

ALTSEAN BURMA

ALTERNATIVE ASEAN NETWORK ON BURMA
campaigns, advocacy & capacity-building for human rights & democracy

TSUNAMI IMPACT ON BURMA – Update as of 4 January 2005

The tsunami has highlighted the reality that Burma is a failed state that has been slow to recognise the seriousness of the situation. The military authorities have denied the severity of the effects of the tsunami and associated earthquakes. Besides being slow to act to support its own citizens, the regime has also hindered aid agencies and concerned people from providing direct assistance.

The impacts on Burmese have not just been felt in the country, but also amongst thousands of migrant workers and asylum-seekers in Thailand. However, the Burmese authorities has not moved to provide support to their citizens overseas, neither has it been committed to helping account for foreigners who may have been present in coastal areas affected by the tsunami.

Reports of casualties in Burma have ranged from 56 to up to 300 people dead, and many more displaced. The problem of establishing reasonable estimates has been worsened by the regime's refusal to allow aid workers free access to areas that may have been affected.

The tsunami is not the only natural disaster threatening Burma. Earthquakes and aftershocks continue to affect 6 states and divisions, ranging as far as Shan state in the north. The international community remains concerned about the immediate and mid-term impacts on survivors, especially since the civilian public health system has been impoverished by military-focused expenditure. Unfortunately, international concern and solidarity with the people of Burma has been blocked by the national authorities' lack of political will to help civilians.

While the people of Burma have been fortunate to escape the devastation that was witnessed in southern Thailand, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and India, the regime's irresponsible approach will intensify the damage felt by the civilians of Burma.

Humanitarian Assistance Rejected

On 30 December the junta's ministries of health and social welfare officially refused offers of international relief assistance, saying they "believe there is no need for an emergency operation. They can cope with the present situation." The government made the announcement during a meeting attended by representatives of 15 organizations, including UN Agencies, ICRC, Myanmar Red Cross Society and MSF-Holland.¹

Meanwhile preliminary surveys by international agencies in some affected areas indicate significant destruction, with possible outbreak of disease.

The regime turned down initial offers by the World Food Program to assess damage and assist victims, but it apparently since backtracked. WFP and UNICEF were been allowed to survey Irrawaddy Division, and found that around 10,000 people were in immediate need of food and clean water. About 29 people were killed and 2,800 displaced in Irrawaddy Division alone.²

Inside Burma: The Generals Fear Collapse of Regime

On Tuesday 28 December the junta buried information about the tsunami's impact under a lengthy press conference dedicated to vilifying the Burmese pro-democracy movement in exile.³

Burma's press coverage of the tsunami is also indicative of the regime's desire to bury the event and its impact on the local population. On the day following the disaster the New Light of Myanmar reported only the "messages of sympathy" sent by the generals to the neighboring countries, while giving no report on local impact. It took two full days for the regime to officially report a minimal 36 deaths, 45 injured, 14 missing, and 788 homeless displaced, and 17 coastal villages destroyed.⁴ On 1 January the regime updated these figures to 59 dead, 43 injured, and 3,205 people made homeless.⁵

Apart from the tsunami waves, several earthquakes and aftershocks hit six States and Divisions in Burma in the past week. It is traditionally believed that earthquakes are omens of a government change in Burma. Hotels partly owned by the junta leader Sr Gen Than Shwe were reportedly damaged in Bassein, Irrawaddy Division. A pagoda in Bassein also collapsed, another bad omen.⁶

Did the Waves Hit Burma?

With a 2,276-km coastline along the Andaman Sea directly exposed to the tsunami waves, it is widely expected that the impact on Burma's coastal population has been severe. A simulation produced by the National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology (Japan) shows the tsunami waves hitting the coast of Arakan State, and Irrawaddy and Tenasserim Divisions.⁷ According to a geophysicist from University of California at Santa Cruz Southern Burma "should have been hit equally" as hard as neighboring Thailand.⁸

The impact of several earthquakes that hit Burma in the week following the 26 December tsunami remains unclear. Strong tremors were felt in Rangoon on 26 and 29 December, and a minutes earthquake also hit Bassein, Irrawaddy Division, on 30 December. Buildings in Tenasserim, Rangoon, Pegu, Irrawaddy, Arakan and the southern Shan state were destroyed, stated a junta spokesperson.⁹

A volcano erupted off the coast of Arakan State, Western Burma, immediately prior to the 26 December earthquake and tsunami wave that hit Burma. The volcano is situated on Chaduba, a.k.a. Manaung Island Narinjara reports at least 12 deaths in Arakan State from the tsunami waves.¹⁰

The Dead, the Injured, the Missing, so far

As of 1 January the regime has officially reported 59 dead, 43 injured, and 3,205 people made homeless.¹¹ However reports by NGOs already indicate far greater damage and casualties. According to the Myanmar Red Cross Society a total of 96 people have been reported dead so far, half of which in Irrawaddy Division.¹² One diplomat in Rangoon estimates that there could be thousands of casualties from the tsunami waves.¹³

It is extremely likely that the tsunami, at various intensities, reached coastal regions that have been promoted as new tourist destinations. What is unclear is whether foreign tourists were in those areas and whether they are accounted for. The junta's newspaper reported that beach resorts of Ngwehsaung and Chaungtha (Irrawaddy Division) "thronged with vacationers", with no traces of the tsunami to be found. SPDC officials also toured the area and "provided assistance for development of hotel and tourism industry".¹⁴

The South African News Agency reported the disappearance of two South African backpackers and some Christian charity workers been incommunicado for a week.¹⁵ The

junta made no comments on the disappearance of the two South African nationals, nor has it released the number or identity of foreigners killed or missing as a result of the tsunami.¹⁶ DVB reported that the majority of foreign nationals killed by the tsunami could be from China.¹⁷

	Arakan State	Irrawaddy Division	Tenasserim Division	Total dead, injured, and missing
The junta's official report	No detailed report has been produced by the military regime so far.			59 dead, 43 injured, and 3,205 people made homeless. ¹⁸
Unofficial reports by NGOs	- 12 dead (Myanmar Red Cross) ¹⁹	- 29 dead, 2,800 displaced.(UNICEF, WFP) ²⁰ -47 dead (Myanmar Red Cross) ²¹	- 200 dead (island off Lambi Island) ²² - 50 dead Palao Ton Ton Island.(Sunday Telegraph) ²³ - 27 dead (Myanmar Red Cross) ²⁴	Approximately 370 deaths reported so far.

The Tenasserim Division & Mergui Archipelago: A Campaign of Denial

Of particular concern is the Mergui Archipelago in the Tenasserim Division (a.k.a Tanintharyi Division). Tenasserim Division is home to a population of 1.3 million people, according to the regime's published estimates. The division is a thin strip of coastland about 700km long, and 95 km at its widest. It is located just north of Thailand's Ranong province where hundreds of people were killed and 200km north of Phang Nga province, where thousands fell victim to the tsunami. The Tenasserim coast and the Mergui Archipelago were likely hit by the tsunami before the Irrawaddy Division.²⁵

The military junta is attempting to seal the coast of Tenasserim Division against foreign scrutiny. Troops have been deployed on the outskirts of Kawthaung to prevent foreigners to access the coastal areas, and the Burmese Navy has also stepped up its patrols.²⁶

Doctors Without Borders, ICRC and UN Agencies are still attempting to survey the region. "I think it's very reasonable to assume that there's been quite significant death and destruction caused by the tsunami in Burma, just as it has elsewhere," said Tony Banbury, the World Food Program's regional director in Asia.²⁷ Rangoon-based NGOs have admitted that communication problems made it difficult to get an accurate picture of the situation. Transport inefficiencies also make it hard for them to reach the affected areas. It is not clear moreover how much cooperation they will receive from the junta as a clearer picture of the situation emerges in the coming days.²⁸ Aid workers who had access to a section of the Mergui Archipelago already reported over 200 people dead on a small island near Lambi Island.²⁹

Foreign journalists have also started making their way inside Burma to assess the destruction. One fisherman confided to a journalist of the Sunday Telegraph (UK) that he witnessed 50 people killed when a bridge collapsed on Palao Ton Ton island off the Tenasserim Division coast.³⁰

Another journalist from The Guardian (UK) reported that a lot of villagers in Southern Burma were able to escape the deadly waves, but were in immediate need of food, water, and cooking utensils. "Nobody, including our government, has given us any support, but economically we've lost a lot," confided a villager to the journalist.³¹

The regime has a number of reasons why it wants to detract attention from its coastline and islands.

Military Interests

Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) reported that military radar installations in the Mergui Archipelago and Heingyi Island could have been destroyed.³² An illegal Thai gambling casino operating the regime's consent on an island in Southern Burma – using the telephone country code of Thailand – was also reportedly damaged by the 26 December destruction.³³ The presence of the Yadana and Yetagun pipelines in Tenasserim Division – associated with numerous human rights abuses, may also prompt the regime to restrict access to humanitarian organizations.

The junta has also denied any impact of the tsunami on the Coco Islands, south of Irrawaddy Division. DVB reported that army radar installations on Coco Islands had been partly destroyed by the tsunami, with Asian Tribune adding that Chinese Military Officers were among victims.³⁴ Interestingly, junta-operated newspaper Myanmar Alin specifically denied any severe impact on Coco Islands, and claimed most of the damage occurred in Irrawaddy Division, Central Burma.³⁵

Fear for Burmese Migrant Workers in Thailand

There is fear that the deaths of Burmese migrant workers in Thailand may go unaccounted because of their lack of legal status. The lack of documents makes them hard to identify as Burmese, reported the Irrawaddy.³⁶ Thousands of Burmese migrants work in the fishing, construction and rubber plantation industries along the Andaman coast. Radio Free Asia reported that some of the bodies of Burmese victims were flown to Ranong by the Thai military because they were illegal immigrants.³⁷

The National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) nevertheless thanked the Thai Government for extending help to Burmese migrant workers. Around 800 Burmese nationals were found dead and 1500 are still missing following the tsunami, according to a Thai official and NGO workers in Southern Thailand.³⁸ NCGUB also condemned Burma's military regime for failing to show offer help to their nationals in Thailand.

NGO World Vision nevertheless raised concerns about the neglect of Burmese migrants by the relief efforts. "There has been no publicity at all about Burmese workers. They have been totally forgotten," said a representative of World Vision.³⁹

According to Surapong Kongchanthuek, deputy chairman of the Law Society of Thailand's committee on human rights for stateless and displaced people, there were 127,714 Burmese migrants in the five Thai provinces hit by the tsunami, but only 22,504, or less than 18%, were registered with the Thai Labour Ministry.⁴⁰

World Vision reportedly found 500 Burmese migrants who took refuge inland and who were in pressing need of health care and sanitation. Apparently over 600 Burmese migrants have contacted immigration officials and asked to be sent home.⁴¹ The Burmese embassy in Bangkok has not set up an information center for its nationals who were victims of the tsunami.⁴²

Around 200 Burmese workers and families have gone missing in Ban Bin beach (Ranong Province) alone. This beach has a population of around 8,000 Burmese migrants working in restaurants and construction sites. Reports warned of discrimination in the distribution of aid in the area due to the lack of legal status of most Burmese migrants. The Thai police has also reportedly attempted to crackdown on the Burmese migrants with accusations of looting.

Approximately 300 Burmese were also killed and over 2,000 are still missing on Phuket Island. The Burmese people made homeless by the disaster are still lacking adequate aid, because local authorities distribute supplies only to registered Thai citizens. The local police is also arresting anyone without I.D. on suspicion of looting, and some Burmese migrants have reportedly already been deported back to Burma.

The Human Rights Education Institute of Burma pleaded for immediate supplies of food, water, clothing and medicine for around 2,000 Burmese migrants in Ranong Province and 3,000 others in Phuket Island.⁴³

A History of Denial

A Burma's military regime has a history of suppressing information on natural disasters affecting the country.

The generals waited ten days to report publicly the 19 May 2004 cyclone in Arakan State – the worst in Western Burma in over 40 years. According to the Red Cross the storm killed at least 220 people and left 14,000 others homeless, but it took two weeks for the regime to plea for international assistance to cope with the humanitarian disaster.⁴⁴ Even when aid was forthcoming, the regime maintained its standard procedure of insisting that military commanders took possession of aid supplies and denying opportunities for donors to monitor distribution.

In July 2004 the junta arrested a filmmaker who produced a documentary on the floods affecting Kachin State, Northern Burma. The regime did not report any deaths nor damage from the floods, but local NGOs affirmed that over 50 people were killed 5,000 homes damaged as a report of the overflow of the Irrawaddy river.⁴⁵

This irresponsible behavior poses a serious threat to the health of local populations, and hampers international relief assistance. Burma's military regime must be held accountable for its lack of attention to its population.

The junta annually spends a dismal 5.7% of its budget on public health, and 45% on military expenditures.

¹ Irrawaddy (31 Dec 04) Burma Regime Rejects Offers of Disaster Aid

² Washington Post (2 Jan 05) Experts Fear Burma Was Battered

³ New Light of Myanmar (29 Dec 04) Press conference on bomb blast, unlicensed vehicles and damages caused by strong earthquake

⁴ New Light of Myanmar (29 Dec 04) Press conference on bomb blast, unlicensed vehicles and damages caused by strong earthquake; AP (28 Dec 04) Burma's Tidal Wave Death Toll 90 and Rising

⁵ New Light of Myanmar (1 Jan 04) Loss of lives, property in recent earthquakes

⁶ Asian Tribune (30 Dec 04) No News is Bad News in Burma

⁷ Scientific Background on the Indian Ocean Earthquake and Tsunami; available online: iri.columbia.edu/~lareef/tsunami/

⁸ Washington Post (2 Jan 05) Experts Fear Burma Was Battered

⁹ Radio Free Asia (27 Dec 04) Burma Counts Cost of Quake Disaster

¹⁰ Narinjara (2 Jan 05) A small volcano erupts in Arakan

¹¹ New Light of Myanmar (1 Jan 04) Loss of lives, property in recent earthquakes

¹² Irrawaddy (30 Dec 04) Paucity of Information on Tsunami in Burma

¹³ Sunday Telegraph (2 Jan 05) Our government in Burma is lying when it says just a few people were killed

¹⁴ New Light of Myanmar (31 Dec 04) Loss of lives, property in recent earthquakes

¹⁵ Sunday Telegraph (2 Jan 05) Our government in Burma is lying when it says just a few people were killed

¹⁶ DVB (1 Jan 05) Many Chinese fear dead in Burma by the tsunamis

¹⁷ DVB (1 Jan 05) Many Chinese fear dead in Burma by the tsunamis

¹⁸ New Light of Myanmar (1 Jan 04) Loss of lives, property in recent earthquakes

¹⁹ Irrawaddy (30 Dec 04) Paucity of Information on Tsunami in Burma

²⁰ Washington Post (2 Jan 05) Experts Fear Burma Was Battered

²¹ Irrawaddy (30 Dec 04) Paucity of Information on Tsunami in Burma

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- ²² Forum-Asia (3 Jan) Confidential Interviews
- ²³ Sunday Telegraph (2 Jan 05) Our government in Burma is lying when it says just a few people were killed
- ²⁴ Irrawaddy (30 Dec 04) Paucity of Information on Tsunami in Burma
- ²⁵ Tourism Myanmar (1 Apr 04) Mergui Archipelago available online:
www.tourismmyanmar.com/mergui.htm
- ²⁶ Sunday Telegraph (2 Jan 05) Our government in Burma is lying when it says just a few people were killed
- ²⁷ Washington Post (2 Jan 05) Experts Fear Burma Was Battered
- ²⁸ DVB (28 Dec 04) Help being sent to quake and tsunami victims in Burma
- ²⁹ Forum-Asia (3 Jan) Confidential Interviews
- ³⁰ Sunday Telegraph (2 Jan 05) Our government in Burma is lying when it says just a few people were killed
- ³¹ The Guardian (3 Jan 05) 'We need just a little, not much'
- ³² DVB (30 Dec 04) Burma's Coco Islands destroyed by the tsunami
- ³³ Asian Tribune (30 Dec 04) No News is Bad News in Burma
- ³⁴ DVB (30 Dec 04) Burma's Coco Islands destroyed by the tsunami
- ³⁵ New Light of Myanmar (31 Dec 04) Loss of lives, property in recent earthquakes; Irrawaddy (31 Dec 04) Burma Regime Rejects Offers of Disaster Aid
- ³⁶ Irrawaddy (2 Jan 04) In the Tsunami's Wake: Burmese Workers Feared Dead
- ³⁷ Radio Free Asia (27 Dec 04) Burma Counts Cost of Quake Disaster
- ³⁸ NCGUB (2 Jan 05) Press Release: Tsunami Victims Need Urgent Help; Burmese Communities Urged To Render Assistance; DVB (30 Dec 04) Missing and dead Burmese in Thailand
- ³⁹ AP (3 Jan 05) Thousands of Myanmar migrants are the forgotten tsunami victims
- ⁴⁰ Bangkok Post (30 Dec 04) 800 Burmese workers 'killed in catastrophe'
- ⁴¹ AP (3 Jan 05) Thousands of Myanmar migrants are the forgotten tsunami victims
- ⁴² DVB (30 Dec 04) Missing and dead Burmese in Thailand
- ⁴³ Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (3 Jan 05) Preliminary report
- ⁴⁴ AFP (9 Jun 04) Myanmar PM tours region devastated by cyclone
- ⁴⁵ Irrawaddy (30 Jul 04) Flood Documentary Maker Arrested