process. Our collective response in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis is an example of the benefits that broader integration and closer partnerships can yield.

ASEAN's response to Nargis, in cooperation and collaboration with the United Nations, the international humanitarian community and civil society, helped ease the pain and suffering that the Cyclone inflicted on people living in Ayeyarwady and Yangon Divisions of Myanmar. Since the region as a whole is prone to disasters, it is imperative, particularly as we reach the end of the mandate of the ASEAN-led coordination mechanism in Myanmar, to document and disseminate the lessons ASEAN has learned in the wake of Nargis.

This publication chronicles the events that led to ASEAN's historic decision to launch the ASEAN-led humanitarian operation from the perspective of many of the people who figured prominently in the story.

Through this publication, we wish to share within and across the region what we have gained from our experience carrying out ASEAN's first-ever large-scale humanitarian operation in a Member State. It is our sincere hope that our lessons will be of service to others and our best practices replicated in the event of future disasters.



SURIN PITSUWAN



Chapter One

A Storm Like No Other

Have compassion for all beings, rich and poor alike; each has their suffering. Some suffer too much, others too little.

— Buddha

It was early May 2008 and the nation was preoccupied with an upcoming referendum on the Constitution due to take place on 10 May 2008. Bulletins were being broadcast on television and radio that a storm was brewing to the west of Myanmar in the Bay of Bengal. But the country was so accustomed to weathering storms prior to the annual monsoon deluge that most residents didn't heed the warnings. Instead, the farmers, fishermen and merchants of the sleepy villages occupying the Ayeyarwady Delta went about their daily lives, just as their ancestors had done for generations, striving to eke out a living for their families.

On the evening of 2 and 3 of May 2008, a Category 4 Cyclone¹ named Nargis walloped the Ayeyarwady

2 May Cyclone Nargis makes land fall in Myanmar.

3 May Government of Myanmar activates the National Disaster Preparedness Central Committee; declares Cyclone-affected regions as natural disaster areas.

5 May The Government of Myanmar meets diplomats and UN officials. Myanmar says it will only accept bilateral aid.

9 May The Government welcomes donations of cash and emergency aid, but says it is "not ready" to receive search and rescue teams or journalists from foreign countries.

and Yangon Divisions of Myanmar with cataclysmic consequences. Though its name is deceptively innocuous—Nargis is the Urdu word for daffodil—the Cyclone was the worst natural disaster in Myanmar's history and the eighth deadliest cyclone ever recorded on the globe. An estimated 140,000 people were killed or missing and Nargis had a deleterious effect on the lives of 2.4 million people – one third of the population of the Ayeyarwady and Yangon Divisions.

The scale of the devastation was unprecedented. The national

Government took action immediately after the Cyclone but was quickly overwhelmed by the catastrophic effects of the tragedy. Initially, some offers of international assistance and Myanmar's response to them ignited a storm of controversy.

Cyclone Nargis uprooted trees and flooded street in Myanmar's most populated city, Yangon. Photo courtesy of Khin Maung Win





Yangon residents emerged from their homes the day after the Cyclone to find debris littering the city. Photo courtesy of Khin Maung Win

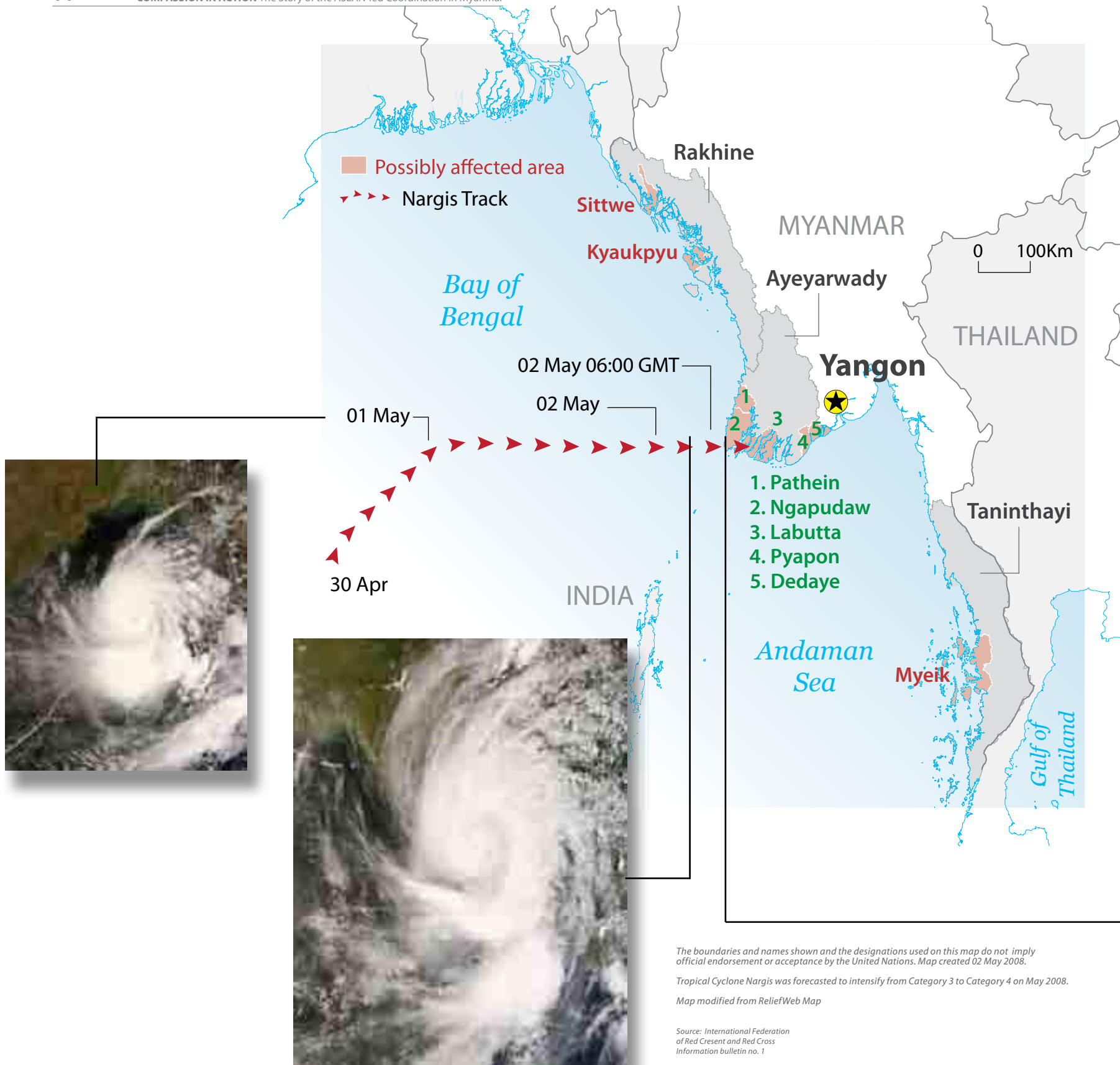
The Storm from Yangon²¹

"For those of us who were living in Yangon at the time of the Cyclone, the media told us on the afternoon of 2 May to expect a 'big storm.' But little did we realise the magnitude of this 'big storm.' So on the evening of the 2nd when all of us were at home from work I checked a meteorological website and I said, 'Oh my gosh.' It showed a big blob already making landfall in the Ayeyarwady Delta.

Having lived through typhoons when I was working in the Philippines and Japan I [had an idea what to expect]. But little did I realise that [it would be such a powerful] cyclone. It was very strong even when it arrived at Yangon at 11 pm. I thought it would last only 4 or 5 hours and it would blow over. But it got stronger and stronger through the night. From my home, I could even see the coconut trees blown almost all the way down to the ground. There were very strong howling winds and very strong rains to the extent that the water was even coming in laterally through the doors and windows.

It was very scary. Thankfully other than water seeping in from our roof, we were blessed by having only small damage to our garden. The storm left Yangon about 8 am in the morning, so it was a long spell from 11 pm the previous evening."

—Mr Robert Chua, Singapore Ambassador to Myanmar



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Map created 02 May 2008.

Tropical Cyclone Nargis was forecasted to intensify from Category 3 to Category 4 on May 2008.

Map modified from ReliefWeb Map

Source: International Federation of Red Crescent and Red Cross Information bulletin no. 1



Very Severe Cyclonic Storm Nargis, seen from Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer on 2 May 2008, just before it made landfall.

Scenes of devastation in various parts of the Ayeyarwady Delta. Photo courtesy of MNA (1) (6) and Khin Maung Win (2) (3) (4) (5)

Dearth of Details about the Delta

“The media were reporting in real time, but for those of us living here, there was little information to get a sense of what was happening. Yangon was damaged and trees were down. Not until we were in the choppers going down to the Delta did we realise the horror of what damage had been done. So at that point in time, the authorities may not have known the extent of the damage. They may have felt that they were able to handle the response with their own capabilities.”

—Mr Robert Chua, Singapore Ambassador to Myanmar¹⁸

Puzzling Storm Trajectory and Early Warnings

Official advisories that a tropical storm was gathering strength off the Myanmar coast were first disseminated 28 April 2008² when the Bangladesh Meteorological Department issued a Special Weather Bulletin alerting nearby countries to a deep depression near the centre of the Bay of Bengal. By then, the tropical storm system had developed the telltale concentric eye of a severe cyclonic storm. The Joint Typhoon Warning Centre had originally tracked the storm moving slowly west and forecast it to hit Bangladesh. But after becoming almost stationary, Cyclone Nargis changed direction. It steadily moved due eastward and then rapidly intensified. Its ominous well-defined eye stretched 19 kilometers and its associated winds reached an estimated 215 km/hr when it made landfall 2 May. Nargis pummelled the Ayeyarwady Division at peak strength as a Category 4 Cyclone.

Chris Kaye, Country Representative of World Food Programme (WFP) and then Acting UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Myanmar had been vigilantly tracking the storm online before Cyclone Nargis struck. Its puzzling trajectory made it very difficult to read. Mr Kaye recalls first observing the storm in late April when it appeared it might be headed for Myanmar’s Rhakine State. But a couple of days later he spotted it further south and learned that it was strengthening. Then, suddenly, the storm vanished from the tracking website. “It went off the screen! It wasn’t until around 11 am on 2 May that the storm appeared again on the screen. By that stage it was clear the storm was coming in much further south and would strike the Delta and Yangon. There was a certain amount of disbelief that it could have changed course so rapidly. However that afternoon the Disaster Management Team met to update our

initial assessment and response plans. Even then, we didn’t know how totally devastating the next 24 hours would be...”³

Though the nature of the storm made reliable information hard to come by, the Government warned residents in weather bulletins issued through daily newspapers, television channels and radios stations.⁴ The message reached many in the Delta, but they did not anticipate the severity of the storm and did little in the way of taking protective measures, particularly in isolated villages. In spite of the advance notice and cautionary messages, many expected and prepared for a typical monsoon storm, but not a cyclone of such a devastating magnitude.

Cyclone Nargis Carves a Path of Destruction

Cyclone Nargis hit the Ayeyarwady Delta at approximately 2 pm on 2 May and pounded Yangon later that evening. The Cyclone’s destructive winds and battering waves flattened houses, uprooted trees, ripped through power lines and severed communication systems, including land line and mobile telephone services. Compounding the devastation was the Cyclone’s accompanying saltwater storm surge that was reportedly as high as 12 metres in some areas of the Delta, which killed thousands of people and animals, inundated large swathes of fertile land and submerged scores of villages.

Domes of water pummelled residents of the Delta relentlessly throughout the night. The townships of Labutta, Pyapon and Bogale of the Ayeyarwady Division suffered the brunt of the Cyclone’s force. Most residents of the townships who lived to tell about the ordeal had harrowing and horrifying tales of survival (some of which are chronicled in an ASEAN “Voices of Nargis Survivors” publication). But “for many it was a nightmare from which they never awoke. Many others who did live to see



While the Cyclone caused considerable damage in Yangon, conditions were much worst in the Delta where Nargis struck at peak intensity. Photo courtesy of Khin Maung Win

daybreak wished they had not survived. The thin light of morning dawned on a landscape of utter devastation, and on the survivors scarred by lacerations on both skin and soul. Entire villages were reduced to quagmires of mud and debris.”⁵

Apart from the overwhelming loss of life in the region, the Cyclone destroyed three-quarters of the hospitals and clinics, crippled the primary agriculture and fishery sectors, caused property damage estimated at over US\$4.1 billion and destroyed the livelihoods of more than 2.4 million people. Hundreds of thousands of homes were destroyed along with essential infrastructure like roads, jetties, electricity, water supplies, fuel supplies and sanitation systems. One particularly pernicious aspect of the Cyclone’s aftermath was the contamination of a large proportion of the region’s water supplies and rice paddies as well as the destruction of stored food. The timing of the storm was almost as cruel as its force. The Cyclone struck towards the end of the dry season, just as the Delta paddy farmers were at the very last stage of harvesting their “dry season” rice paddy crops, which account for 25 per cent of annual rice production in the Delta.⁶

After tearing through the Delta at peak intensity, Cyclone Nargis weakened somewhat as it headed northeast, passing just north of Yangon, where winds reached velocities of 130 km/hr. Yangon residents spent a terrifying night assaulted by high winds and rain. They awoke 5 May to discover destruction and debris everywhere. An eerie calm permeated Myanmar’s largest city and the usually bustling streets were almost deserted. Huge trees that had been a part of the cityscape for decades were uprooted and scattered across the roads. The storm toppled power lines and ripped the roofs off homes, cut off water and electricity supplies and disrupted telephone service. Floodwaters had risen on many streets making it difficult to get around the city.

In a city where electricity is unreliable at best and water supply to homes is haphazard and tends to be controlled by electric pumps, the situation was especially dire for the most vulnerable and homeless. Conditions were much worse in the Delta, but telecommunication systems were inoperable and roads impassable making details sketchy as little information was trickling back to Yangon.









ASEAN Member States were among the first to provide emergency relief supplies to Myanmar. Photo courtesy of Khin Maung Win.

Confusion and Uncertainty over International Assistance

The national response following Cyclone Nargis was immediate⁷. Prime Minister Thein Sein activated the National Disaster Preparedness Central Committee (NDPCC) at 8:30 am on 3 May in the capital of Nay Pyi Taw, assigning rescue, relief and rehabilitation tasks to Ministers and Deputy Ministers. The Prime Minister, along with high-ranking military officers and Cabinet Ministers, relocated to Yangon the same day, where an office was established to carry out rescue measures, coordinate the disaster response and closely supervise the effort. The Government declared the Cyclone-affected regions natural disaster areas and initially allocated 5 billion Kyats to carry out emergency relief operations. (An estimated 70 billion Kyats had been allocated as of July 2010).⁸

The next day, the Prime Minister and several Ministers personally inspected the Cyclone-affected areas in Ayeyarwady and Yangon Divisions and the Government began distributing emergency relief supplies, launched search and rescue missions and clearing debris from major transportation routes. Navy and Air Force aircraft and vessels transported food, clothing and medical supplies to survivors around the clock.⁹ But the scale of the devastation quickly proved overwhelming.

Humanitarian assistance from the international community was made available immediately, but limited supply stocks existing within the country were soon exhausted. Since experience from previous disasters shows that the prevention of a second wave of deaths from starvation or disease hinges on the rapid delivery of aid, it was vital that the international humanitarian community be granted access to dispatch urgently needed relief supplies to Cyclone-affected communities.

Initially, some offers of aid and Myanmar's response to them sparked confusion, prompting suggestions that Myanmar was ambivalent about accepting international aid and reluctant to permit international aid workers into the country.

Humanitarian assistance from the international community was made available quickly, but limited supply stocks existing within the country were quickly depleted. Photo courtesy of Khin Maung Win

On 5 May, the Government met with diplomats and members of UN agencies to clarify a coordinated response to the disaster, at which time it was stated that the Government would only accept bilateral aid.¹⁰ In other words, aid would be accepted only if it was channelled through the Government, which most donors were unwilling to do because they had strict policies of transferring aid to Myanmar only through international NGOs or UN agencies. Moreover, some were concerned about the effectiveness of aid delivery if it was distributed directly to the Myanmar Government.

Mr Kaye asked the Government three key questions at the 5 May meeting:

1. Would the Government be willing to allow the UN system to facilitate the coordination of international assistance?
2. Would it agree to waive all tax, duties and customs on relief items?
3. Would it be willing to relax procedures on granting visas for expert relief personnel to quickly enter the country?¹¹

Mr Kaye says he received no response to his queries, which he was told would have to be referred to higher authorities.¹² Time was passing and agencies and diplomats, who were eager to respond to the disaster, felt exasperated.

A statement, issued 9 May indicating that the Government welcomed donations of cash and emergency aid, but “was not ready” to receive search and rescue teams or journalists from foreign countries, did little to ease simmering tensions.

Still, some donations of cash, relief goods, medical supplies, food and water began entering the country and international and national aid workers who were already on the ground quickly responded to the emergency needs of the Cyclone survivors.

National staff from United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), together with officials from the Ministries of Health and Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement (MoSWRR) visited Cyclone-affected areas on 4 May to conduct assessments and







An ASEAN Volunteer provides support to community livelihood activities in Labutta. Photo by AHTF Coordinating Office

immediately mobilise pre-positioned supplies. UNICEF secured an agreement with the Government that international staff could travel to affected areas for assessment and response. International aid workers from the WFP, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Save the Children – who were already all in Myanmar – also responded to Nargis within the first days following the Cyclone.

Private Myanmar citizens pitched in by personally delivering emergency relief supplies to the Cyclone-affected areas. Monasteries and churches served as focal points for such grassroots community assistance. Aid organisations and NGOs that were already operating in the affected regions gathered information on the damages and needs of the victims.

But NGOs and UN agencies that did not have a previous presence in the affected areas were not granted access. Relief

workers who drove down to the Delta across damaged roads in the hopes of providing assistance to Cyclone survivors invariably were turned away at checkpoints. They were permitted to deliver aid to the roadside, but were not permitted entry into the most severely affected remote villages. “At that stage, access was very unclear and people in response efforts were being turned back and prevented from going to affected areas. Certainly, there was no international staff access,” said Daniel Collison, Director of Programme Development and Quality for Save the Children, the largest international NGO operating in Myanmar at the time of the Cyclone.¹³

Save the Children managed to break through the bureaucratic tape by procuring a letter from the MoSWRR permitting its national staff members to access most areas in the Delta. Save the Children then redeployed several national staff members

from other areas of the country to the Delta to carry out relief efforts and to gather much-needed information about the condition of survivors.¹⁴ Word spread quickly among Myanmar's humanitarian community that national staff members were able to travel more freely to Cyclone-affected areas. Agencies and NGOs, desperate to launch relief operations, also began to mobilise Myanmar national staff members from other areas of the country to assist survivors in the Delta.

Meanwhile key international experts in logistics and emergency response were gathering in Bangkok awaiting visa approvals. Mr Collison was stationed at Save the Children's regional office in Bangkok at the time and remembers the mood was frantic. "The agencies that were congregating in Bangkok waiting to get into Myanmar were going around like hornets in a nest as there was no pressure release. There was a huge build up of people in Bangkok but nowhere for them to go. The UN regional office briefly set up a parallel cluster system in Bangkok to at least get coordination happening at that end while they waited for access arrangements to be agreed."¹⁵

An Urgent Need for ASEAN to Bridge Trust

Since success in responding to and managing disasters typically is measured in the speed with which lifesaving aid is delivered, the global humanitarian community was anxious to get people on the ground to accelerate the relief and recovery process. They were growing increasingly agitated and vocal in their criticism that international aid workers were not being permitted access into Cyclone-affected regions. While the reasons remain obscure why the Government was initially reluctant to accept international assistance, a confluence of rapidly shifting circumstances likely contributed.

Myanmar's relationship with many Western democracies had been strained for close to two decades before the Cyclone struck. The presence of a United States naval ship from its

"Marine Expeditionary Strike Group" and a French "Amphibious Assault Ship" that were both stocked with supplies off the coast of Myanmar following the Cyclone likely only aggravated pre-existing friction. While it is not unusual for military personnel to distribute relief items following disasters, the presence of these warships undoubtedly created uncertainties as to the nature of the international humanitarian intervention. The Government's refusal to accept aid from the ships and France's suggestion to invoke the "Responsibility to Protect" clause as a means to deliver aid without Government approval¹⁶ did not inspire mutual trust.¹⁷

Some UN officials, NGO managers and diplomats within the country speculated that rather than deliberately trying to keep international aid out, the Government was merely attempting to maintain the status quo. Government policy prior to the Cyclone required all UN agencies and international NGOs to secure official Government authorisation and a signed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) agreement before they were permitted to carry out work in any part of the country. The Government initially insisted that this policy be strictly followed after the Cyclone. Thus, if an NGO or agency did not have prior permission and a signed MOU to work there, access to Cyclone-affected areas was not granted.

Others suggested that perhaps the Government initially underestimated the scale of the damage and destruction and was confident that an appropriate national response could be mounted without international assistance.

It was upon this very fluid, chaotic, confusing and tense backdrop that ASEAN took the lead in breaking down the communication and trust barriers that were preventing the flow of aid and international relief workers into the country. As a consequence, the Myanmar Government was soon cooperating with the international community and UN agencies in unprecedented ways.¹⁹ 🇲🇲



Wutt Hmone Oo (Safia) survived the Cyclone, which claimed the lives of half of her immediate family. Photo by AHTF Coordinating Office

Safia's Story²⁰

Cyclone Nargis tore Wutt Hmone Oo's family apart when it ripped through her village of Kyein Chaung Gyi in Bogale Township. She lost her mother and two young brothers and barely managed to survive the storm herself. Nearly 13 years old when the Cyclone struck, Wutt Hmone Oo, who goes by her Muslim name "Safia," remembers the village leader alerting the community just before dawn that a cyclone was on its way and to expect winds as strong as 200 kilometres per hour and a storm surge up to 3 metres. But she confesses she "did not take the news seriously." Safia had endured plenty of storms and village life had always quickly returned to normal before. She assumed the same would be true this time. Her family made no special preparations for the Cyclone and some of them even made light of it.

Safia and her family began 2 May 2008 like any other day. She helped her family prepare the pancakes that she distributed to shops in the village every morning starting at 7 am. Once she was done, she returned home as usual to cook rice and curry for her family. Around 1 pm, the wind started to pick up and by 3 pm it was blowing and raining heavily. Word spread in the village that the Cyclone had levelled Labutta Township, but the water had not yet started to rise in Safia's village so she ventured out in the storm at around 3:30 pm to buy cooking oil at the market to prepare the pancakes to sell the next morning while her father picked up a few sacks of flour.

When the wind continued to gust, her aunt teased her that the Cyclone had started and wondered aloud when the water would rise. But no one was poking fun when water gushed inside the family's one-storey wooden home around 7 pm. First, it was up to Safia's ankle, but in the span of 10 minutes, it rose exponentially. Her father carried her younger brothers, who were only 5 and 3 years old, to a nearby brick house in the hopes they would be safer there.

Eventually, Safia and her heavily pregnant mother had to climb up a couple of wooden posts of the family home to escape the rapidly rising water. It was dark by then and disorienting. When the water reached the roof, they managed to paddle over to a nearby home and grab hold of a couple of more posts. But the wood poles collapsed, casting Safia and her mother adrift in the water until they were able to scramble

onto a plank as it drifted by them. Up and down they bobbed amid the debris in the churning, heaving water until they heard Safia's father call out to her mother in the dark. He asked them to join him on a large piece of timber that was keeping him afloat but as soon as they did, a strong wave struck, hurling them violently off the plank in different directions. Safia never saw her mother again. "She must have died after the wave knocked her off the piece of wood," Safia says sadly.

The rest of the night was a struggle to stay conscious, for Safia knew if she succumbed to the urge to fall asleep, she would surely die. "Nothing was in my mind except trying to survive," she says. Safia slipped or was pulled underwater "a lot" until finally bumping into a large block of wood that she clasped to help keep her head above the surface. She drifted that way until the block she was holding somehow became wedged in the fork of a tree. "I hung onto that tree 'til morning," recalls Safia.

When the water receded, around 3 or 4 am, Safia's mind was on her mother. She climbed down from the tree "thinking that my mother would be around somewhere." She had drifted into a stream next to Ma Kyin Myaing Island, near her village. She spotted some survivors on the island, which lifted her spirit enough to muster the strength to cross the stream. "The current is very strong, but I managed to swim across the stream by myself," she says proudly.

It wasn't until dawn broke that Safia realised she had a serious gash on her head and a very deep hole in her thigh that was filthy with paddy and dirt. She hadn't noticed the wounds all night, but in the light of day they began to throb with pain. With the support of other survivors, she hobbled to a monastery on the island, where she reunited with an aunt, who located some dry clothes for her to wear. Several other survivors—neighbours, acquaintances and strangers—also congregated at the monastery. The monk distributed fresh water and Safia and the other survivors salvaged some food to eat that they found scattered around the island. Her father found her at the monastery a few days later.

Though it was very dark that night, the colour of the sky that night is tattooed in her memory. It glowed a vivid red. 🌹

Chapter Two

The Tipping Point

**“The quality of mercy is not strain’d, It droppeth
as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest, It
blesseth him that gives and him that takes...**

— William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 1596

While efforts to establish a coordinated and cohesive international response following the Cyclone had reached an impasse, a flurry of activity was taking place behind the scenes. Frantic calls between States and Foreign Ministers were made and backroom discussions proliferated around the region. The international media, which was not welcome to report the unfolding disaster directly from the Cyclone-affected areas, pressed for action and a solution. As mentioned in the previous chapter, some parties had even begun to talk of using force, if necessary, to assist Cyclone survivors under the banner of the “Responsibility to Protect” principle.

Secretary-General of ASEAN, Dr Surin Pitsuwan, faced enormous personal pressure to respond. He recounts, “I was in Singapore two to three days after

5 May ASEAN Member States extend relief assistance to Cyclone survivors.

9-18 May ASEAN dispatches its Emergency Rapid Assessment Team.

12 May Secretary-General of ASEAN meets with UN and high-ranking World Bank officials in Bangkok, who pledge full support for the emerging ASEAN-led mechanism.

the Cyclone hit. I was confronted by the media [who asked], ‘What have you heard? What have you done? What will you be doing?’ I said so far we have been monitoring the situation with grave concern.”²²

Behind closed doors the Secretary-General fielded numerous telephone calls encouraging swift action.

ASEAN as a regional body was urged to convince Myanmar, as one of its Members States, to open up

channels of humanitarian assistance and ASEAN felt a collective responsibility to act. “ASEAN collectively felt what was needed was a joint response to show to the world that ASEAN can make a contribution on issues of such highly emotional and highly sensitive matters. Failure to do that would certainly have a negative lasting impact on the organisation,” recalls Dr Pitsuwan.²³

A girl in the Delta fetches water using a locally-fashioned device. Photo by AHTF Coordinating Office





Some of the figures who played a key role in setting up the ASEAN-led post-Nargis effort in Myanmar included: (top from left to right) Dr Surin Pitsuwan; Lord Malloch Brown; Dr Kuntoro Mangkusubroto; Mr Heru Prasetyo; Dr William Sabandar; Dr Hassan Wirajuda, Dr Noeleen Heyzer; Mr Robert Zoellick and Ms Adelina Kamal.

Dr Pitsuwan says that, in particular, Lord Mark Malloch Brown, then a Minister in the Prime Ministers' office in the United Kingdom, played a significant role. "He was quite familiar with the region and was working the phone. He called me and said, 'Dr Surin, this is an extremely critical issue for ASEAN – believe me.' His background was with United Nations Development Programme and he was well connected in the region. I assume he didn't just call me, the Secretary-General of ASEAN. I am sure he was calling people in high places in the region expressing, at least from his perspective, a concern of the world, a concern of the European Union, a concern of the British Government. Major governments were all in touch. I think Mark Malloch Brown could say that it was not only the United Kingdom that he represented but also many of the EU States, Australia and New Zealand would be on board. I think he could say the Nordic countries would be on board. It was a frustration with a global dimension that we were faced with this problem."²⁴

Sharing Practices from the Indian Ocean Tsunami Response

Following the Cyclone, several UN and donor agencies approached Dr Kuntoro Mangkusubroto, the Director of the Indonesian Bureau for Recovery and Reconstruction Agency of Aceh and Nias, Indonesia (BRR), to offer assistance based on the agency's experience in the post-Indian Ocean Tsunami operation. He assigned Mr Heru Prasetyo, then Director for International Relations, and Dr William Sabandar, Chief of Nias recovery programme for the BRR, to closely monitor the developments in Myanmar and to render assistance as needed. This would prove a vital link in subsequent months for ASEAN as Dr Sabandar would later be named Special Envoy for the Secretary-General of ASEAN to lead the ASEAN Humanitarian Task Force (AHTF) Coordinating Office in Yangon.

Mr Prasetyo reflects that when Nargis struck he was still working on the Aceh and Nias response and from his office in Jakarta he thought, "How can we share what we know?" Many

of his associates working on the post-Tsunami response were eager to help in Myanmar and they were contacting him in droves. In particular, Australia and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) had been in touch.

"They were contacting me as it was known that there was a trust between Indonesia and Myanmar. They wanted to help Myanmar after the Cyclone. So we started to look at the possible ways to do that. One of the links that I have was my relationship with the Department of Foreign Affairs in Jakarta. I thought we have all these friends who want to help, so I asked if we could use the good hands of the Indonesian Department of Foreign Affairs to channel this assistance into Myanmar," remembers Mr Prasetyo²⁵.

"However I was told that even the Indonesian Government couldn't get aid in at that time. Indonesian doctors couldn't get in and much of the Indonesian aid was held up in Singapore at that time waiting to get in. So it was not possible. I also met with Dr Noeleen Heyzer, Under Secretary-General of the UN and Executive Secretary of Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP). I briefed Dr Heyzer about what we could do. I gave her a book about the Indonesian Army and the relief operation in Aceh after the Tsunami. There were similarities between the situation in Aceh and in Myanmar. She later got an audience with the leadership of Myanmar and even met with the Prime Minister. I know she shared that book with the Myanmar leaders, which was helpful," Mr Prasetyo says.²⁶

Initially, Dr Heyzer remembers being uncertain of the scale of the tragedy. "I was in Indonesia when the numbers of those who had died or were missing reached 100,000. No one had said anything at the time and the Government didn't want outside help. What crossed my mind immediately was how isolated the country had become, that there was a lack of trust of the outside world that had to be bridged, and I felt that ASEAN and the UN could play a very strong role behind the scenes to build trust and facilitate humanitarian cooperation."²⁷





Advance ERAT team plans for assessment in the Delta 7 June 2008. Photo courtesy of the advance ERAT team

Since Dr Heyzer was in Jakarta, she immediately contacted Dr Pitsuwan and met up with Dr Kuntoro Mangkusubroto. “I said that Indonesia would have to make a strong stand to support the Government of Myanmar through ASEAN. During the Special ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting on 19 May 2008 in Singapore, I know that the Foreign Minister of Indonesia made a strong plea for ASEAN to play a leading role in the response, as ASEAN would be able to build a bridge of trust to encourage Myanmar to work with the outside world in a more coherent and coordinated way.”²⁸

Later, Dr Heyzer gave the book that had been given to her by Mr Prasetyo about the Indonesian Army and the relief operation in Aceh and Nias following the Tsunami to the Myanmar Prime Minister. “During this month, I gave two more books to the Prime Minister. When I met the Prime Minister during my visit in June 2008 for an ASEAN Roundtable on PONJA, the Prime Minister told me, ‘You have now given me three books, but the first one was the most important.’ Without ASEAN’s willingness to play this bridging role, Myanmar would have continued dealing with the massive disaster internally, while the outside world could have been largely kept out of the relief and recovery effort.”²⁹

15 May Secretary-General of ASEAN meets President of the World Bank. The World Bank promises full support to ASEAN.

19 May ASEAN convenes Special Meeting of ASEAN Foreign Ministers in Singapore. The ASEAN Humanitarian Task Force is born.

21 May Secretary-General of ASEAN meets the Prime Minister of Myanmar.

23 May Myanmar makes official statement to allow aid workers “regardless of nationality” to enter the country.

25 May ASEAN-UN International Pledging Conference convenes in Yangon Myanmar.



ASEAN-ERAT, together with the UNDAC team, at the UN building on 18 May 2008 after finishing the report to be presented to the Special ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Singapore. Photo by AHTF Coordinating Office

ASEAN-Emergency Rapid Assessment Team (ERAT) Conducts Initial Assessment

ASEAN was in close contact with Myanmar officials after the Cyclone hit. After a number of reports, communications and recommendations as a part of the ASEAN Standard Operating Procedure for Regional Standby Arrangements and Coordination of Joint Disaster Relief and Emergency Response Operations (SASOP), the Myanmar Government accepted a recommendation from ASEAN Secretariat to deploy an ASEAN-ERAT to conduct initial assessments.

The ASEAN-ERAT was mobilised to the Delta on 9 May. The team was made up of experts from ASEAN Member States, with experience in disaster response and background with the UN and other emergency response agencies. The mobilisation was coordinated by the ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management (ACDM) under the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER), which Myanmar had ratified. Ms Adelina Kamal, Head of Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance Division of the ASEAN Secretariat, led the team. It was the first “official and international” team that the Government of Myanmar allowed into Myanmar. Once the Government gave the green light, the team was deployed within 48 hours.³⁰

Ms Kamal remembers: “The decision to form a standby ERAT team for the region was made by the ACDM in March 2008 before the Cyclone so there was no team in place when the Cyclone hit in May 2008. There were many assessment teams coming from other countries to get into Myanmar but they weren’t allowed access. There was an ASEAN meeting on the weekend after Nargis and my colleague Dhannan Sunoto from the ASEAN Secretariat was there. I was in Jakarta preparing for my visit to Bangkok with the Secretary-General. Dhannan texted me from the meeting and asked if we could mobilise the assessment team. He told me that a senior official from the Foreign Ministry of Myanmar had approached him and asked what ASEAN can do and if ASEAN could mobilise an assessment team – I was surprised but I said, YES! In every ASEAN Member State, there is an ASEAN focal point for disaster management, and so although the ERAT team wasn’t set up yet, I knew I could ask these focal points to mobilise their experts.”³¹

She adds, “While I was in Bangkok the next day in between meetings with the UN and World Bank, I called all the focal points from the taxi and asked them to mobilise their experts within 48 hours. The Government said they would be willing to grant access to the ASEAN team. I knew this was a great chance for the Nargis relief effort...The deployment was very swift. Within 48 hours we were on the ground. The approval came very quickly from the Government.”³²

Members of ERAT arrived from Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and the ASEAN Secretariat. When ERAT travelled to the Delta, staff members from various UN agencies including the WFP, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC), who were already on the ground, assisted the team. ERAT members were permitted access to the Delta when they conducted their assessment from 9 to 18 May and consulted with Government representatives, members of civil society, NGO and UN staff members as well as survivors of the Cyclone. Based on the

team’s findings, they made a series of key recommendations to the Special ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting held on 19 May in Singapore.

Chief among them was the establishment of a mechanism that would allow ASEAN to bridge the humanitarian gap between the affected communities and the international humanitarian community. The ERAT report validated the Secretary-General of ASEAN’s recommendation immediately following Nargis that a coalition led by ASEAN be created to carry out the Myanmar relief effort. This later became known as the ASEAN-led coordinating mechanism.

The deployment of the ASEAN-ERAT was significant because it was the first “official and international” assessment team allowed into Myanmar following the Cyclone. Other assessment teams from outside the country were either held up in Bangkok or denied entry. The Government of Myanmar’s willingness to allow ASEAN access to the disaster areas at that early time was an indication of the good standing that ASEAN had in Myanmar. This team was the forerunner for the bridging role that ASEAN would eventually play in the negotiation of access for the international community to respond to the unfolding humanitarian crisis.

Tense Special ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting Breaks Impasse

Although ASEAN Member States had a burning desire to help, they were also keenly aware that they lacked the necessary resources and had limited technical capabilities to do so. The Association would need the support of strong partners to succeed. Inspired by the Shakespeare quote at the start of the chapter, Dr Pitsuwan suggested establishing an ASEAN-led “Coalition of Mercy” to assist the Cyclone Nargis survivors. On 15 May, Dr Pitsuwan met with World Bank President Robert Zoellick in the US. Mr Zoellick had heard of Dr Pitsuwan’s proposed “Coalition of Mercy” and pledged his support. Dr



Singapore Foreign Minister George Yeo speaks at the ASEAN-UN International Pledging Conference 25 May 2008 in Yangon. Photo Courtesy of Khin Maung Win

Pitsuwan recalled Mr Zoellick saying, “I like it Surin, we are ready to stand behind you. I know you need help. I know you need support. You can count us in to be with you.”³³

Buoyed by assurances of resources from the World Bank and the support of others, Dr Pitsuwan felt confident that ASEAN Foreign Ministers could help Myanmar in a meaningful way when he boarded his 21-hour flight from the US to Singapore for the pivotal Foreign Ministers’ Meeting on 19 May.

Singapore, as ASEAN Chair at that time, hosted the Special Meeting of ASEAN Foreign Ministers that aimed to break the impasse over the international assistance to Myanmar. Singapore Foreign Minister, George Yeo, recalls that, “In the

first two weeks after Cyclone Nargis, there was a tense stand-off between the international community and the Myanmar Government. While there was a great willingness from members of the international community to help the victims and survivors, the Myanmar Government was suspicious of their motives. Some countries had dispatched warships carrying supplies to the region, and even talked openly about invoking the ‘Responsibility to Protect.’³⁴

Mr Yeo, who chaired the meeting in Singapore, “felt that ASEAN had to rally around a Member State in its hour of dire need. As Singapore was then the ASEAN Chair, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong asked me to seek the approval of the Myanmar

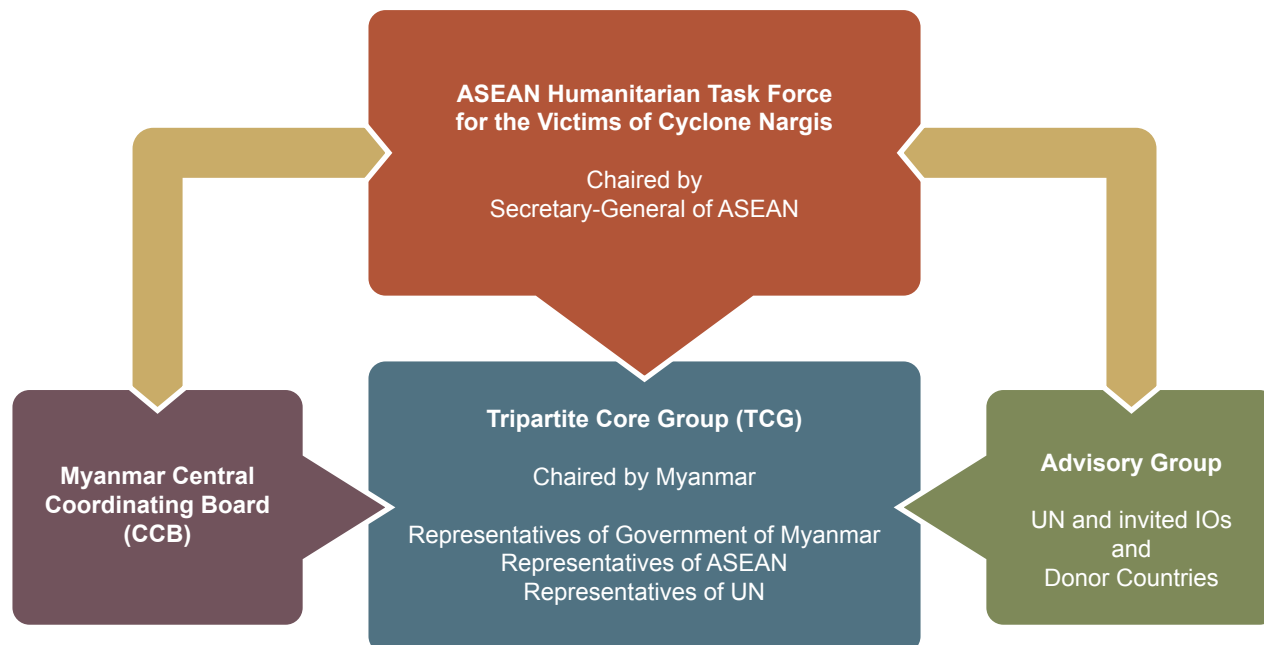
Government for an emergency meeting of ASEAN Foreign Ministers. The Myanmar Government agreed and the Special ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting was held in Singapore on 19 May 2008.³⁵

It had been almost three weeks since the Cyclone had struck Myanmar and a political solution was needed to facilitate the urgent delivery of aid and access for aid workers to help the victims of Nargis. "Our response was late but it was better late than never... Cyclone Nargis was a test of ASEAN's solidarity. In the end we made the right call and helped prevent a second wave of deaths from hunger and disease. This is an achievement we can be proud of," said Mr Yeo.³⁶

Insiders say that the mood at the closed-door meeting was extremely tense and pressure was mounting. Ms Kamal, who headed the ERAT team, had arrived in Singapore in time for the meeting with a report on the initial assessment of the situation and made several recommendations to the Foreign Ministers. The ERAT report urged the Government to open up channels of aid and outlined that it would be "to the detriment of the people if the survivors of Nargis did not have all the available assistance that could be deployed, including the assistance from ASEAN countries," says Ms Kamal.³⁷

The ASEAN Foreign Ministers were prepared to deliver a very strong message to the Myanmar Government, recounts Dr

Structure of ASEAN-led Coordinating Mechanism





ASEAN Chair and Singapore's Foreign Minister George Yeo (left to right), Prime Minister of the Union of Myanmar General Thein Sein, and Secretary-General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon at ASEAN-UN International Pledging Conference, 25 May 2008. Photo courtesy of Khin Maung Win

Pitsuwan. It was suggested that if Myanmar did not accept assistance, ASEAN would be implicated for not being able to help. Everyone was deeply concerned and the messages delivered were clear and crisp. Dr Pitsuwan remembers that Hassan Wirayuda, then Indonesian Minister for Foreign Affairs, and Mr Yeo were particularly strong contributors during the meeting.

"Myanmar was initially reluctant to cooperate with the international community saying that it could manage on its own. I remember Indonesian Foreign Minister Pak Hassan asking Myanmar Foreign Minister Nyan Win what ASEAN meant to Myanmar and what Myanmar meant to ASEAN," recalls Mr Yeo.³⁸

To overcome the impasse and accelerate post-Nargis relief and recovery, the Myanmar Government was given three options.³⁹

1. A UN-led mechanism for relief and reconstruction effort in Myanmar.
2. An ASEAN-led mechanism for the same purpose. ASEAN would be at the forefront of the coalition to forge strong partnerships with neighbouring countries and competent organisations. ASEAN would work with the Government to provide access for the coalition partners to implement relief and recovery programmes in the affected areas.
3. The 'Responsibility to Protect' would be invoked and Myanmar would stand the mounting pressure to open up alone, including the possibility that the international community would deliver aid without authorisation.

"ASEAN played a critical role by working with the UN and the Myanmar authorities to create an innovative mechanism, the TCG, to expedite the humanitarian response, in particular by facilitating access. Dr Surin played a key leadership role in the success of the TCG."

- Michelle Chan, Australian Ambassador to Myanmar.⁴⁴

"Myanmar decided they would take the middle option and chose the ASEAN-led coordination mechanism," recollected Dr Pitsuwan.⁴⁰

Myanmar agreed on an ASEAN-led mechanism upon assurances that assistance provided through ASEAN would not be politicised. The Foreign Ministers unanimously agreed to establish an ASEAN Humanitarian Task Force for the Victims of Cyclone Nargis, headed by Dr Pitsuwan, as the first step in implementing the ASEAN-led coordinating mechanism. ASEAN's first-ever collective engagement in a disaster management and humanitarian mission began in earnest. The mandate of the ASEAN-led coordinating mechanism was "to facilitate the effective distribution and utilisation of assistance from the international community, including the expeditious and effective deployment of relief workers, especially health and medical personnel."⁴¹ As a tangible demonstration of its faith in the coalition, the Myanmar Government agreed to the immediate dispatch of medical teams from all ASEAN Member States into Myanmar.

Ms Kamal describes it as "a defining moment for all of us, for ASEAN. We were able to show leadership and affirm our relevance as a regional organisation... We did not know at that time if it would work but we had no other options but just to do it. I remember that once the decision was made for ASEAN to lead the coordination, the Secretary-General turned his head towards me as I was sitting in the back row and said 'there will be a lot of work ahead of us.' Well, I knew it would require much work, but I never realised how much it would entail! We jumped into the river and swam along with the current. As the Secretary-General says, ASEAN was baptised by Cyclone Nargis."⁴²

A day after the decision was made to allow ASEAN to lead the coordinating mechanism, the Secretary-General flew to Yangon to meet with the Myanmar Prime Minister on 21 May 2008 to convey the messages agreed to in Singapore and to discuss the establishment of a Tripartite Core Group (TCG). Dr Pitsuwan stressed that it was necessary for ASEAN to take the lead in coordinating and liaising with the UN system and international community in assisting Myanmar to recover from Cyclone Nargis. He was eager to ensure that the ASEAN-led initiative had been acknowledged, accepted, endorsed, and supported fully by all levels of the Government of Myanmar⁴³ and he expressed his gratitude to the Government of Myanmar for its hospitality and for the opportunity to pay a courtesy call to the Prime Minister.

Dr Pitsuwan also impressed upon the Prime Minister that the Myanmar representative on the TCG should be a high-level minister within the Government who had direct access to the Prime Minister. He reinforced that the TCG would be led by the Myanmar Government. During his visit, Dr Pitsuwan also met with key Ministers to discuss preparations for the ASEAN-UN International Pledging Conference, including granting access to the media to cover the event.

Many interviewed for this book commended Dr Pitsuwan's leadership and presence on the Cyclone Nargis issue, suggesting it was instrumental to achieving a solution. His interest in and concern for the survivors of Cyclone Nargis was apparent to all working with him and his commitment to the overall post-Nargis effort unshakable.

"I can't sing the praises of the TCG and ASEAN enough in the first few months after Nargis. The way they were able to

Secretary-General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon addresses the ASEAN-UN International Pledging Conference 25 May 2008 in Yangon. Photo courtesy of Khin Maung Win.



establish themselves quickly, the access they were able to negotiate for the humanitarian community, and particularly the interest and time given from ASEAN at the highest level. Dr Pitsuwan made a number of visits to Myanmar met with NGOs frequently and also met NGOs working on the Nargis response in Bangkok. This representation was appreciated immensely,” says Brian Agland, CARE Myanmar Country Director.⁴⁵

Another prominent figure who played a significant role in opening access was the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. He visited Myanmar on 22 and 23 May to meet with Senior General Than Shwe in Nay Pyi Taw to advocate for further humanitarian access and discuss the UN relief efforts. After his visit to Nay Pyi Taw, Mr Ban Ki-moon told reporters in Yangon, “I’m quite confident we will be able to overcome this tragedy. I’ve tried to bring a message of hope to your people... The UN and the whole international community stand ready to help you overcome this tragedy.”⁴⁶

Myanmar’s Prime Minister agreed to the ASEAN-led coordinating mechanism and Myanmar shifted its stance from the acceptance merely of bilateral aid from the international community to allowing aid and relief workers into the country irrespective of nationality on 23 May. This promise has been kept to this day.⁴⁷

Dr Pitsuwan and Mr Ban Ki-moon officially launched the ASEAN-UN partnership under the auspices of the ASEAN-led coordinating mechanism on 24 May 2008 at the Don Mueang Airport in Bangkok. The Thai Government previously had agreed to the use of the airport as the UN staging point for relief items entering Myanmar. The two Secretaries-General also exchanged notes following their respective visits to Yangon earlier that week and discussed strategies to ensure the expeditious deployment of relief assistance from the international community to the Cyclone-affected population in Myanmar. Dr Pitsuwan joined the then Prime Minister of Thailand, Samak Sundaravej, and Mr Ban Ki-moon in opening the cargo hangars at the airport.⁴⁸



Dr Surin Pitsuwan, Secretary-General of ASEAN, observes the PONJA process at the PONJA Control Room. Photo by AHTF Coordinating Office.

The Gates to the Delta Swing Open

The AHTF, chaired by the Secretary-General of ASEAN, was set up to provide policy decisions and establish the priorities and targets with regard to the implementation of this ASEAN-led initiative. It was made up of two senior representatives from each of the 10 Member States. The first meeting of the AHTF was held on the morning of 25 May, just before the ASEAN-UN International Pledging Conference in Yangon.

An Advisory Group was also established to assist the AHTF in providing relevant technical expertise and inputs. Members of the Advisory Group included representatives from

neighbouring countries (China, India, and Bangladesh), the UN, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the World Bank, the ADB and NGOs. International donors represented by Australia, Norway and the United Kingdom joined the Advisory Group at a later stage.

Representatives from 51 countries as well as international and national NGOs and UN agencies attended the ASEAN-UN International Pledging Conference, which was chaired by the Myanmar Prime Minister, Mr Yeo, as Chair of ASEAN, and the UN Secretary-General. A huge outpouring of aid was pledged, and while doing so the international community reinforced



A Complete Turnabout

"It didn't look very hopeful for most of May. When Ban Ki-moon visited Myanmar in late May and announced that access was going to improve and international staff would be able to get in, nobody really believed it at the time. However sure enough, that was the case.

It was clear to everyone involved that the key to this happening was the role that ASEAN was going to play. It certainly propelled ASEAN into a role, which it had never been in before. This was an opportunity to do something and do it within the realms of what was politically acceptable.

By the end of May when the rules of the game finally became clear, suddenly everything became easier and it was almost like a complete turnabout. From a situation where the authorities had been condemned from all corners for handling the early weeks so badly, it took everyone by surprise.

At the end of May there was a completely different playing field and that has held up until now. We have had access to anywhere we wanted to go in the Delta. As long as we have had the right visa there has never been a problem in getting travel authorities for international staff. The big difference to working in the rest of the country is that we don't have to work being accompanied by someone from the authorities in the Government. This is still in place up until now. Relatively, we have had a lot of freedom to move around."

—Daniel Collison, *Save the Children*⁵²



Ambassadors serving on the TCG, (from left to right) Singapore Ambassador to Myanmar, Robert Chua, former Thai Ambassador Barnsarn Bunnag and Viet Nam Ambassador Chu Cong Phung. Photo by AHTF Coordinating Office.

the importance of easing restrictions on access to the Delta so that activities could be completed unimpeded. The ASEAN-led coordinating mechanism was introduced, as shown in the accompanying graph.

After the conference, a Coordinating Office was established in Yangon by Ms Kamal, under the direction of the Secretary-General of ASEAN. Ms Kamal says she had exceptional help from the Thai Embassy and the World Bank, but literally had to set up the Coordinating Office from scratch, which was done in merely four hours at Chatrium Hotel in Yangon. Thus, within a very short period the AHTF Coordinating Office was born, which supported the AHTF on the ground and also supported the TCG mechanism. In a country and sector where most of those in charge are men, Ms Kamal was one of only a few female senior representatives working at such a high level in Yangon at the time.

Following the commitment made by the President of the World Bank to Dr Pitsuwan, the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR) swiftly mobilised its resources to support ASEAN in performing coordination functions. “GFDRR contributed to strengthening the Secretariat’s ability to coordinate the post-Nargis international assistance, bridging the gap between delivering humanitarian assistance and developing a sustainable disaster recovery program for Myanmar. “In this context, GFDRR offered ASEAN Secretariat a US\$1.9 million grant to help manage the post-Nargis assistance, as well as to reinforce its capacity to coordinate regional long-term efforts in disaster risk management, especially in conducting disaster impact assessment, developing recovery planning and strengthening emergency preparedness and risk reduction,” says Mr Saroj Jha, the World Bank’s GRDRR Manager and Disaster Risk Management Global Expert Team Leader.⁴⁹

Displaced Cyclone survivors find shelter from the annual monsoon rains in temporary tents erected following the disaster. Photo courtesy of Khin Maung Win

“When response to Nargis started in earnest, World Bank experts were promptly mobilised. With this support, the AHTF was able to harmonise Myanmar assistance efforts, arrange and convene coordination meetings between partners, facilitate high level dialogue on recovery planning, manage the [Post-Nargis Joint Assessment], deliver necessary trainings in damage and loss assessments and risk reduction, and to exchange knowledge and best practices in prevention, recovery planning and reconstruction,” he adds.⁵⁰

Meanwhile, a day after the pledging conference, Mr Prasetyo met with Mr Dhannan Sunoto, then Principal Director for Bureau for External Relations and Coordination of ASEAN Secretariat, and Dr Pitsuwan. Mr Prasetyo advised Dr Pitsuwan about the immense challenges that lay ahead based on his experiences in the post-Tsunami effort in Aceh. He recommended that the AHTF move swiftly to create a work plan, conduct damage and loss assessments with the support of the World Bank, and mobilise technical experts on the ground to monitor progress. Following that, the Second AHTF meeting was conducted through videoconference to discuss the above plans.

Later that day, Dr Pitsuwan held a series of meetings to set up coordination with various stakeholders, including the World Bank, the UN, NGOs, Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and the private sector. At the time, the ASEAN-ERAT was scheduled to be redeployed to Myanmar on 1 June to complete a one-month field assessment of recovery needs in Cyclone-affected areas. Dr Pitsuwan stressed at the time, “It is important to move things forward rapidly. We don’t want to lose any more momentum.”⁵¹ 🇲🇲





Chapter Three

Three Voices as One

**“Si Lone Nyi Nya Aung Gyaung Phyar”
“Unity is the best policy”**

— Myanmar proverb

Following the decision of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers to establish an ASEAN-led coordinating mechanism, the next challenge was translating that decision into an effective working mechanism on the ground. The TCG was set up to operationalise the relief efforts for Cyclone Nargis. The TCG consisted of three representatives each from ASEAN, the Government and the UN.

The TCG was conceived after the Special Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in Singapore.⁵³ The Secretary-General of ASEAN presented the Terms of Reference of the ASEAN-led coordinating mechanism to the First AHTF Meeting, just before the Pledging Conference on 25 May 2008 in Yangon. The First AHTF Meeting adopted the terms of reference, including the creation of the TCG, the Advisory Group and the AHTF Coordinating Office.

31 May 2008 First TCG Meeting conducted.

31 July 2010 TCG mandate ends.

It was emphasised at the meeting that the Government of Myanmar should lead the TCG and that a high-level Government official, with a direct reporting line to the Prime Minister, serve as the Chair. The

Secretary-General of ASEAN introduced the TCG to the ASEAN-UN International Pledging Conference.

A few days later, the Government of Myanmar appointed then Deputy Foreign Minister U Kyaw Thu to lead the TCG. One of his key tasks was to liaise directly with the Myanmar Central Coordinating Board, chaired by the Prime Minister, to ensure the rapid and effective deployment of international assistance.

The official mandate of the TCG was to:

- Coordinate resources;
- Facilitate operations including access for humanitarian workers;
- Coordinate monitoring of and evaluation on the progress and achievements.

Secretary-General of ASEAN Dr Surin Pitsuwan, far right, Chair of the TCG and Chair of the Civil Selecton and Training Board U Kyaw Thu (centre) and UN Representative to the TCG and UN Resident/ Humanitarian Coordinator Bishow Parajuli inspect a boat distributed to Cyclone survivors in Seik Gyi Village, September 2008. Photo by AHTF Coordinating Office





Dr William Sabandar, Special Envoy for Secretary-General of ASEAN for Post Nargis Recovery (second from left) and Mr Dhannan Sunoto, Director of Cross Sectoral Cooperation for ASEAN Secretariat (third from left) visit the TCG Recovery Hub in Pyapon. Photo by AHTF Coordinating Office.

In the early days of the relief efforts, the TCG operated as a trouble shooting mechanism to help solve a myriad of challenges in delivering aid quickly to the Delta areas. The most pressing issues during that time were gaining visas for international experts and opening up air space for the delivery of goods.

“The formation of the TCG and the relationship between ASEAN, the Government of Myanmar and the UN was unique... Besides paving the way for unprecedented international support to humanitarian efforts in Myanmar it also had the dimension of building ASEAN’s capacity in emergency response for the future through their direct engagement in this humanitarian situation,” says Mr Bishow Parajuli, UN Resident/ Humanitarian Coordinator (UNRC/HC) to Myanmar.⁵⁴ The

immediate response to Nargis was buttressed from a strategic as well as a practical, operational perspective by the TCG, he adds.

Another important element of the TCG was that it was a forum to share information, whether that was concerns from the ground flowing up to authorities or communicating progress on the relief efforts to stakeholders. This communication channel was vital in keeping all parties informed and on board. “This was the first time something of this sort had been created internationally, so we improvised. I often use the analogy that we were like a jazz band, improvising trying to make things happen together like a band,” says Mr Robert Chua, Ambassador of Singapore to Myanmar.⁵⁵



Dr Anish Kumar Roy (second from left), then Special Representative of Secretary-General of ASEAN in 2008 with ASEAN Volunteers in Seik Gyi village. Photo by AHTF Coordinating Office

There were three keys to the success of the TCG. Firstly, it was chaired by a representative from the Government of Myanmar since typically the national government takes on the lead role following an emergency. Secondly, Ambassadors from ASEAN Member States added their respective political weight and diplomatic flair to the mix while the UN brought the perspective of the international community and contributed technical expertise on responding to a humanitarian emergency of such an immense scale. Lastly, everyone interviewed for this publication agreed that the TCG members were united in a common goal — to help the survivors of Nargis — and that first and foremost their mandate was founded on a humanitarian as opposed to political imperative.

Ambassadors carried significant political weight with their respective nations and as members of the TCG. Beyond that, “there was also a personal dedication from these Ambassadors. They were on the ground. They were aware of what was happening, and they relayed what they were seeing and hearing back to the ASEAN Secretariat, while at the same time seeking support from the Government of Myanmar... It was not only the Ambassadors that were extremely committed. They mobilised their capitals. They took their roles very seriously. We met every week, and they showed a high level of commitment,” says UNRC/HC in Myanmar Mr Parajuli.

From an international NGO perspective, Dr Paul Sender, Country Director of Merlin, observes that the TCG was a mechanism for joint collaboration and a model for “how to



TCG Chair U Kyaw Thu consults with a monk during a TCG field visit to the Delta. Photo by AHTF Coordinating Office

work effectively in the Delta. Within a complicated context, it enabled us to focus upon addressing humanitarian needs ... as well as enable and maintain access to the Delta.⁵⁷

Dr Anish Kumar Roy, then Special Representative of the Secretary-General of ASEAN for Post-Nargis Response in Myanmar in 2008 and then Director of Bureau for Resources Development for ASEAN Secretariat, recalls that one of the TCG's greatest achievements was expediting the visa approval process for humanitarian workers to access the Delta. "The Government gave the TCG a mandate to issue visas, travel authorities and related matters. Normally international humanitarian actors would have to deal with ministries like Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement to get access into the relief areas like the Delta and Yangon Divisions. The officials they deal with are not at a high level. However the TCG had the power to grant visas and TAs. If things had gone through the normal mechanisms, it would have taken months to get the approvals. Instead we were able to mobilise people through the TCG mechanism very quickly. This was a great achievement,"⁵⁸ he says.

"The TCG mission and objectives were so clear — that it is to operate on behalf of the [wellbeing of survivors] of Cyclone Nargis in the Delta area. We have been working very closely, very closely like a family. Of course, leadership is the most important thing. The leadership of the Chairman of the TCG, the Myanmar Minister U Kyaw Thu, brought us success," says former Ambassador of Thailand to Myanmar, Bansarn Bunnag.⁵⁹

The first Ambassador to serve on the TCG as a senior ASEAN member was Mr Robert Chua. He served on the TCG from May to July 2008. Ambassador of Thailand, Bansarn Bunnag, replaced him. He served from July 2008 to November 2009.

"During my time on the TCG, the most memorable experiences were the people that I met. I shall never forget the Myanmar people. They have good hearts and are willing to help each other to alleviate the plights of the victims," says Mr Bunnag.⁶⁰

Mr Bunnag organised a trip for the TCG members to learn from the Tsunami response in southern Thailand. All of the TCG members and some representatives from the Myanmar Government attended this study tour, which focused on early warning systems. "We were able to learn from the experience of the Tsunami tragedy, and were able to bring back some ideas," says the Ambassador.⁶¹

"We never thought that we would be so close, this was unexpected. At first we thought it would be like a loose cooperation with the UN and the Myanmar Government. ASEAN taking the lead hadn't happened before so we didn't expect much at the beginning, but at the end we felt so strong, we felt that it was so useful and helpful to the people in Myanmar and it was very well recognised by every identity ... we were not only able to bring in assistance, we brought in access. We brought Myanmar into the open and all the international community were able to take part and assisting in sharing their humanitarian assistance to Myanmar. I am very happy and proud and honoured to be a part of the TCG," says Mr Bunnag.⁶²

The last senior ASEAN member was the Vietnamese Ambassador, Mr Chu Cong Phung⁶³, who served from November 2009 until the end of the TCG mandate in July 2010. In looking back over the term of the TCG, he notes three main achievements.

"The first achievement was to set up the partnership between the three parties and this partnership mechanism, which can be applied to another country experiencing emergencies/ natural disasters. Secondly the TCG mobilised great resources from the international community. Thirdly the TCG worked as a bridge to help UN to understand the Government more and the Myanmar Government to also have a better understanding of the UN. Relations between the UN and Myanmar Government did improve during this time, so this was an important cooperation," says the Vietnamese Ambassador. 🇻🇳



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Chapter Four

Pioneering Joint Assessment

“Post-Nargis Joint Assessment (PONJA) and the Village Tract Assessment (VTA) were milestones in humanitarian response anywhere because they represented, under very difficult circumstances, a jointly agreed picture of needs.

A joint assessment hadn’t been done on that scale before. PONJA was incredibly useful as it allowed for consensus in approaching donors; that is, all agencies were working from the same assumption in terms of need and priorities. Having that as a starting point, and having it quite soon after the event, was a great achievement. “

— Daniel Collison, Save the Children⁶⁴

A comprehensive assessment of the situation on the ground was critical to respond effectively to the disaster as well as to ensure that everyone was on the same page about the impact of Cyclone Nargis and what needed to be done in response. Donors had made it clear at the pledging conference on 25 May that much-needed funding for the relief and recovery effort hinged on such an assessment since the nature and extent of the damage was still unclear.

A few preliminary assessments had been completed at that stage, including the ERAT team’s initial assessment. However a more comprehensive assessment was needed, and quickly. During the first TCG meeting on 31 May, it was agreed that a Post-Nargis Joint Assessment (PONJA) would be conducted

to determine the immediate and long-term effects of Cyclone Nargis, and the requirements for immediate humanitarian assistance needs and medium- to long-term recovery. PONJA commenced on 3 June, exactly four weeks after the Cyclone hit.

It was a huge undertaking and involved approximately 5,000 questionnaires and visits to 283 villages by roughly 300 people. Staff and volunteers from the Myanmar Government, ASEAN, the UN, the Red Cross, civil society, the private sector, and NGOs all participated in the PONJA. The annual monsoon rains had begun, making access even more difficult. This, coupled with the need to travel to remote locations, meant that a number of different transport options were needed, including WFP helicopters, boats, motorbikes and vehicles.

Merging Methodologies: DALA and VTA in Simple Terms

As this assessment was such an important and significant undertaking, the TCG formed a three-person Assessment Oversight Committee (AOC) led by Dr Puji Pujiono, a Recovery Needs Assessment Programme Specialist seconded from UNDP Geneva to ASEAN. In typical relief operation settings, there is no single assessment methodology that provides a comprehensive snapshot following a disaster. In the case of Nargis, there was only going to be one opportunity to comprehensively assess the impact of the disaster, which meant the World Bank and the UN had to cooperate and consequently the PONJA was made up of two different methodologies.

The AOC was tasked with integrating the assessments of the various UN agencies with that of the World Bank. “Each UN agency has their own methodology, and they are quite strict,” Dr Pujiono said. “And the World Bank also has its own assessment, which is also very strict. The challenge was reconciling the different interests and parameters, and translating this reconciliation into approval.”⁶⁵

The World Bank proposed using the Damage and Losses Assessment (DALA) – a methodology originally developed in the early 1970s used for reconstruction and recovery purposes. It relies on secondary data as well as formal data from the Government and focuses on physical infrastructure, macroeconomics and finance. However, the UN proposed a Village Tract Assessment (VTA), which uses various tools to assess qualitative data, including perceptions, feelings and experiences and assesses micro issues that affect individuals, families, and communities.

It was common knowledge that funding for the relief operation hinged on the quality of the PONJA. “A credible assessment means one that cannot be disputed by anyone.

2 June PONJA survey begins using 10 World Food Programme helicopters; over 250 enumerators visit 291 villages.

21 July PONJA report launched at the 41st ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting.

It would have to be conducted jointly, and it must withstand scientific questioning. Additionally it must speak about the real impact of the disaster and what needs to be done,” Dr Pujiono says. All parties wanted to ensure that the PONJA met these conditions, and were eager to use their tried-and-true methodology to ensure its success.⁶⁶

However, differences of opinion over the merging of respective methodologies almost caused the collapse of the PONJA and it was only after delicate diplomatic negotiations that the AOC secured agreement from the UN and the World Bank to present their findings in a joint report.

“We forced them to align their sectoral analysis, their story lines,” says Mr Pujiono. “For example, if the World Bank were to look at water needs, it would look at water installation and water distribution networks inter alia, then convert that to dollars. But when the UN considers water, it looks at people having access to an improved source of water – regardless of whether it’s through pipes or trucking. In the same regard, in terms of housing, the bank looks at housing infrastructure and settlements, but the UN looks at people’s access to basic shelter to protect them from the elements immediately, while the Bank is considering the next fiscal year. So we assumed a complementary approach and perspectives that were lined up under a common report outline.”⁶⁷

PONJA was ground breaking because it integrated humanitarian relief assessments with a longer-term recovery assessment, including both micro and macro analysis, which had never been attempted on such a scale before.

In the case of Cyclone Nargis, it was also essential that the assessment be a collaborative effort, between ASEAN, the Government of Myanmar and the UN. However, in most disaster scenarios, agencies typically conduct their own assessments based on their own, unique specialised fields. For example, UNICEF may conduct an assessment on damage to schools



Assessment teams interview villagers. Photo by AHTF Coordinating Office

and children at risk, whilst an international NGO like CARE may assess impact of a disaster on livelihoods. In other disaster responses, a coordinating body like UNOCHA may then pull together these assessments to make it easier to share the findings across that country.

A joint assessment on the unprecedented scale of PONJA presented a number of challenges. It had to cover all sectors (livelihoods, water and sanitation, food security, shelter) and focus on the immediate needs of affected people while also

providing a long-term recovery outline. This had never been undertaken before. Results and findings had to be signed off by all members of the TCG—ASEAN, the Government of Myanmar and the UN. One of the benefits of the information being endorsed by all parties was that findings were then easy for humanitarian agencies to reference and use. It was an agreed baseline from which other agencies could work.

“PONJA was quite unique and covered a large geographical area. There was a significant amount of important information



*An assessment team sets off into the field.
Photo by AHTF Coordinating Office*

gathered, and although there were some drawbacks and difficulties, for the scale of the assessment, and how quickly it was published after the disaster – it was quite a credit to the team. PONJA set up a baseline to measure against which was followed up by the Periodic Reviews. It gave us a document that the Government had endorsed so we were able to quote the figures... Donors always wanted to see how our activities were supporting the PONJA and Post-Nargis Recovery and Preparedness Plan (PONREPP). It was a great resource,” says Mr Agland.⁶⁸

Apart from delivering important information about the needs of the Nargis survivors, PONJA afforded the international community unprecedented access to the Delta region. The survey sample was devised on a grid system so that even the most remote areas in the Delta could be surveyed.

As PONJA had the use of WFP helicopters, the breadth of the geographical area sampled was impressive. The spatial sampling helped unravel the Cyclone’s confusing trajectory and establish patterns of destruction. Naturally, there were challenges. PONJA needed to be put together quickly, resulting in limitations in time for reviewing the assessment before it was rolled out. The questionnaire could not be piloted due to time constraints, but on the whole PONJA was a widely lauded assessment that broke new ground in the humanitarian sector.

PONJA was an extraordinary opportunity for a variety of stakeholders to collaborate in an international post-disaster assessment. The Government of Myanmar provided more than 20 personnel from 18 different ministries, who were involved at various levels of the assessment, from coordination in Yangon to enumeration on Hub teams.

The UN assisted with the inputs and processes required to develop the immediate relief and early recovery components of the joint assessments. They also trained and supplied data enumerators and coordinated the contribution and participation of other UN agencies and members of the Inter-Agency Steering Committee.

The World Bank seconded approximately 20 experts to ASEAN, and the ADB and the UNESCAP also provided technical experts to assist in the undertaking. It was very much a collaborative effort.

Says Mr Chua, Singapore Ambassador to Myanmar: “We needed to work together to produce a written damage assessment report that would give the international community and donors a sense of the various sectors of damage. This was a difficult but a touching and memorable experience, in all round cooperation. There were skeptics of course that cooperation could happen, but I think officials and ministers from the Myanmar Government offered their assistance. When we sent assessment teams down to the Delta, we divided the Delta into quadrants – West and East. The Myanmar Government supported the effort by providing Code Division Multiple Access phones so that every team could phone back to headquarters emergency office. This office was located at the Chatrium Hotel, in Yangon and we had TCG representatives rostered through the night. I was there in the late night and early morning and it was very touching to hear the reports of the very brave volunteers who went down to assess the extent of the damage. They came back with a template created by the World Bank and the UN and finally the PONJA report came out in July, presented at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting.

“I felt a great sense of satisfaction to have contributed to that whole exercise. If you see the final document, you will notice that there were more than 200 volunteers involved, very brave young men and women, who went down to collect the data. It was a highlight of my time on the TCG as we received support from Myanmar officials on the ground, and we all worked together to get a sense of the various areas of damage.”⁶⁹ 🇲🇲

Chapter Five

Without Trust There is Nothing

“While the issue of extending the mandate first came up at the 41st ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in July 2008 ... we knew that there was still much more to be done during the recovery phase. The Myanmar Government also recognised this and welcomed continuation of the tripartite cooperation process. Once we had trust, so much could be done.”

—Mr George Yeo, Singapore Foreign Minister⁷⁰

The first nine months of the ASEAN-led humanitarian operation demonstrated “ASEAN’s potential as a regional grouping in the international humanitarian arena, that ASEAN can play proactive roles in bridging national interest and international assistance, and is increasingly competent to coordinate complex humanitarian operations,” Dr Pitsuwan noted.⁷¹

But recognising that more work was needed, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers agreed late in February 2009 to extend the mandate of the AHTF and TCG until July 2010. The decision was a timely one as the effort was shifting into the recovery stage, and “we need to act and move fast to put in place measures to continue helping the Nargis survivors,” Dr Pitsuwan said at the time.⁷²

PONREPP

As the Nargis response shifted from emergency relief to a medium- to long-term recovery process, emphasis then shifted to rebuilding lives and livelihoods in a sustainable way. The TCG responded with the PONREPP,

which outlined a three-year recovery plan from January 2009 to December 2011. Under the leadership of the UN, the PONREPP was a joint effort with contributions from the Government of Myanmar and ASEAN.

The TCG agreed that the PONREPP would focus on five sectors, based on need and prospective donor interest: Livelihoods (Agricultural and Non-agricultural), Education, Health, Water and Sanitation and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR).

The PONREPP planning process provided opportunities to engage with the region on how to best implement recovery plans. In October 2008, an ESCAP-ASEAN Regional High-level Expert Group Meeting on Post-Nargis Recovery and Livelihood Opportunities was held in Myanmar, which examined lessons learned from around the region and explored how to promote regional cooperation. “We were able to pull out the best examples and help Myanmar and ASEAN to come up with guiding principles in preparing recovery plans,” Dr Heyzer says⁷³. “We emphasised things like focusing on vulnerable groups, community participation, making sure that we

TCG Periodic Review team overcomes challenges in the field. Photo by AHTF Coordinating Office.



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build the capacity of institutions to deliver and also the need for effectiveness and transparency and accountability.”

TCG Chairman, U Kyaw Thu, embraced the idea of learning from regional experience to support the recovery planning process. In a UNESCAP press release he stated, “We have again found ourselves at crucial crossroads nearly six months after Cyclone Nargis hit the Ayeyarwady Delta, and that the reason for this important regional meeting was to concentrate our knowledge and experience to outline a set of commitments and actions to boost early recovery efforts and bridge the gap between reliance and self-sufficiency for the affected populations of the Cyclone Nargis.”⁷⁴

Coordinating Response at the Community Level

The TCG’s coordinated post-Nargis relief and recovery response at the community level evolved over two phases. From October 2008 to May 2009, community-level coordination centred on establishing the UNOCHA hub structure that is traditionally put in place to facilitate international humanitarian assistance following disasters. To support coordination and cluster mechanisms at the field level, UNOCHA established six hub offices. ASEAN personnel were co-located in all of the hubs to coordinate the implementation of the Periodic Reviews. They performed complementary functions, liaising with the local Government through Township Coordination Committees (TCC). A desk was reserved for the TCC Secretary (or nominee), to encourage informal interactions and problem solving, and to give local government access to the technology, information and facilities of the hub. ASEAN provided human resources to fill gaps in the hubs during the transition from relief to recovery.

From June 2009 to the end of the AHTF mandate, the co-hub system merged into a unified system called the Recovery

Key Dates

July 2008
ASEAN Foreign Ministers discuss possibility of extending ASEAN’s post-Nargis mandate.

August 2008
TCG approves the Periodic Review as a mechanism to monitor progress in meeting needs.

31 October 2008
First Periodic Review begins.

17 November 2008
First Social Impact Monitoring Survey completed.

9 February 2009
The TCG launches the Post-Nargis Recovery and Preparedness Plan.

27 February 2009
ASEAN Foreign Ministers decide to extend AHTF and TCG mandate until July 2010.

Periodic Review team interviews a survivor. Photo by AHTF Coordinating Office

Hub Office (RHO) that was led by the TCG, with administrative assistance from ASEAN and UN. In the interest of maximising and harmonising the effort, the AHTF and UNRC/HC negotiated the establishment of the RHO. The process involved re-selection of human resources from UN and ASEAN into the RHO structure (both international and national staff) and finetuning the Terms of Reference to ensure TCG coordination was extended to the field.

As the hub structure evolved, it was imperative that trust be maintained between the TCG, which included the Government, donors and the vulnerable populations, which was made more challenging given a spike in agencies working in the Delta following the Cyclone. Prior to Nargis, there were 10 international NGOs and one UN agency, the UNDP, present, in the Delta. (The World Health Organisation, UNICEF, UN Population Fund and Food and Agriculture Organisation had activities there to various degrees but sometimes only through partners in the Delta).⁷⁵ As of April 2010, 114 organisations had reported activities in the Delta. The sudden influx of foreigners and Myanmar nationals from other parts of the country, who needed to interact with local authorities to carry out their activities, required delicate facilitation. Ultimately, the hub offices proved to be an effective mechanism to enhance communication, cooperation and harmonious relations among the various stakeholders.⁷⁶

Periodic Reviews (PRs)

Periodic Reviews or PRs were designed to evaluate the progress of the recovery effort. These were in essence a ‘snapshot’ of progress in meeting the evolving needs of the Cyclone-affected population every six months over the two-year mandate. These PRs aimed to provide objective and credible data, covering multiple sectors and a large geographic region.



In simple terms, they were developed to track the impact of the humanitarian assistance being provided and to determine whether the post-Nargis effort was meeting the needs of the Nargis survivors and, if not, to identify and articulate the gaps. All PRs covered the same villages as the PONJA, which spanned 30 townships. The PRs were released every six months after the launch of the PONJA: PR I in December 2008, PR II in July 2009, PR III in January 2010 and PR IV was published in July 2010. The PRs were led by the AHTF Coordinating Office with support from the Myanmar Government and the UN. It was very much a collaborative process with a range of stakeholders, including township authorities. From a big picture perspective the PRs played an important role in the Nargis response by helping to inform the prioritisation of needs in the Delta.

The PR IV found that by May 2010, the physical health of the people living in the Cyclone-affected areas had stabilised, though conditions generally were worse than they were prior to the Cyclone. Overall, progress also was uneven across sectors and across geographic areas impacted by the Cyclone. Compared to the first PR, household heads were more likely to have access to health facilities and to indicate that facilities needed medications and trained health personnel. Generally, the ability of households to access safe drinking water, during both the rainy and dry seasons, had improved. More households were treating their drinking water and their capacity to store water had improved compared to previous PRs. But the Cyclone-related destruction of sources of livelihood was still adversely affecting communities, their capacity to generate incomes and sustain their families. Households who



A survivor dries fish as part of a livelihood initiative in Labutta. Photo by AHTF Coordinating Office

relied on agriculture had not yet achieved the level of asset ownership they had prior to the Cyclone. Nearly two-thirds of households reported that their dwellings were fully repaired but the homes remained highly vulnerable to storms. Three-quarters of dwellings lacked adequate foundations and nearly all walls and roofs were not adequately reinforced, contributing to weak storm preparedness scores in many of the most vulnerable areas. School attendance was on an upward trend among children aged 10 and above, but was down slightly for those aged 5-10 compared to earlier PRs. Cyclone damage to family homes continued to influence the likelihood of children attending school, particularly among younger children.

Social Impacts Monitoring (SIM)

To complement the PRs, a SIM assessment also was carried out with a focus on qualitative analysis. Research teams conducted over 220 formal interviews and over 150 focus group

discussions on a wide range of topics. In addition, over 100 informal discussions were held to get a picture of the social impact of the Cyclone. SIM found that relief and recovery assistance had reached “even the most remote villages ... and all affected villages had received assistance within two to four weeks”⁷⁷ although many pressing issues were identified, including a need to re-establish livelihoods and food security. The assessment also identified an increased burden of debt, depression of local economies and land and fishing rights.

Importantly, the SIM highlighted the need for recovery efforts to focus and build on the strengths of local communities and to involve the communities in how aid is delivered and used. The AHTF Coordinating Office also led SIMs with strong technical support from the World Bank. 🇲🇲

An enumerator conducts a shelter assessment with assistance from the community. Photo by AHTF Coordinating Office





Chapter Six

Where There's a Will There's a Way

"Thit Tebin Kaung Hngat Tethaung Na Naing"

"A large and strong tree can be relied upon by thousands of birds."

— Myanmar proverb

After a strong start to the Nargis relief effort and solid donor funding support, momentum of the overall effort started to wane in the face of several challenges in 2009. Some sources interviewed for this publication noted a dilution in the TCG's influence and effectiveness during the second year of its mandate.

UNRC/HC Mr Parajuli reflects donor support was strong during the first year of the relief and recovery effort, "but the second year after the Post-Nargis Recovery and Preparedness Plan was launched, sufficient resources were not available, [which] brought frustration to the whole TCG membership."

Donor fatigue set in and funds began to dry up while many of the needs of the survivors of Cyclone Nargis had still not been met.

"The Cyclone Nargis response presented a complicated situation to the donors. On the one hand, many saw an opportunity to encourage more engagement, but on the other they were still tied

to their own national political and regional policies, which severely limited what they could and could not fund. They are caught between humanitarian relief, early recovery, and long-term recovery plans. Many donors were able to commit funds for the humanitarian phase, but raising funds for early and longer-term recovery has been very challenging," says Dr Heyzer.⁷⁸

In addition to the funding challenges, in April 2009, the Myanmar Government announced that the visa approval process for Nargis humanitarian workers would revert to the traditional Government Ministry system and visas no longer would be issued directly through the TCG. This was viewed as a set back and sparked worries that fewer visas would be granted for humanitarian workers.

"The Myanmar Government changed the visa application process and procedures, which caused considerable delays, and there were many visas in process. This brought a lot of worry to humanitarian

May 2009 Dr William Sabandar, Special Envoy appointed and arrives in Yangon.

October 2009 PONREPP Prioritised Action Plan launched.

November 2009 Post-Nargis and Regional Partnership Conference held with approximately 85% of requested funds pledged, which rose to 94% by June 2010.

July 2010 Approximately 80% of pledges had been released to implementing partners or trust funds for PONREPP projects in the Delta.

workers. However the Myanmar Government moved swiftly to help reduce these delays," says UNRC/HC Mr Parajuli. At one stage there were approximately 219 visas backlogged for processing.⁷⁹

This issue was raised directly by the Secretary-General of ASEAN to the highest level of Government in Myanmar. In a letter addressed to the Myanmar Prime Minister on 11 June 2009, Dr Pitsuwan asserted

that the role of the TCG in providing access for humanitarian workers in the Delta should continue.

Appointment of Special Envoy Dr William Sabandar

In May 2009 Dr William Sabandar was appointed Special Envoy of the Secretary-General of ASEAN for the Post-Nargis Recovery based in Yangon. Prior to his appointment, the leadership of the AHTF Coordinating Office was a rotating one, and often the attention of ASEAN Secretariat officials were divided because they were required to travel to and from Jakarta – to continue to perform duties related to their regional portfolios.

It became apparent to the Secretary-General of ASEAN that the AHTF Coordinating Office needed a more permanent fixture, one that would have leveraging power. Dr Pitsuwan consulted with the Office of the President of Indonesia about recruiting Dr Sabandar, who had been Chief of Nias recovery programme for the Indonesian BRR for four years after the devastating Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004.

As mentioned previously, Dr Sabandar's involvement with the Cyclone Nargis response dated back to 4 May 2008, when Dr Mangkusubroto asked him to closely monitor support from the Government of Indonesia to the relief and recovery effort as a part of a BRR Task Force for Nargis. Although Dr Sabandar participated through this informal BRR Nargis Task Force, little did he know at the time that a year later he would be asked to become the Special Envoy in Myanmar and lead the AHTF Coordinating Office, all the while making a significant contribution to the success of the ASEAN-led mechanism. Appointing a Special Envoy to the Secretary-General of ASEAN illustrates the importance and commitment ASEAN accorded the Nargis response.

During a meeting on 7 April 2009, Dr Mangkusubroto and Dr Pitsuwan both agreed that the Special Envoy position should be created and that it should carry an appropriate level of authority and sufficient resources to exercise that authority. Dr Pitsuwan agreed that Dr Sabandar would be granted the authority to work on behalf of the Secretary-General as Special Envoy.

This role of Special Envoy was significant. Dr Pitsuwan explains, "Dr Sabandar's task was to represent me in the interaction and engagement with high-level officials of the Government of Myanmar, United Nations, donor community, international and national NGOs and other humanitarian agencies and development actors in the execution of the AHTF mandate in the post-Nargis recovery process."⁸⁰

Upon his arrival to Yangon, Dr Sabandar was immediately struck by the need for ASEAN to take a more proactive approach to leading the recovery process. In particular, he was concerned about the delays in establishing a Trust Fund for the recovery process as he was convinced that ASEAN could take an active role in establishing one, rather than merely assuming a facilitation role with partners.

Dr Sabandar remembers: "In my first week in Yangon as Special Envoy I noticed that many agencies and people had lost their spirit and energy. They had lowered their expectations of



Dr Willam Sabandar, Special Envoy of Secretary-General of ASEAN to Post-Nargis Recovery, consults internally displaced survivors in Labutta. Photo by AHTF Coordinating Office

what could be accomplished. There didn't seem to be the same energy and motivation or sense of urgency of a crisis situation. I saw a great chance for ASEAN to help, to take some innovative steps and to show our highest commitment to the people in the Delta."⁸¹

PONREPP Prioritised Action Plan

After the Periodic Review II, it was evident that the outstanding needs in the Delta exceeded the funds available to meet them. Basic needs such as water and shelter were largely unmet, children were slow to get back to school and livelihoods urgently needed to be re-energised. The Prioritised Action Plan

was one of Dr Sabandar's first undertakings after he assumed leadership of the AHTF. Sectors in the Prioritised Action Plan included shelter, livelihoods, water and sanitation, education and health in 13 townships. The Prioritised Action Plan was developed in consultation with the TCG and key representatives of the Delta Recovery Working Groups, through the TCG and Recovery Coordination Centre.

Dr Sabandar, at the Sixth AHTF Meeting in Jakarta, suggested developing a Prioritised Action Plan on 2 July 2010. At the meeting, Dr Sabandar proposed a pragmatic approach to the plan, which would be designed to have a meaningful impact on Cyclone survivors in the Delta.



Secretary-General of ASEAN, Dr Surin Pitsuwan (center); Under Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of UNESCAP, Dr Noeleen Heyzer (right); Dr Willam Sabandar, Special Envoy of Secretary-General of ASEAN for Post-Nargis Recovery; and Former Thai Ambassador to Myanmar, Senior Member of TCG Mr Barnsarn Bunnag (back) at the PONAC, 25 November 2009. Photo by AHTF Coordinating Office

Following the meeting, Dr Sabandar visited the Delta, accompanied by Mr Sunoto and Ms Kamal from ASEAN Secretariat. Dr Sabandar remembers, "After my trip to Pyapon on 2 August 2009, I saw first-hand how alarming the living conditions of the Nargis survivors were. I called for a meeting on 6 August. A selection of partners (donors and humanitarian agencies) attended the meeting and supported ASEAN on leading the process forward. I remember our first support came from Australia, the United Kingdom, Merlin, Save the Children and Oxfam."⁸²

The Prioritised Action Plan totalled US\$103 million. It was part of the overall recovery plan identified in the PONREPP, which sought US\$691 million over a three-year period. The Prioritised

Action Plan did not replace PONREPP. Rather, the plan was derived from the PONREPP and the PONREPP remains the overarching framework for post-Nargis recovery until December 2011.

Dr Sabandar followed up the Prioritised Action Plan with another innovative proposal for ASEAN to host a Post-Nargis Regional and Partnership Conference to boost dwindling funding supplies and to follow through on pledged donations. Lobbying of donors and ASEAN Members States to support the PONREPP Prioritised Action Plan was intensified through personal visits, letters, e-mails and telephone calls. The effort paid off in pledges.

Post-Nargis and Regional Partnership Conference (PONAC)

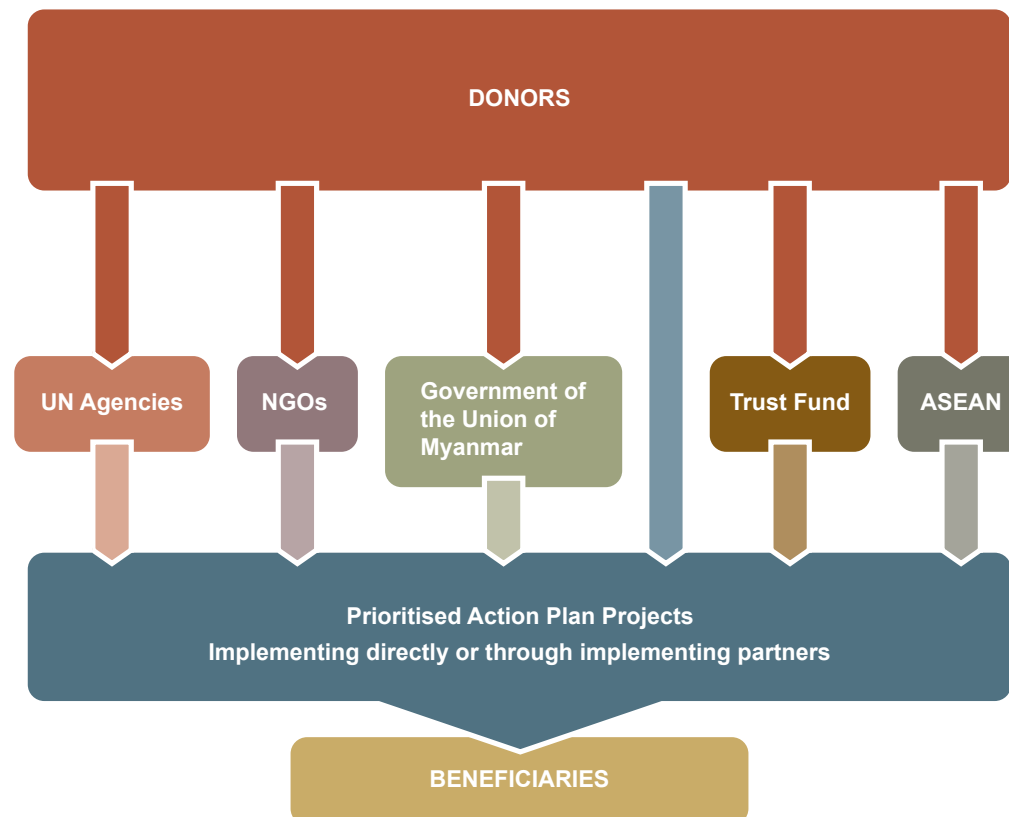
The AHTF Coordinating Office initiated and led the Post-Nargis and Regional Partnership Conference with support from the TCG. It marked the first time for ASEAN to initiate such an event, and the results were extremely positive. Dr Sabandar's fresh energy was infectious and kickstarted the flagging momentum of the post-Nargis effort.

On 25 November 2009, PONAC was held in Bangkok to mobilise much-needed resources to meet prioritised needs in Cyclone-affected areas. The conference also shared the

lessons learnt from the 18 months of post-Nargis assistance. The conference was co-chaired by Dr Pitsuwan and Dr Heyzer.

Dr Heyzer recalls, "It was about building a trusted partnership. Many of the donors were asked to show that they were able to come up with support on the humanitarian front. The Chairman of the TCG, U Kyaw Thu was saying how disappointed he was at the level of funding and how the Government of Myanmar felt that whatever they were doing was not enough. I was concerned that the Myanmar Government would not believe in the sincerity of the international community and that the trust that we all worked so hard to build would be broken. So it was

Funding Channelling Mechanism from Donors to Beneficiaries Presented at PONAC





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六	七	八	九	十
十一	十二	十三	十四	十五
十六	十七	十八	十九	二十
二十一	二十二	二十三	二十四	二十五
二十六	二十七	二十八	二十九	三十

1000	2000	3000	4000
5000	6000	7000	8000
9000	10000	11000	12000

A	B	C	D	E	F
G	H	I	J	K	L
M	N	O	P	Q	R
S	T	U	V	W	X
Y	Z				

100	200	300
400	500	600
700	800	900

1000	2000	3000	4000
5000	6000	7000	8000
9000	10000	11000	12000

1000	2000	3000
4000	5000	6000
7000	8000	9000

One of the outcomes of the PONREPP Prioritised Action Plan, a school funded by Japan, a PONAC donor. Photo by AHTF Coordinating Office

very important that the TCG and all the humanitarian partners working on the ground developed the PONREPP Prioritised Action Plan, a document that highlighted and costed the outstanding critical needs in the Delta. This document became an effective tool in lobbying donors for renewed commitments that could be realistically delivered by the end of the mandate of the TCG in July 2010. I was happy to co-chair the donor conference with Dr Surin, at ESCAP.⁸³

Organising this fundraising conference was not without its challenges. The funding appeal was pegged at US\$103 million. If ASEAN failed to raise a significant portion of this target, ASEAN risked losing face with the Myanmar Government.

The night before the conference, Dr Pitsuwan called Dr Sabandar to ask what he thought the outcome would be from the Post-Nargis and Regional Partnership Conference. Dr Sabandar thought that it would be possible to raise 60 per cent of the target. Dr Pitsuwan was satisfied with this estimate, suggesting that if ASEAN could raise 60 per cent, it would be a very good achievement.

The following day both Dr Sabandar and Dr Pitsuwan “were delighted” because US\$88.5 million had been pledged or 85 percent of the target. “This was well beyond our expectations. ASEAN believed we could do it. Working wholeheartedly for the survivors of Cyclone Nargis, impossibility turned into reality!” recounts Dr Sabandar. Donors included Australia, Denmark, EC, Germany, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Singapore, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom and the US. Importantly, donors were free to give funds through a number of channels including to UN agencies, NGOs, the Government of Myanmar, various trust funds, ASEAN or to the Prioritised Action Plan projects.

Mr Collison says that many international NGOs had little money to implement activities planned in the PONREPP and the donor conference represented a lifeline to Save the Children and other agencies. “There had been all this effort for the thematic working groups and clusters to put together its

three-year recovery plan, and so much was needed to finance that. But basically there was no money coming through – grants were coming to an end, and the outlook for 2010 was looking quite bad,” he said. “ASEAN took a real initiative, particularly when Willy [Sabandar] arrived, to raise some funds for the recovery phase of the response.”⁸⁴

A much-needed boost to the recovery efforts of Nargis was achieved through the Post-Nargis and Regional Partnership Conference. Pledges were allocated to five priority sectors: livelihoods; shelter; water, sanitation and hygiene; education and health. It was also an opportunity for the Myanmar Government to express its thanks to the international community for their assistance during Nargis and to emphasise that additional funds were needed to assist in the recovery process. Chairman of the TCG, U Kyaw Thu, advocated for a joint commitment to ensure that the affected communities never again suffer as they did because of Nargis, by successfully implementing the PONREPP and the Prioritised Action Plan.

The effort did not stop at the conference. To monitor the implementation of the donor pledges, the AHTF Coordinating Office set up a monitoring unit and introduced the Recovery Information and Accountability System (RIAS). The RIAS aims to monitor the progress of pledges, how pledges are converted into projects and to track the progress of projects. With this tool, recovery achievements become transparent to all—including the Government, donors and the humanitarian community. The monitoring unit was able to accelerate the implementation of donor pledges. By the time ASEAN’s mandate ended in July 2010, approximately 80 per cent of the pledges had been transferred to implementing partners or trust funds to implement various PONREPP projects. This maintained the momentum of the recovery effort. 🇲🇲

Chapter Seven

Pivotal Moments in ASEAN's Cyclone Nargis Response

“We were able to bring the world to Yangon in spite of everything.”

— Secretary-General of ASEAN, Dr Surin Pitsuwan

Wider Space for Cooperation and Increased Aid

Undoubtedly, one of ASEAN's most significant achievements during the post-Nargis relief and recovery effort was the facilitation of visas and travel authorisations for international staff through the TCG. ASEAN worked together with the Myanmar Government and the UN to open up humanitarian access in the Delta, which brought much-needed assistance, expertise and supplies to the survivors of Cyclone Nargis.

Apart from expediting assistance to beneficiaries, improved access for the international community created new humanitarian space in Myanmar and new pathways for engagement in both directions. The Myanmar Government has had the opportunity to engage with the international community in fresh ways and the international community has been afforded unprecedented access to provide assistance, and in turn has had the opportunity to improve its understanding about the Myanmar operating context. It is hoped

that this new space will improve receptivity for future engagement. Myanmar authorities will be more inclined to work with the international community, and the international community will explore new opportunities to collaborate with Myanmar.

Another ASEAN accomplishment was mobilising resources for the relief and recovery stages of the response, which was not an easy task given the political restrictions some donors face in providing aid to Myanmar.

To put the funding dilemma in some context, Myanmar received less Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) than any of the 50 poorest countries in the world in 2007, including North Korea, Zimbabwe and Sudan. Myanmar received US\$4 per person in ODA, according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development; Cambodia and Laos PDR received US\$47 and US\$65 respectively for the same time period. Increased aid flows into Myanmar following the Cyclone resulted in a dramatic increase in ODA to US\$11 per capita in 2008.⁸⁵

Emergency food distribution during the relief period. Photo courtesy of Khin Maung Win



ASEAN's achievements have been numerous since joining the Cyclone Nargis relief efforts. Under the ASEAN-led coordinating mechanism, in collaboration with the TCG and partners, achievements include:

- Facilitating through the TCG the issuance of 3,833 visas for humanitarian workers.
 - Comprehensively assessing needs, losses and damages through the Post-Nargis Joint Assessment.
 - Community monitoring, through Periodic Review and Social Impacts Monitoring, to inform humanitarian assistance strategies and programme changes to optimise benefits to the people affected by Cyclone Nargis.
 - Providing a framework for medium- to longer-term recovery with a view to promoting productive, healthy and protected lives through the Post-Nargis Recovery and Preparedness Plan.
 - Supporting TCG-endorsed projects to assist in livelihoods rehabilitation, infrastructure reconstruction and disaster risk reduction through the ASEAN Volunteer Programme.
 - Strengthening humanitarian coordination at the township level to bolster the mainstream coordination mechanism to ensure focused assistance to affected populations.
 - Sustaining a coordinated effort as recovery enters the medium to longer-term stage based on the guiding framework articulated by the PONREPP.
 - Maintaining momentum and a sense of urgency through every phase of the relief and recovery.
- Establishing the Recovery Coordination Centre, Recovery Forum and Recovery Hubs in partnership with the Government and United Nations.
 - Mobilising support and funding from the international community to address the critical needs through the Post-Nargis Assistance and Regional Partnership Conference.
 - Developing a Recovery Information and Accountability System to monitor the implementation of the PONREPP Prioritised Action Plan.
 - Establishing linkages between the recovery and development framework and preparing a strategy for transition through the MoSWRR.
 - Handing over coordination tools to the MoSWRR.
 - Developing a knowledge management database of post-Nargis experiences to be incorporated into AADMER.
 - Sharing lessons learned and institutionalising good practices of post-Nargis into AADMER and the AHA Centre

Myanmar Government Praises ASEAN

When asked to name ASEAN's greatest contribution to the post-Nargis effort, Myanmar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded, "the convening of the Pledging Conference on 25 May 2008, the conduct of the Damage and Loss Assessment and Village Tract Assessment in June 2008, development of the Post-Nargis Joint Assessment and Post-Nargis and Regional Partnership Conference on 25 November 2009."

Teams distribute assistance for recovery projects in the Delta. Photo courtesy of UNICEF



Through the ASEAN-UN International Pledging Conference and PONAC, ASEAN, together with the UN, was able to raise funds from donors to support the relief and recovery efforts in the Delta and to address short-term funding challenges. The post-Nargis effort prompted some donors to reassess their policies regarding providing aid to Myanmar and others to increase their contributions significantly.

“ASEAN created the bridge to bring the support provided by international humanitarian community closer to the survivors. It provided an opportunity for Nargis survivors to fully benefit and utilise all the available resources from the international humanitarian community, including those from the neighbouring countries and the ASEAN region. It also brought ASEAN closer to the people,” said Ms Kamal.⁸⁶

While some donors were initially skeptical about the effectiveness of aid to Myanmar, the post-Nargis relief and recovery response proved that aid could be delivered directly to those in need.

“There is also a misconception among donors that aid cannot be delivered effectively, but this is not the case and that has been proven with Nargis. This is the message that needs to get out, to be communicated to donors,” says UNRC/HC Mr Parajuli.⁸⁷

“The response to Cyclone Nargis in the Delta has shown that it is possible for the international community, local organisations and the Government to cooperate to save and rebuild lives,” says Paul Whittingham, Head of the Department for International Development (DFID), British Embassy in Myanmar. DFID was one of the biggest contributors to the Nargis response.⁸⁸

Improved Relations with the World

“ASEAN could play an important continuing role in promoting mutual cooperation for the alleviation of poverty in Myanmar. It is critical that the gains made following Cyclone Nargis – in terms of increased international awareness of the levels of

Teams distribute educational materials to support schools in the Delta. Photo courtesy of UNICEF



poverty in Myanmar and the increased allocations we have seen - are protected and sustained. We hope that ASEAN can continue to use its influence with the Government to ensure a greater focus on meeting the needs of its people. For our part, Department for International Development will continue to provide support to basic healthcare and education in the Delta, as well as helping the communities affected by Nargis to restore their livelihoods, raise incomes and establish food security," says Mr Whittingham.⁸⁹

Many humanitarian agencies say they have better working relationships with the Government as a result of working together in the post-Nargis response.

"The Government's response capacity has much improved since Nargis. The Government has shown willingness to work with the UN and NGOs," says Bhairaja Panday, the UN Refugee Agency representative in Myanmar. "The Government has shown more confidence in dealing with the aid community and now understands better how the latter functions."⁹⁰

Win Zin Oo, the director of humanitarian and emergency affairs for World Vision, has also noticed a change in the Government's attitude toward the international humanitarian community. "At the outset of the Nargis response, the policy of the Government was 'we can do [this] by ourselves'. Now, the approach of inviting international agencies for assistance can be seen as change, due to the humanitarian space created by cooperation during the Nargis response," says Win Zin Oo.⁹¹

"They are open to receiving support and are continuing to engage. This is exactly the sign that the cooperation built after Nargis is continuing. We have engagement," agrees Vincent Hubin, deputy head of office for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.⁹²

Mr Collison observes that, "The level of trust and dialogue at meetings [with the Government] has improved over the last two years. I think that this reflects an improvement or an increase in understanding on the role and the objectives of international agencies within some layers of some of the line Ministries and

authorities. This is possibly due to the fact that they have been working closely with international agencies, perhaps for the first time, for an extended period. Before, some ministries may have believed that international agencies were in Myanmar to destabilise their system. From the Nargis response that has been demonstrated not to have been the case."

International financial institutions that engage with Myanmar as a member country—the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and the ADB—have also "witnessed a substantial improvement in the quality of their policy dialogues" with their Myanmar counterparts at the ministerial and subministerial levels, analysts⁹³ observe.

Besides being more willing to engage with the international community, the Government's capacity to respond to an emergency has improved. Government authorities have demonstrated a greater appreciation of what it takes to lead a disaster response and willingness to reach out to the international community for support in emergencies. Shortly after floods and landslides killed dozens and displaced thousands in western Myanmar in June 2010, high-ranking Government officials assessed the damage first-hand, conferred with UN agencies and NGOs, adjusted their plans accordingly, delegated duties for aid delivery and quickly authorised aid delivery. When a cyclone once again threatened Myanmar from the Bay of Bengal in April 2009, MoSWRR appealed for assistance. They alerted Save the Children, World Vision and UNICEF and requested support before it made landfall.⁹⁴

Mr Kaye of the WFP believes "the Government now has a better understanding of how the international community can help to respond to disasters of this magnitude. This understanding has helped to strengthen relationships to the point where now the Government sees us as clear partners. [When] Tropical Storm Alia was forecast to strike Sittwe in Northern Rakhine State, the MoSWRR called a number of UN agencies and NGO partners together to prepare in the event the storm hit. That was unheard of before Nargis. This year, the

A fisherman stores his catch, part of livelihoods support project. Photo by AHTF Coordinating Office

Government participated in a simulated exercise organised by the UN to test our inter-agency contingency plan. There is definitely now a greater awareness and appreciation of the need for disaster preparedness as well as of disaster response mechanisms.”

In working towards assisting the survivors of Cyclone Nargis, ASEAN has helped forge new pathways to improved relationships. Although it is unclear what the future holds, these pathways will remain in place to guide future engagement.

ASEAN's Formula for Success

Many have credited ASEAN's success in the post-Nargis endeavour to its cultural capital and the goodwill that has been fostered within the organisation. Myanmar has been a member of ASEAN for over 10 years and there was a level of comfort in dealing with ASEAN. ASEAN's intuitive sensitivity to the local context and its culturally appropriate response to the disaster were key to achieving consensus on the way forward.

“The starting point was that this disaster happened in an ASEAN Member State so Myanmar had a confidence level in ASEAN - as a family, as Southeast Asian neighbour. There is a comfort level with ASEAN as Myanmar has been a member since 1997. So there was an open starting point. When the Foreign Ministers proposed this ASEAN-led mechanism option to the Myanmar Government, there was a comfort level. Secondly, having the presence of the ASEAN Secretariat office in Yangon and the ASEAN Volunteers was something practical that showed that ASEAN wanted to help on the ground, politics aside. In addition, ASEAN knows the UN well and vice versa. The UN represented the international community and sometimes there were differences, so it was natural that ASEAN played this bridging role. Perhaps it could be seen as a possible mechanism elsewhere. In places hit by severe disasters where there are issues of trust and cooperation, this mechanism could come into place,” says Mr Chua, Singapore Ambassador.

ASEAN has been recognised for its nuanced use of soft power diplomacy, which worked extremely well in reconciling gaps in understanding and trust between institutions with very different backgrounds and paradigms.

Likewise some members of the international NGO community have attributed ASEAN's success to its more subtle, pragmatic approach. “ASEAN brings to the table a local understanding of the situation. If you go back to that time, the French and the United States had war ships off the coast and there were all kinds of threats to Myanmar. People were saying that that they wanted to come in to help but if they weren't going to get permission they were going to come in anyway. Whereas ASEAN approached this situation in a much more subtle way and worked to bring the Government on board without those kinds of political conditions attached. I think the Government felt comfortable with ASEAN. If the TCG was made up of other parties and not ASEAN, I don't think it would have been as successful. ASEAN brought a cultural understanding of the context and a local way of dealing with things. They approached the issue in a culturally appropriate manner,” says Mr Agland.⁹⁵

Ultimately, says John Holmes, UN Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, “Nargis showed us a new model of humanitarian partnership, adding the special position with capabilities of the ASEAN to those of the UN in working effectively with the Government. This may prove the most important — and, I hope, enduring — lesson of the Cyclone response with implications for how we respond, anywhere, in the future ... ASEAN's leadership was vital in building trust with the Government and saving lives.”⁹⁶ 🇲🇲





Post-Nargis Achievements of the Government⁹⁷

Significant achievements included:

- Reconstruction of 10,117 rural houses by the Government, which provide shelter for homeless survivors.
- New model villages were relocated with systemic village plans for villages that were totally wiped out by Cyclone Nargis.
- The rehabilitation of livelihoods could be carried out with leadership from the Government and cooperation from local and international donors.
- For rehabilitation of agriculture, draught cattle, power tillers, fuel, paddy strains, insecticide and fertilisers were provided to farmers.
- Rehabilitation of the fishery sector through the provision of fishing boats, nets and fuel helped fishermen resume their livelihoods.
- Supply of financial resources, water pumps, tarpaulins, tents and fuel by concerned Ministries to salt makers to restore salt production, which was damaged by the Cyclone.
- Established a Youth Training School in Labutta District to provide education and vocational training to orphans.
- Constructing 28 cyclone shelters as preventative arrangements for future disasters. Cyclone shelters with 500- and 300-capacity were designed by Public Works for construction in Ayeyarwady Division.
- Along with the cyclone shelters, 17 hillocks were designed by the Department of Irrigation are being constructed by domestic construction companies in Ngaputaw, Labutta, Bogale, Phyapon, Daydaye and Kungyangon townships.
- Building of new roads, upgrading of summer season roads and embankments of existing roads by concerned Ministries and private construction companies to allow for easy evacuation in case of disaster and improve transportation corridors. A total of 129 bridges have been built by nine Special Bridge Units and two District Units since 23 November 2008. Ten new roads are being constructed under the Ayeyarwady Division Road Network Development Project
- The NDPC developed a Standing Order on National Disaster Management in January 2009 to ensure effective response to future disasters.
- The MoSWRR is conducting capacity building for disaster management practitioners and community awareness programmes as part of a Myanmar Action Plan on Disaster Risk reduction, which was drawn up in line with the Hyogo Framework for Action and the AADMER.



Collective Post-Nargis Achievements of the International Community⁹⁸

- Mixed commodities delivered: 107,000 MT
- Malnourished children supported: 39,375
- Fortified food distributed: More than 2,000 tonnes to 74,000 pregnant and lactating women and children under five
- Children benefitting from the educational humanitarian response: More than 623,000
- Children receiving essential learning material packs/student kits: More than 575,000
- Hospital nutrition units receiving technical and training support: 12
- Community buildings constructed for multiple purposes/cyclone shelters: More than 356
- Ponds dug/rehabilitated: 3,800
- Wells hand dug/rehabilitated: 2,300
- Deep and shallow tube wells constructed/rehabilitated: 802
- Ceramic water filters distributed: 90,000
- Latrines constructed: 67,430
- Women's self-reliance groups established: Approximately 1,282 with an estimated membership of 19,230
- Women-friendly spaces established in Labutta: 7
- People receiving awareness training on women's protection, sexual reproductive health, psycho-social and livelihood issues: 2,084 women and 610 men
- People/households receiving agricultural support: Nearly 1.6 million people from 344,112 households
- Rice seed distributed: More than 10,332 MT
- Pulses seed distributed: More than 1,001 MT
- Boats distributed: 25,029
- Fishing gear distributed: 172,960 units
- Health facilities reconstructed: 24
- Health facilities rehabilitated (furniture and medical equipment provided): 422
- Children receiving primary health care services: 15,813
- Villages receiving expanded Programme on Immunisation Packages: 5,000 in 24 townships



Chapter Eight

Moving Forward

“As we move into a longer-term recovery process, it is time for the Myanmar Government to take full charge over the process.”

— Dr William Sabandar,
Special Envoy of Secretary-General of ASEAN for Post-Nargis Recovery in Myanmar

The AHTF Mandate Ends, but ASEAN’s Work Continues

The mandate for the ASEAN-led mechanism in the response to Cyclone Nargis ended in July 2010. But the recovery process for many Nargis survivors will take many years to come. A number of parties, including the UN, have urged ASEAN to extend the mandate, however ASEAN has confidence in the Government’s capacity to take over. The Government has said it is ready to manage the Cyclone Nargis recovery process. ASEAN is committed to working with the Government to hand over knowledge and skills.

“The ASEAN Foreign Ministers discussed the matter and decided that it was the right time to hand over. The AHTF and TCG had played a critical role in coordinating relief efforts during the relief and recovery phases. Once the emergency period was past, the Myanmar Government should reassume

responsibility and deal directly with international aid agencies. There was enough trust for this to work,” said Mr Yeo.⁹⁹

The handover focused on the MoSWRR and ASEAN will continue to provide support on request from the Government. The transition plan will focus on knowledge transfer and the smooth maintenance of coordination and documentation. “The Myanmar Government is willing to receive knowledge transfer, management skills, the experiences, the documentation and the management assistance and ASEAN will provide this,” says Dr Pitsuwan.¹⁰⁰

As ASEAN hands over coordination to the Government of Myanmar, it is clear that many lessons have been learnt on both sides. The Government has acknowledged that the recovery in the Delta is not over. The PONREPP will continue until 2011 and there are still many needs that must be met in the Delta. Although the Government has taken the lead in the recovery efforts, it has acknowledged that it cannot

A beneficiary of aid waters a betel leaf home garden, part of livelihood project in Seik Gyi village. Photo by AHTF Coordinating Office

*Survivors in Labutta rebuild homes with the support of international donors.
Photo by AHTF Coordinating Office*

do it alone. The Government has emphasised that further funding and support from the international community is vital to the recovery of the Nargis-affected communities.

In the 64th session of the United Nations General Assembly, Prime Minister Thein Sein pointed out that “PONREPP requires US\$691 million over a period of three years. To date, only the international community has committed half of that amount. We have been carrying out many of the rehabilitation activities relying on our own funds and resources. If more funds are forthcoming and donors fulfill their pledges, the rehabilitation process would be speedier and more effective.” The Prime Minister also thanked the international community on behalf of the Government and the Cyclone survivors “for the generous help and assistance extended to them during their hour of need.”¹⁰¹

Furthermore, key figures in the MoSWRR have expressed an eagerness to learn from ASEAN and other players about how best to operationalise a disaster response. Dr Sabandar emphasises, “We will continue to support Myanmar through a normal ASEAN framework. The experience in Myanmar has taught ASEAN how to work in a more operational way with the Government and the people in the region.”

ASEAN has learned considerable lessons from this experience, and there were many “firsts” — from the first ASEAN-ERAT team being dispatched in May 2008, to setting up the AHTF coordinating structure to operationalising relief assistance through the TCG. Working in partnership with the UN has also been a key learning opportunity. The experience has enhanced ASEAN’s institutional knowledge on disaster response and management and will be fed back to AADMER and ASEAN’s response to future regional disasters.

When the ASEAN Foreign Ministers agreed to officially end the operations of the AHTF and TCG in Myanmar at the 43rd ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting from 19-20 July 2010, they recognised the “assistance and cooperation rendered by the Government and people of Myanmar in these efforts” and





noted that the MoSWRR would take over the responsibility of coordinating and utilising the assistance from the international community in the post-Nargis recovery efforts.¹⁰²

The Foreign Ministers expressed their “highest appreciation and gratitude to the UN, Dialogue Partners of ASEAN, donor agencies/countries and the international community for their generous contributions and full support to the ASEAN-led post-Nargis operation in Myanmar.” They also “underlined the importance to institutionalise the experience and knowledge gained and agreed that the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) to be established in Jakarta and the ASEAN Secretariat should be the repository of good practices and lessons learnt.”¹⁰³

As the Nargis recovery transitions into development phase (see accompanying diagram), ASEAN will do its best to ensure development cooperation continues in Myanmar. In addition, ASEAN will feed all the knowledge and lessons back into the implementation of AADMER and other regional development initiatives.

“In our view, ASEAN could make more contribution to the Government in disaster management by the assignment of expertise in disaster management and disaster risk reduction field to provide technical provisions to the Department of Relief and Resettlement,” the Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted in a letter to the AHTF on 9 July 2010.¹⁰⁴

AADMER – The First of its Kind

The Cyclone Nargis experience helped accelerate ASEAN’s capacity to manage disasters by providing an opportunity for ASEAN to challenge its collective response to a major disaster within the region. It marked the first time that AADMER was activated and tested in a real-life post-disaster situation. ASEAN’s leading role in coordinating the post-Nargis effort will provide valuable inputs, lessons learned as well as tool and mechanisms to be further adapting and utilised.

“We have learnt from this tragedy and should be better prepared the next time round. Disaster management has become a major item on the ASEAN agenda,” says Mr Yeo.¹⁰⁵

AADMER is a regional legally-binding agreement that binds ASEAN Member States together to promote regional cooperation and collaboration in reducing disaster losses and intensifying joint emergency response to disasters in the ASEAN region. AADMER is also ASEAN’s affirmation of its commitment to the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA)¹⁰⁶ and so far it is the only HFA-related binding instrument in the world.

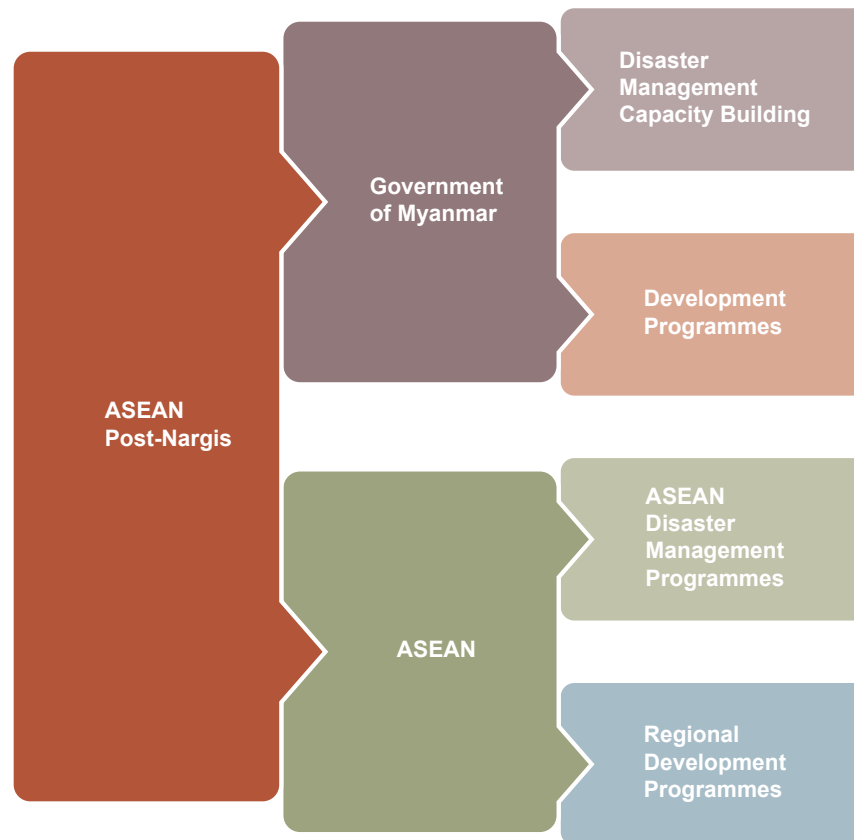
All 10 ASEAN Member States had ratified the AADMER by November 2009 and it came into legal force in December 2009. “This was a significant milestone in ASEAN’s collective efforts to build a disaster-resilient community by the year 2015,” says Dr Pitsuwan.¹⁰⁷

Margareta Wahlström, the UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Disaster Risk Reduction, “congratulates ASEAN and the Governments of Southeast Asia for their foresight and engagement in affirming their commitment to the HFA and for offering partnerships to the UN and other partner organisations to help achieve the objectives of the Agreement.”¹⁰⁸

Mr Jha of the World Bank agrees: “In just two years, ASEAN has showed great potential in helping [Member States] better prepare for and respond to natural disasters, bringing immense benefits to millions of vulnerable people. In the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar, ASEAN quickly enlisted its international partners and effectively coordinated the international humanitarian response under the creative structure of the TCG... The Bank was privileged to contribute to ASEAN’s efforts under the visionary leadership of Dr Pitsuwan to assist the disaster-affected people of Myanmar. It looks forward to further build on this positive experience and expand its partnership with ASEAN and its Member States.”¹⁰⁹

AADMER contains provisions on disaster risk identification, monitoring and early warning, prevention and mitigation,

Transition from Recovery to Normal Development Phase



preparedness and response, rehabilitation, technical cooperation and research, mechanisms for coordination, and simplified customs and immigration procedures. AADMER also provides for the establishment of an AHA Centre to undertake operational coordination of activities under the Agreement.

Dr Pitsuwan reiterates that, "ASEAN has accumulated invaluable lessons learnt from our experience in providing

the coordination mechanism and serving as the humanitarian bridge between the international community and the affected population after the Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar last year. ASEAN will use this experience to ensure that AADMER is meaningful, effective and operational for reducing disaster losses and responding to future large-scale disaster emergencies."





After harvest in Pyamut. Photo by AHTF Coordinating Office

In sum, ASEAN is documenting and institutionalising the good practices from the post-Nargis operations to strengthen the implementation of the AADMER. In this way, the post-Nargis response in Myanmar will directly contribute to the capacity of the region to respond to natural disasters. ASEAN's experience in post-Nargis relief and recovery in Myanmar will also help strengthen responses to future disasters in the region.

Possible Replication of the ASEAN-led Mechanism

It is possible that the ASEAN-led mechanism could work in other situations. For ASEAN to add value to the humanitarian mix, the context would have to be considered carefully.

"I am glad that this ASEAN-led mechanism has worked well and has been successful. It is a good experience that other countries or other communities can share and follow this good example... After July 2010 this AHTF and TCG will be in a sleeping mode as troubles have subsided and we have gone into recovery phase and will be in the good hands of the Myanmar Government to continue all the recovery work, which has been done. But this sleeping mode can be active and awakened again whenever there is a crisis or national disaster, and I strongly believe that this mechanism will definitely work because it has proved successful before, especially with the TCG mechanism," says former Thai Ambassador Bansarn Bunnag.¹¹⁰

The humanitarian efforts of the Myanmar Government with ASEAN and the international humanitarian community are seen as an outstanding example of cooperation worthy of emulation. Of all of the challenges and lesson learnt that deserve special recall, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs mentioned that the formation of the TCG is a good example to adapt in future joint disaster responses in the region with the Government of the disaster-affected country taking the lead role.¹¹¹

As ASEAN moves forward, new synergies are likely to be formed and a greater responsibility taken for disaster management in the region. Cyclone Nargis has provided opportunity for the people of Myanmar to benefit from international assistance, to strengthen its local institutions and to bring development and change in the region. “We need to come to terms with the fact that there will be more natural disasters in our region,” Dr Heyzer says. “Therefore we need to mainstream disaster preparedness into the development strategies of countries in our region, and we need to enhance collaboration at the regional level to provide adequate and timely response to future disasters.”¹¹²

The post-Nargis operation shows that strong collaboration and partnerships between ASEAN, the international community, the Government of Myanmar and the people can foster development. There is a need to continue to make use of and fill the humanitarian space that has been created after Cyclone Nargis to help the people of Myanmar rebuild their lives.

“Based on the impressive performance of the office it established in Yangon to support its leadership position in the post-Cyclone relief and recovery efforts,” ASEAN is well-positioned to continue to act as a bridge between Myanmar and the rest of the world by helping to shore up support for longer-term development, some analysts suggest.¹¹³ In fact, “a strong case can be made for creating a new [TCG] — consisting of the Government, ASEAN and ESCAP—to help the Government manage foreign aid.”¹¹⁴

In the meantime, ASEAN’s relationship with Myanmar has certainly matured as a result of the Cyclone Nargis response. ASEAN has been successful in creating a window, which has opened minds to see that it is possible to deliver aid effectively in Myanmar. In addition this opportunity has demonstrated to the Myanmar authorities that the international community can — and did — help in Myanmar’s greatest hour of need. This is a clear demonstration of a sharing community within the ASEAN Member States and also a new way of working with the international community.

“It is inconceivable to see how the country has changed as a result of the concerted efforts in the post-Nargis relief and recovery. It has not only shown an improvement in the development indicators in the Delta, but a change in the dynamics of development policy of the country. More importantly, it has brought hope towards a stronger Myanmar society,” concludes Dr Sabandar. 🇲🇲

Children on their way to school in the morning in Yathaya. Photo by AHTF Coordinating Office



Notes

- 1 Early on 2 May, the Joint Typhoon Warning Centre estimated the Cyclone reached peak winds of 215 km/hr as it approached the coast of Myanmar, making it a Category 4 Cyclone on the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Scale when it hit landfall according to Joint Typhoon Warning Center (2008), "Cyclone Nargis Warning NR 020."
- 2 World Food Programme, "Cyclone Nargis." Yangon: WFP. 2008, p. 6. The Myanmar Metrological and Hydrology Department began tracking the storm 29 April 2008.
- 3 Chris Kaye, Representative and Country Director for the World Food Programme in Myanmar, personal interview with author and Lisa Nicol Woods, 25 May 2010.
- 4 Union of Myanmar National Disaster Preparedness Central Committee, "Record of Activities during the Emergency Relief, Assistance and Rehabilitation Period in Cyclone Nargis-Affected Areas," p. 9
- 5 Chachavalpongpun, Pavin and Thuzar, Moe, "Myanmar Life After Nargis." Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Publishing. 2009, p. 2.
- 6 Association of Southeast Asian Nations, "A Bridge to Recovery: ASEAN's Response to Cyclone Nargis." Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat. July 2009, p. 5.
- 7 Union of Myanmar National Disaster Preparedness Central Committee, "Record of Activities during the Emergency Relief, Assistance and Rehabilitation Period in Cyclone Nargis-Affected Areas."
- 8 Union of Myanmar National Disaster Preparedness Central Committee, "Record of Activities during the Emergency Relief, Assistance and Rehabilitation Period in Cyclone Nargis-Affected Areas, p. 36.
- 9 Union of Myanmar National Disaster Preparedness Central Committee, "Record of Activities during the Emergency Relief, Assistance and Rehabilitation Period in Cyclone Nargis-Affected Areas.
- 10 World Food Programme, "Cyclone Nargis." Yangon: WFP. 2008, p. 12.
- 11 World Food Programme, "Cyclone Nargis." Yangon: WFP. 2008, p. 12.
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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

AADMER	ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response	SASOP	Standard Operating Procedure for Regional Standby Arrangements and Coordination of Joint Disaster Relief and Emergency Response Operations
ACDM	ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management		
ADB	Asian Development Bank		
AHA Centre	ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management	SIM	Social Impacts Monitoring
AHTF	ASEAN Humanitarian Task Force for the Victims of Cyclone Nargis	TA	Travel Authorities
AOC	Assessment Oversight Committee	TCC	Township Coordination Committee
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations	TCG	Tripartite Core Group
BRR	Bureau for Recovery and Reconstruction Agency	UN	United Nations
DALA	Damage and Loss Assessment	UNDAC	United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination
DFID	Department for International Development	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction	UNESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
ERAT	Emergency Rapid Assessment Team	UNHC	United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator
GFDRR	Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery	UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
HFA	Hyogo Framework for Action	UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
MoSWRR	Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement	UNRC	United Nations Resident Coordinator
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding	UNRC/HC	United Nations Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator
MT	Metric Tonne	US	United States
NDPCC	National Disaster Preparedness Central Committee	VTA	Village Tract Assessment
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation	WFP	World Food Programme
ODA	Official Development Assistance	WHO	World Health Organisation
PONAC	Post-Nargis and Regional Partnership Conference		
PONJA	Post-Nargis Joint Assessment		
PONREPP	Post-Nargis Recovery and Preparedness Plan		
PR	Periodic Review		
RCC	Recovery Coordination Centre		
RF	Recovery Forum		
RH	Recovery Hub		
RHO	Recovery Hub Office		
RIAS	Recovery Information and Accountability System		

Government refers to the Government of the Union of Myanmar



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