
A year after Nargis, Burma's future still clouded

In the year since nature unleashed yet more devastation on the Irrawady Delta, evaluation reports about the survivors' conditions and the effectiveness of the relief efforts and government cooperation seem to vary widely, perhaps reflecting differing starting points and mind-sets.

Some stress the continuing plight of the populations, others the improving working conditions for international and local NGOs, while some continue to focus on the military-led government's general disregard for the population and human rights.

The EU Council of Ministers April 27 seemed to routinely extend its long-standing economic and political sanctions on the regime. But Derek Tonkin, who analyses the situation and policies affecting Burma/Myanmar on a regular basis from his base in Guildford, seemed to detect a change in the tone of the accompanying EU declaration regarding the sanctions, less hectoring, in his view than in the past, and continuing to hold out prospects for normalisation, without "benchmarks," or traditional pre-conditions.

He and others suggest that some policy review may be forthcoming in Europe, just as the Obama Administration in Washington indicated some reflection on the effectiveness of sanctions and general isolation.

The EU and some individual member states and other countries have also maintained the Three-Disease Fund there, which was established after Western political pressure forced the Global AIDS Fund to abandon its activities in the country.

And, at the EU-Japan summit meeting in Prague May 4, "Summit leaders expressed their hope that the Government of Myanmar tackles the country's severe political, structural and economic problems and fosters a peaceful transition to a legitimate, democratic and civilian government without delay. They pointed out that elections planned for 2010 could be welcomed by the international community if they were based on an inclusive dialogue among all the stakeholders in Myanmar."

In the meantime, others have raised warnings regarding a possible consequence of the storm and desperate conditions in Burma/Myanmar, that manifests itself in the outflow of refugees, migrants, illegal workers and the inevitable abuse by human traffickers in nearby countries. While recent months put the spotlight on the dramatic situation of the Rohingyas in Bangladesh and even their deadly expulsions at sea, Charles Santiago, a member of the Malaysian Parliament and others have more recently called attention to the equally-lethal human trafficking in Thailand and Malaysia of Burmese migrants, who are sold into virtual slavery or prostitution in the region.