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Burma: Access to Information Must Be Enabled to Ensure Effective Relief in Aftermath of Cyclone

The cyclone that hit Burma has resulted in the estimated death of at least 100,000 people. Many more have seen their homes and livelihoods destroyed. The response of the Burmese junta has been at best incompetent, at worse negligent and criminal.

- The Burmese authorities have failed to issue effective early warning to the population even though the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre is reported to have warned the Burmese government about the impending storm several days in advance.
- Visas for relief agencies workers are being distributed on a piecemeal basis.
- Ongoing negotiations to open the border to full disaster relief are delaying the distribution of much needed relief.

“How many people will die as a result of these delays? How many people will suffer, having lost everything and everybody, because of the Burmese authorities’ failure to ensure the free flow of information to and from those most in need?” asked Dr. Agnes Callamard, Executive Director of ARTICLE 19

The longstanding failure of the Burmese authorities to protect and respect the right of its people to freedom of expression and access to information had resulted in last September’s Saffron Revolution wherein according to the Democratic Voice of Burma, 138 were killed and several thousand were arrested and detained for participating in the protests. Many more have since been prevented from imparting or receiving information.

This has now resulted, overnight, in tens of thousands of deaths.

“Censorship and the absence of credible and accurate information takes many forms in Burma from the banning of newspapers and radio and TV programmes, to the imprisonment of journalists. Legitimate cries for help are suppressed and actors are denied the information that could enable them to help those in need. This is a most pervasive and insidious abuse, which has now resulted in a tragedy of enormous proportion” said Dr. Agnes Callamard, Executive Director of ARTICLE 19.

The rights to information and expression are fundamental human rights. They underpin all human rights and are central to human development. In the context of a large-scale natural disaster, fulfilling these rights takes on particular importance: Appropriately targeted information cannot only ensure that assistance is effective and locally relevant, but it can also save lives and preserve human dignity.

Access to information is of particular importance in the aftermath of a disaster to:

- Mitigate the loss of life;
- Reduce panic;
- Direct people on how and where to get essential services;
- Facilitate contact with relatives and friends;
- Assist in the discovery of the missing and dead;

- Provide an outlet for grief and counseling;
- Provide watchdog oversight over assistance activities and help guard against corruption; and
- Ensure two-way communication between assistance providers and the affected communities.

Recommendations:

ARTICLE 19 calls on the Burmese authorities to respect and fulfill the free flow of information and put an immediate end to the current delays in delivering assistance. A strong information regime must be implemented immediately. In particular:

- Survivors must have access to the information they need to make the most of relief and reconstruction efforts.
- Relief agencies must be given free access to devastated areas so as to conduct much needed assessment and deliver appropriate and relevant assistance.
- Relief agencies must be able to gather all required information and data freely, and have access to the people and information they require in order to put in place effective targeted and required assistance.
- International and local media must be given free access to the country and devastated areas. They must be allowed to report globally on the scale and impact of the disaster, and act as the necessary watchdog of the effective delivery of assistance.
- Authorities involved in relief, reconstruction or rehabilitation should make all possible efforts to ensure that survivors have access to key information including information on the provision of food, water, shelter, and medical and other services.
- Effective measures to trace those missing, to identify the dead and to inform relatives should be put in place.
- No undue restrictions on freedom of expression should be imposed.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- For further information, please contact Catrina Pickering, Advocacy and Communications Officer, catrina@article19.org, +44 20 7278 9292
- In February 2005, ARTICLE 19 published a report on humanitarian disasters and information rights available at: <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/publications/freedom-of-information-humanitarian-disasters.pdf>. The report illustrates the importance of information in disaster relief operations, in some cases based on binding legal standards. It sets out the legal, ethical and policy basis and arguments for the protection and fulfillment of freedom of expression and access to information in disaster situations, from the pre-disaster phase or early warning, to the reconstruction efforts.
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.