

United Nations Flash Appeal Launch - Tropical Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar

**Statement by John Holmes,
Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs
and Emergency Relief Coordinator**

9 May 2008

Excellencies,

We have all assembled today because we are deeply concerned about the humanitarian situation in Myanmar. After the devastating effects of Cyclone Nargis, which struck the country on 2 May, we must help the Government help the people in need as rapidly as possible. The Flash Appeal that we are launching today offers a coordinated preliminary plan by the humanitarian community to complement and supplement the relief efforts of the Myanmar government in providing assistance to the survivors. Let me say right away that I had contemplated postponing this launch given news about extra difficulties facing UN aid shipments and access for humanitarian staff not already in the country. But I decided that the priority has to remain to do all we can to get through to the people in such desperate need on the ground. I will come back to some of the difficulties we face in a moment.

Nargis is the worst cyclone to hit Asia since 1991, when 138,000 people died in Bangladesh. The government estimates that more than 22,000 people have died and more than 41,000 persons remain missing. Other estimates are much higher and raise fears about the level of devastation and human suffering in the country. Based on assessments of 18 agencies and their assessments in 55 townships, we estimate currently that the number of the severely affected population lies between 1.2 and 1.9 million. The number of deaths has been climbing daily and could be anywhere between 63,000 and 100,000 or possibly even higher than that. The vast majority of the deaths have occurred in the low-lying delta region, where category 4 winds and 3 ½ meter storm surge destroyed 90-95% of the buildings in 7 townships. As many as 10,000 deaths have been reported in the city of Bogalay alone, and most of the city's 190,000 residents are thought to be homeless. The cyclone raged through the five divisions of Yangon, Irrawaddy, Bago, Mon and Kayin, which are all told home to nearly half of the country's 53 million people. We estimate that about 5,000 sq km (1,930 sq miles) of land remain underwater in the Irrawaddy delta. One week after the cyclone, uncertainty about the exact scale of the catastrophe continues. This Flash Appeal is based on the best assessments we can make at this moment, from those teams which have been able to visit and report back, but there is still a lot more work to be done on assessing the needs, which is why the appeal will be revised in the weeks to come.

As in all disasters, the government of the affected country is in the lead in response in it. The Myanmar Government is providing assistance to the population. It has pledged approximately US\$ 5 million for relief provision. The Myanmar Red Cross has been distributing emergency relief supplies to beneficiaries in Yangon and Ayeyarwady Divisions through its network of volunteers, and the Myanmar military has made helicopters available to relay aid

from Yangon to remote areas such in Patheingyi. I hope they will step up those efforts further, given the clear massive need. But it is usual for countries struck by major disasters to ask for help from the rest of the world. The Myanmar government said at an early stage that it would welcome outside help. We have therefore been in constant dialogue with authorities at all levels to offer our assistance. Certainly the sheer magnitude of the devastation is such that international assistance is indispensable for ensuring a rapid and coherent response.

The UN organizations and humanitarian partners present in Myanmar therefore immediately started relief efforts based on their capacities on the ground. Available stocks of food, shelter and health supplies are being provided to affected populations and more stocks are coming into the country via air, sea and land. However, relief has been slow due to initial physical obstacles, including the break down of communications systems and infrastructure, and more recently the slow progress in getting essential relief goods and humanitarian workers into the country. Whatever these initial obstacles, the immense challenge of getting the aid onwards to the people in such desperate need in the delta area cannot be overstated, whatever the issues about cooperation I have referred to. I believe we are going to need a combination of military and civilian assets to achieve this in any significant way.

Humanitarian aid so far has included food, water, water purification, plastic sheeting, tarpaulins, mosquito nets, first aid and health kits, plastic sheeting and oral rehydration salts. It is estimated that around 276,000 individuals were reached in some way by 7 May, and that total should have risen since then. UNICEF Myanmar field staff have begun delivering preliminary emergency supplies to the Irrawaddy delta and have, for example, provided essential drugs, first-aid kits and oral rehydration tablets to treat diarrhoeal dehydration. WFP has been able to distribute food assistance in Yangon, in cooperation with MSF Holland. UNHCR provided plastic sheeting and tents for some 10,000 people and purchased US\$ 50,000 of urgently needed basic supplies in the capital Yangon for distribution – including emergency tarpaulins, plastic sheeting and canned food. Another dispatch of relief items from the UN's Brindisi warehouse is planned for Saturday, 10 May. The plane will carry 25 metric tonnes, with materials, including tents, plastic sheeting, kitchen sets, blankets and water purification items. These goods should be distributed through UN agencies and NGOs. Four WFP chartered planes have already reached Myanmar, and unloaded, though the loads of two of them are currently in a government controlled warehouse while discussion about their distribution continues. UNHCR are planning to bring in significant supplies of shelter material by air using WFP-chartered planes, and by road, in the next couple of days. A planeload of UNICEF medical supplies arrived in Yangon earlier today, and another planeload is expected tomorrow. It is vital that any problems about these airlifts are resolved quickly since there is no time to lose.

On the humanitarian personnel front, the first two members of the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) team were admitted to Myanmar yesterday, but two others were turned back after reaching the country, which was extremely disappointing. Although the Government has said overnight that it is not ready to accept foreign aid workers, a very few visas have in fact been granted. In any case, I strongly urge the Government to reconsider its attitude, in view of the urgency of the situation, and to do all they possibly can to speed up aid and relieve the suffering of its people. Faster progress on this issue is crucial for the effectiveness of the response.

Excellencies,

The international response so far is encouraging. Governments and relief agencies around the world have already promised more than \$38 million worth of aid and technical support. For example, Thailand, India, China, Israel, Indonesia, Bangladesh, South Korea, Japan, and Italy among others, are reported to be sending relief items on a bilateral basis. Others like Singapore, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and ECHO have pledged funds to be made available for relief operations. The substantial engagement and solidarity of Myanmar's neighbouring countries – most of which have themselves had painful experiences with similar natural disasters – are particularly important for the success of aid operation.

To ensure as coordinated and prioritised a response as possible, based on preliminary needs assessments, we are proposing today a common humanitarian Flash Appeal of USD\$187 million. This is to help international partners (10 UN organizations and 9 NGOs) support the Government of Myanmar in addressing the needs of a minimum of 1,500,000 persons for at least three months. As I have said, the appeal will be regularly updated to reflect new needs as the situation evolves, and a revision is foreseen after some weeks, as access to affected areas improves, administrative difficulties for bringing relief supplies and expertise into the country get resolved, and more information is available on in-country capacity to implement relief programmes.

The Appeal covers 12 sectors, with the largest proportion of the funding foreseen for food, water/sanitation, logistics, health and shelter. WFP is seeking \$56 million for the provision of daily food rations to 630,000 persons in severely affected areas or temporary shelters. The distribution is foreseen for the next six months until the next harvest is due in October/November. Partners in the Water and Sanitation Cluster will assist more than 1 million affected persons with the provision of a minimum vital supply of safe water and the prevention of water-borne diseases, to a total requested amount of almost \$9 million. Substantial resources of almost \$50 million have also been foreseen for the logistics cluster to ensure adequate support and coordination of all humanitarian assistance through the provision of transport, management hubs and storage facilities as well as infrastructure rehabilitation. The health cluster will play a crucial role for the surveillance, prevention, and treatment of major health threats related to the cyclone such as diarrhea, pneumonia, malaria and other critical diseases. The Appeal requests \$16 million for this sector. Emergency shelter assistance will be provided to approximately 140,000 households that have been affected by the cyclone and the flooding that followed. This includes the provision of tents and plastic tarpaulins as well as sanitary equipment for displaced and destitute people. Just over \$20 million are needed here. Other key sectors include agriculture, with \$10 million in projects, and education, with \$7.5 million.

Initially I indicated that the minimum of \$10 million will be made available from the CERF to kick start UN agencies' operations. Considering the magnitude of the needs that we know now and the current Flash Appeal, we are discussing with the Country Team rapid allocations of at least \$15 million, and anticipate this amount may need to go up to \$20 million.

Excellencies,

I would like to conclude in reiterating that the extent of the humanitarian catastrophe is enormous and that the numbers of people in need may well increase further as we come to

understand better the situation on the ground. And I repeat that the sooner humanitarian aid is allowed in, and the less procedural and other obstacles we encounter, the more lives we can help save. The speed with which we deliver assistance to those in need is becoming more and more critical and the danger of the outbreak of epidemics rises by the hour. If we do not act now, and if we do not act fast, more lives will be lost. We are working hard to step up our own response. But we also count on strong support from the international community to alleviate the suffering of millions of people whose lives have been shattered.

Thank you.