

Kelman, I. 2008. "Burma and China Disaster Diplomacy". Disaster and Social Crisis Research Network Electronic Newsletter, no. 34 (April-June), pp. 2-3.

Full text:

On 3 May 2008, Cyclone Nargis roared through Burma (Myanmar), killing at least 78,000 people, leaving over 56,000 missing, and affecting half the country's population. With decades of collective international experience in trying to stop such tragedies, what went wrong here?

Research by international scholars such as Ben Wisner, Tony Oliver-Smith, Ken Hewitt, James Lewis, and Michael Glantz provide the answer to that question, an answer which is being expanded through research into disasters striking politically volatile situations: disaster diplomacy (see <http://www.disasterdiplomacy.org>). The answer is straightforward – politics placing a low value on tackling disasters – but that does not mean that the answer is simple, because political influences led to the cyclone disaster before and after the storm.

Before the storm, coastal mangroves were ruined by people trying to eke out basic livelihoods. Research has shown that coastal ecosystems reduce storm surge and tsunami damage for some events. As well, the people's livelihood needs were exacerbated by an oppressive, isolationist regime that failed to implement top-down, or to support bottom-up, long-term environmental management and disaster risk reduction processes. That governance attitude ignores the research and practice showing how vulnerability is accrued as a long-term process which undermines abilities to deal with new stressors, such as climate change, or sudden events, such as cyclones.

That is long-term. In the short-term, 48 hours of warning prior to the cyclone were not heeded. Then, after the extent of the calamity became evident, the military junta was slow in mobilising domestic assistance and deliberately delayed international relief. Disaster diplomacy work from previous case studies explains that, where governments are reticent to seek peace, not even a disaster will necessarily budge them.

In fact, plans for the referendum on Burma's new constitution scheduled for 10 May proceeded except in the worst-hit areas, defying international pressure to focus on disaster response. The referendum results, of course, displayed overwhelming support for the government's proposed constitution.

Would those results have been different if the wider population had been fully aware of their government's lethal limitations? China provides a comparison.

Days after the cyclone, on 12 May, an earthquake struck China, collapsing schools for a death toll topping 40,000. Within hours, Chinese leaders were visiting the devastation and facilitating international relief efforts. The difference from Burma is from long-term trends, in that China has been increasingly open to the outside world, in part to help flex its economic muscle – but it is also from short-term trends, to show the world a positive spin for the Olympics especially given the controversies exposed by the torch relay.

Yet this disaster, too, happened over the long-term. Schools and buildings collapse in seconds, but require months to build. Years are needed to construct a vulnerable building stock. And now the population's anger is emerging against shoddy development, construction corruption,

and the loss of youth in a one-child-per-family society. Which has led China to increase media restrictions, reversing their earlier openness.

Could this social upheaval emulate some previous instances, such as the 1972 Managua and the 1985 Mexico City shakings which some researchers have attributed to being the beginning of the end for the oppressive Nicaraguan and Mexican governments respectively? In a country as large as China, such upheaval is unlikely. But less dramatic political changes should be carefully watched for – as they should be considered for Burma.

The cyclone happened in hours and the earthquake happened in minutes, but the cyclone disaster and the earthquake disaster happened over decades. Previous examples illustrate that the political implications in both cases could fizzle away – or they could also be felt for a long time to come.

Further Reading:

Disaster Lexicon <http://www.ilankelman.org/miscellany/DisasterLexicon.rtf>

Natural Disasters Do Not Exist (Natural Hazards Do Not Exist Either)  
<http://www.ilankelman.org/miscellany/NaturalDisasters.rtf>

Overcoming Disaster Through P<sup>3</sup>: Principles, Policies, Practices  
<http://www.ilankelman.org/fpp.pdf>