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Hardship and Human Rights Violations Continue Among Burma Cyclone Survivors

The survivors of Cyclone Nargis, which struck Burma (also known as Myanmar) in May 2008, continue to face challenges in rebuilding their lives, in lack of access to relief and reconstruction efforts, and in violations of basic rights more than one year after the storm, according to a study by researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and Emergency Assistance Team -- Burma.

The study is published May 7 in the journal *Conflict and Health*. Accounts from survivors and relief workers show that necessities such as food, potable water, shelter and medicine remained insufficient for many a year after the disaster. According to the researchers, a lack of support to help rebuild livelihoods and worsening household debt have precluded survivors from accessing healthcare services, which were inadequate before Cyclone Nargis.

"Accounts of survivors and independent relief workers one year after the cyclone make clear that the basic needs remain unmet for many survivors -- a situation made worse by Burma's military rulers who continued to hamper the recovery effort and to limit access by independent relief workers," said study co-author Chris Beyrer, MD, Professor and Director of the Center for Public Health and Human Rights at the Bloomberg School.

For the study, a network of community-based organizations, known as the Emergency Assistance Team-Burma, worked on the ground to conduct an assessment of the human rights conditions in Burma immediately following Cyclone Nargis. In response to the cyclone -- a storm that killed an estimated 138,000 people and affected 2.4 million people -- the team was formed within days after the storm's landfall. The assessment found that community aid efforts faced government restrictions and harassment, including the threat of arrest of independent relief workers. Storm survivors reported land confiscation, misappropriation of reconstruction materials and governmental restrictions on communication and information, all of which continued in 2009.

Similar reports have been released by human rights organizations, most notably the Human Rights Watch report

"I Want to Help My Own People," which indicated that denial of basic rights, lack of clean water, sanitation, health resources and unjustified restrictions of aid continue. The same report noted that a positive outcome of the storm was the expansion of community-based initiatives, such as the Emergency Assistance Team-Burma, in response to local natural disasters and other humanitarian crises.

"The team's ability to quickly provide appropriate relief services and conduct these assessments reaffirms the key role of community-based organizations in responding to disasters, particularly in challenging settings such as Burma, where official restrictions on humanitarian assistance are extensive," said Beyrer.

He added, "Community organizations like Emergency Assistance Team-Burma are well positioned, given their knowledge of the area and trust by the community, to independently assess human rights conditions in response to complex humanitarian emergencies such as Cyclone Nargis. Efforts of this nature must be encouraged, particularly in settings where human rights abuses have been documented and censorship is widespread."

Authors of "Community-Based Assessment of Human Rights in a Complex Humanitarian Emergency: The Emergency Assistance Teams-Burma and Cyclone Nargis" include Voravit Suwanvanichkij, Noriyuki Murakami, Catherine Lee, Jen Leigh, Andrea L. Wirtz, Brock Daniels, and Chris Beyrer of the Johns Hopkins Center for Public Health and Human Rights, and Mahn Mahn and Dr. Cynthia Maung of Emergency Assistance Team-Burma.

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