

Christians Denied Aid During Natural Disaster

Many villagers in Burma are still afloat in boats ferrying vital supplies for survival amid floodwaters, while others are returning to homes and fields sealed in mud.

The recent flooding has caused damage across a wider area than 2008's Cyclone Nargis, which killed more than 140,000 people and is regarded as the worst natural disaster in Burma's recorded history.

"Despite Cyclone Nargis being the worse disaster ever in the nation, it was a localized event in that it only affected the Irrawaddy Delta," said David, the native director of a ministry based in Burma. His surname is withheld for security reasons. "There is a different face to this flood in that it is spread out almost across the entire western half of the nation. It covers three of the four regions known as the 'rice bowl' of Myanmar."

Unlike Nargis, the flood from rains beginning in July has been gradual, giving residents time to escape, he said. At least 103 people have died.

"There are surprisingly (few) casualties, but huge damage to farmland and animals and properties," he said.

More monsoon rains are expected, and landslides continue to cut transportation routes and crush homes. Familiar with the submerged terrain and its inhabitants, indigenous missionaries sharing in their pain are in prime position to help.

"Many of the worst-affected regions are where we have worked for the past nine years," David said. "I know the region well, and several of the churches planted are in those areas. In one of our sister congregations, we have 28 families who lost

their home either in part or whole.”

Heavy monsoon downpours began swelling rivers and creeks in Burma on July 16. A storm system in the Indian Ocean on July 30 was upgraded to a cyclone—a hurricane in the northern Indian Ocean—and dubbed Komen. Cyclone Komen tore into Burma the first week of August. Some 1.2 million acres of rice fields were destroyed as flooding hit all but two of Burma’s 14 states and reportedly destroyed at least 17,000 homes. So far flooding has “critically affected” more than 1 million people, according to the United Nations, which in 2008 said Cyclone Nargis had “severely affected” 1.5 million people.

International aid is trickling in, with local organizations doing most of the distribution. Indigenous ministries Christian Aid Mission assists are bringing food, clothing and purified water to people stranded in Rakhine, Chin and other states, said the native director of one group, George (surname withheld for security reasons).

“They got a little help from churches and other organizations, but that aid is very small for them because their need is so big,” he said. “Pray also for rebuilding of their families, houses and for their children’s education as well.”

As farmers have lost rice paddies, livestock, homes and family members, the needs are overwhelming, he said.

“Every day, there is need to give out rice and other food for 822 people affected by the flood at Kanan village, Tamu township, Sagaing Region,” he said. “Likewise, in other villages there are a lot of people who are still helpless. In areas of Kalay there are a lot of things to do; also Rakhine state, Matupi township in Chin state and other places really need help.”

A non-stop downpour struck Kanan village from July 26 to Aug. 1, causing the Kanan River to overflow and destroy 313 houses. George said floodwaters carried away 103 of those houses and

left another 210 ruined in the mud.

“During those days and nights,” one of the victims told George, “we were very busy struggling to carry and move our properties and belongings, and some of them were crying, afraid—they could not say anything.”

Among the indigenous missionaries in Burma eager to provide flood relief to their predominantly Buddhist countrymen are some who have lost their own property.

“Our missionaries also have problems from the flood in their areas, along with their people,” George said. “They often call us by telephone for help.”

Besides providing food and clothes, the ministry plans to help families rebuild their homes. Flooding destroyed all houses in Laibung village—40 houses from rising waters, with another six going down in landslides, he said. The deluge also destroyed a church building. Residents fled to Chin state near Tedim, George said, where they are in dire need.

“We are doing what we can do to help the victims,” he said. “We also want to help people in Hakha, Chin state, who are still suffering from a big earthquake [three weeks prior]. Many houses collapsed, and many people need to move to other places. They need food, water, clothes and blankets.”

David said his group visited victims in the Magway area on the banks of the flooded Irrawaddy River in central Burma, where his ministry has planted churches and drilled more than 300 wells. With the aid of a local house church, the ministry was able to buy bags of rice and other supplies and deliver them without problem, he said. In addition, a nurse from its ministry center in Yangon accompanied the ministry team and treated about 150 people with medicines that were locally donated or purchased.

Declaring Chin state and three other areas disaster zones, the

government has appealed for international aid.

There were reports of Christians being denied aid, David said, when local hard-line Buddhist leaders took charge of aid donations from large cities. A ministry worker identified as Naw said that every time he went to a donations center to gather relief items, village leaders told him they had run out.

“But then I soon found out people who came after me were walking home with large bags full of relief items,” Naw said. “I thought I was alone until I shared this at the prayer meeting, and almost all of us had a similar experience. We saw why we were often turned away with empty hands or half our share. We also know our local leader is against us worshipping Jesus. He has been trying to give us trouble, so this does not come as a surprise to us.”

The Christian ministries, by contrast, see an opportunity to serve their Buddhist countrymen with aid and the saving message of Christ. David said the disaster is allowing relationship bridges to be built in the 80-percent Buddhist country.

“In one village, I was able to meet with the villagers and discuss how we could come alongside them in their fight for survival,” David said. “This was a Buddhist village, with no single Christian in their midst.”

George asked for help to meet both physical and spiritual needs.

“Please pray with us to be able to help them know the true God and the gospel through our good deeds, and to show them the love of God as well,” he said. “As Jesus said, ‘You are the light of the world.’ Yes, we have to show the light from Jesus to the victims.”