

American Missionary Says Death Toll in Myanmar Worse Than Reported

Disaster-relief expert Joe Hurston was one of the first Americans allowed entry to the repressed nation devastated by Cyclone Nargis.



[] A shrewd missionary pilot who recently returned from a humanitarian mission to Myanmar says the death toll from the nation's catastrophic cyclone last month far exceeds international media reports.

"We will never know how many people died, but the death toll is likely more than 1 million people," Joe Hurston, founder of Titusville, Air Mobile Ministries, told *Charisma*.

He bases his information on eyewitness accounts he received during his weeklong operation to the ravaged nation and also on his assertion that a census has not been taken in Myanmar for decades.

"[The government] has no idea how many people are down there," he said, referring to southern Myanmar's Irrawaddy Delta. "For them to say the death toll is 133,000—I absolutely don't believe it, not for a second."

Many peasants and rice farmers on the Indian Ocean-fed Irrawaddy Delta who survived the storm are now receiving clean drinking water, an essential necessity following any natural disaster, thanks to Hurston.

The missionary adventurer's specialty is transporting water-purification units into international disaster areas and then training native professionals how to operate them.

The units, called Vortex Voyagers, turn polluted water into drinking water using ultraviolet rays and various filters. Each unit provides drinking water to more than 40 people per hour.

Hurston bases his ministry on the words of Jesus in Matthew 25:35: "I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink."

Media outlets in the central Florida area have long recognized Hurston as the consummate Good Samaritan, since the Titusville businessman seems compelled to take action whenever and wherever disaster strikes.

He has led more than 2,000 relief missions around the world since 1978, burrowing into disaster areas such as the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, the Pakistani earthquake of 2005 and various volcanic catastrophes in Indonesia.

"I've been running after these disasters for 30 years now," he said. "I knew we had a tsunami-type of disaster when I heard about Myanmar."

Possibly Myanmar's worst cyclone in recorded history, Cyclone Nargis formed in the Bay of Bengal in late April. After tracking northwest toward India and Bangladesh for a couple days the storm intensified and boomeranged eastward toward Myanmar (formerly Burma). It made landfall May 2.

Because a restrictive military junta rules the country, international aid over the last month filtered in slowly—sometimes not at all.

U.S. military commanders were forced earlier this week to turn back Naval vessels off the coast of Myanmar after their many requests to assist with relief efforts went ignored.

And though the U.S. has provided Myanmar with millions of dollars in aid since early May, Hurston was one of the first Americans granted a visa to travel to Yangon, the nation's largest city and former capital.

Hurston said he and his small team flew into Yangon aboard a commercial airliner on May 13, along with roughly 25 Vortex Voyagers stored in suitcases.

"Myanmar is not known for its openness and is a fairly closed society," Hurston said. "I don't want to be trite in this statement, but God made a way where there seemed to be no way."

He said all the units went through customs without any delays, and he was amazed by the positive attitudes and "exceptional organization" of the Christian leaders and medical professionals on the ground in Myanmar. "They were all brilliant," he said. "Against almost impossible odds, it went so smooth. It was a mission from God."

The devastation and suffering left in the wake of the storm is "unimaginable," he said. "Survivors said the water that came through was heavy and full of sand. So the storm had no resistance. There were no structures [nor] mountains to stop it at all."

Nearly 20-foot walls of water driven by 120 mph winds decimated towns with populations as high as 100,000, leaving the landscape strewn with corpses, Hurston said.

And because most of the Irrawaddy Delta is at or below sea level, he said the carnage is much worse than many fear. "If you look at a map of Myanmar about a third of the bottom of the country is below sea level."

During the week that his team was in Myanmar, Hurston said checkpoints and barricades blocked their travels on 10 separate occasions.

They also worked closely with three other groups—Terry Law Ministries, Feed the Hungry and In His Image Ministries. Terry Law sponsored 21 of Hurston's Vortex Voyagers; the other two groups sponsored four and three units respectively.

Hurston is planning to return to Myanmar this month with more water-purifying units. He said because of the extraordinary attitudes of the suffering people of Yangon, he's looking forward to returning to help.

"I've done a lot of missionary work over the years, but these guys were amazing," he said. "They were so sharp. I can't tell you the sweetness that these guys worked together with." **—Paul Steven Ghiringhelli**