

STATEMENT BY THE ARCHBISHOP OF MYANMAR ON CYCLONE NARGIS

Sisters and brothers in Christ,

Today, Saturday 17 May 2008, is Day #14 after Cyclone Nargis first struck Myanmar. Its winds, which reached up to a maximum of 190km/h, first hit the low-lying Delta region (Ayeyawardy Division) of south-western Myanmar adjoining the Bay of Bengal on Friday 2 May 2008 and then ploughed through the hinterland during the course of Saturday 3 May 2008 in a north-easterly direction until it reached Yangon (Yangon Division), and then turned north-north-easterly, dissipating as it reached the Myanmar-Thailand border.

At the time of writing, the official death toll from Cyclone Nargis stands at 78,000, with over 56,000 people still missing. Approximately 1 million people are reported by the Myanmar Government to be homeless. In Yangon, even after 14 days, many parts remain without electricity supply. Those who are able have resorted to generators; those who cannot have to rely on candlelight in the night. While most major roads have been cleared, debris and detritus have yet to be completely removed. The work is tedious and labour-intensive. Without electricity supply, piped water supply has been disrupted. Telecommunications have also yet to be fully restored.

In response, the Church of the Province of Myanmar formed a relief committee on Wednesday 7 April 2008 and immediately sent out 4 teams to survey the affected areas. 3 of these teams returned, reporting general damage but little loss of life. The full extent of the damage in the Delta region, however, is still emerging. The team that was sent to what appears to be the worst affected area has confirmed widespread damage and extensive loss of life. In some places, entire villages have been devastated, with few if any survivors. In other places, survivors have huddled together in makeshift shelters awaiting aid. Travel in that area is very difficult, and villages are often in very isolated and remote areas, accessible only by boat. We have already sent a medical team to some parts of the most affected area, meeting both medical needs and distributing relief supplies. We plan to send a second one in the next few days.

The overall situation is still relatively fluid, with government policy shifting in response to new developments. It continues to be inadvisable for our overseas friends to travel to the most affected area. We continue to receive reports and accounts, and these will contribute to our assessment of the scale of the human tragedy and how best to meet the immediate needs of survivors made homeless, injured and/or otherwise affected in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis. We are also assessing the extent of damage to church buildings and property both in the Delta region and in and around Yangon.

We appreciate the support shown by our sisters and brothers within the Anglican Communion thus far. A small fact-finding team from the Anglican Diocese of West Malaysia has spent the last 6 days with us. They have brought an initial instalment of medicines and medical supplies, blankets, candles, clothing, food and other sundry items, as well as some financial assistance. Their advice and encouragement has been invaluable. Emergency funds have also been received from the Province of the Anglican Church in South East Asia through the Diocese of Singapore, from the Australian Anglican Board of Mission, and from the Myanmar Anglican fellowship in Singapore.

Once more comprehensive reports have been received, the Relief Committee will identify what specific assistance is needed and the items which may be provided to the Church of the Province of Myanmar. Immediately we have already identified the need to cleanse whatever water supply is available. As it is now the rainy season, canvas sheets are important. Also, there is a need for trauma counsellors to work with the survivors of this tragedy. We hope you will work with us on plans and options for medium-term resettlement and rehabilitation efforts, even as we address the short-term concerns for survivors.

An inter-denominational memorial service was held at Holy Trinity Cathedral, Yangon on Wednesday 14 May 2008 for the victims of Cyclone Nargis. This was organised by the Myanmar Council of Churches. The Minister for Religious Affairs attended. We covet your prayers and seek whatever financial support you can give for the suffering people of the delta region of Myanmar. For practical reasons, we would appreciate it if you would kindly direct your donations through the Anglican Diocese of Singapore (www.anglican.org.sg), which will in turn forward them to our Provincial Office.

May the peace of God be and remain with us always.

(Signed)

The Most Revd Stephen Than Myint Oo
Archbishop of the Church of the Province of Myanmar