

## REPORT OF VISIT TO MYANMAR 12-17 MAY 2008

### Introduction

In response to the news of Cyclone Nargis hitting Myanmar, both the Diocese of West Malaysia and the Province of the Anglican Church in South East Asia investigated the possibility of providing assistance to the (Anglican) Church of the Province of Myanmar. At the Diocese of West Malaysia it was agreed that, if conditions permitted, we would send 2-3 people to Myanmar, to meet up with the Primate, Archbishop Stephen Than Myint Oo, and to see what assistance could be provided.

In the end we, Revd. Canon Fred David, and Andrew Khoo, were able to obtain “tourist” visas to enter Myanmar. We arrived in Myanmar on Monday 12 May 2008 and returned to Kuala Lumpur on Saturday 17 May 2008. We carried with us an initial instalment of medicines (paracetamol, anti-diarrhoea, medicated eye-drops), medical paraphernalia (rubber gloves, face masks, antiseptic, plaster, bandages, cotton swabs, alcohol wipes), clothes, blankets, food (rice and noodles), toiletries, candles and funds. We managed to obtain additional baggage allowance. We cleared Myanmar customs without any inspection.

### Preliminary briefing by Archbishop Stephen

Archbishop Stephen informed us that in response to the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, the Province established a Relief Committee on 7 May 2008, comprising 21 people. This Relief Committee in turn had formed 3 teams, namely a medical team, a health-care team and a relief team.

8 people were despatched to the affected areas to survey the situation. 1 person was sent to East and West Pantanaw Townships, 3 throughout the Yangon area, 2 to Pathein and Myaungmya, and 2 to Kyun Chaung.

### Situational Report

In the Pantanaw area, Archbishop Stephen stated that there was widespread damage in terms of lost livestock, damaged paddy fields, banana trees and buildings. There was no reported loss of life.

There were no reported deaths among the areas surveyed in the Yangon area, although there was general damage. We ourselves, in travelling in and around Yangon, saw many instances of uprooted trees, buildings with their roofs blown off, buildings with windows blown out, advertising billboards crumpled, electricity poles bent in two, satellite dishes damaged, and buildings and structures damaged by fallen trees. In our visit to the local theological training college, the Principal Revd. Dr. Simon Be Bin Htu showed us the damage to the roof of the library, which had caused leaking and had damaged books, computers and furniture.

In Pathein, there were no deaths reported. In nearby towns, e.g. Myaungmya, there was some physical damage.

Kyun Chaung appeared to be the hardest hit. Even before the team that went to Kyun Chaung returned, several people had come from the Kyun Chaung area and reported extreme devastation. There were stories of entire villages having been swept away, with a very high

death rate. In one area which had a cluster of 4 villages, 3 villages were totally destroyed. In the 4<sup>th</sup> village, only 3 houses stood standing. Many villages have disappeared, so much so that they cannot be found, so it is difficult to know how many have died.

In Dani Boke, further down the Delta area (2 hours by boat) from Kyun Chaung, a church worker was apparently one of 3 survivors overall in a cluster of villages with about 600 people. He said that the storm started at 9.00pm. As it accelerated, all the villagers gathered in a big house. He however realised the situation and left on his own. As the tide rose he hung on to a palm tree. He spoke of a series of waves, up to 20ft in height, lashing the entire village. Eventually he fainted and floated away. When he awoke he found himself in a big tree full of thorns. When the water subsided, he saw that only the church foundation remained. He walked and swam for 3 days without food until he found a small rescue team. The Archbishop himself said that there was news that of 70 members living in another village near Dani Boke, only 19 had survived. Many were his relatives from his father's side.

In the village of Kyait Lar, near (east of) Kyun Chaung, only 4 houses were left out of 45. It was not clear how many people had died.

In the township of Bogalae, further away (east) from Kyun Chaung, where the government had stated that approximately 20,000 people had perished, Archbishop Stephen indicated that the figure they were hearing was closer to 50,000. This is not inconsistent with reports from the ICRC stating that they were estimating up to 128,000 deaths at a time when the government was only quoting a figure of 78,000 plus. 56,000 plus people are now still listed as missing. The government has indicated that 1 million people are homeless. United Nations' estimates are much higher. They say that up to 2 million people may need aid.

Since the government had sent aid to Bogalae, it was decided that a medical team be sent to investigate further the areas around Kyun Chaung. The team was subsequently sent on Tuesday 13 May 2008 to Kyun Chaung and other nearby villages. They tried to make their way by boat to Dani Boke but had to turn back because looters had entered the village and were pillaging the remains. In any event Dani Boke was deserted. Survivors were gathering in Kyun Chaung. They were found huddled together in what makeshift shelter they could construct. This was also true of 2 other very small villages which the team came across in their boat journey to the area.

### Relief Camps

On Monday 12 May 2008 the heads of the various religious bodies were called for a meeting with the Minister for Religious Affairs. Archbishop Stephen attended. According to him, the Minister stated that the situation was worse than the Government had expected. As a result, all religious bodies were given permission to enter the affected areas and establish relief camps in their chosen places, with the condition that any relief camps established would have to cater to the needs of all affected in the area, not just members of the particular religion.

The Province has devised a plan to establish an operations centre in Kyone Ma Ngay sub-township, approximately 7 hours by road (west) from Yangon. It will then set up a relief camp in Kyun Chaung (2 hours by boat from Kyone Ma Ngay).

The camp will initially cater to 200 households, and a total of approximately 1,000 people. Each family unit will be provided with:-

- canvas sheeting (20' x 20')
- hammer, pliers, nails, machete
- nylon rope
- cooking pots
- plates and cups
- storage drums (for water collection)
- mosquito nets
- sulphur powder (anti-snake prevention).

The temporary shelter will be erected on raised bamboo platforms. These will need to be built using whatever wood was locally available.

The on-going material needs which have been identified are as follows:-

- cooking salt
- cooking oil
- rice (30 kg per month per household)
- clean water (through use of water purification tablets and then filtration)
- candles.

This will be “packaged” for one month’s supply for each household. The camp will be supplied until such time when the survivors are self-sustaining.

A roving medical team will be sent to address their medical needs. The team will require:-

- oral rehydration salts
- chlorine (to cleanse water supply, especially contamination due to decomposing bodies)
- medicated eye-drops (for water-borne infections)
- antiseptic (e.g. dettol)
- assortment of medicines (to be identified; some to be sourced from outside Myanmar if necessary)
- sundry minor surgical equipment.

In addition, the roving medical teams will be accompanied by trauma/grief counsellors to help people cope with the tragedy. We will send a small team of counsellors to Yangon who would then train Myanmar nationals to undertake counselling.

Foreign media is also reporting trauma among children due to Cyclone Nargis. Where children are concerned, funding will be needed to rebuild schools which have been destroyed. Funding will also be needed for textbooks and uniforms once the school term begins at the end of May/early June.

### Next stages

In addition to matters already mentioned, we also raised with Archbishop Stephen ideas for planning for the next stages, namely rehabilitation and resettlement. This would entail identifying and pricing standard agricultural implements, which could then be distributed as

separate packages to each household. There is also a need to rehabilitate by way of re-starting agricultural activity, fishing and livestock farming.

While the issue of agriculture was raised and recognised, discussion on this was postponed to a later time. However this aspect would involve assisting displaced persons with income-generating agricultural activities. We were informed that most of the affected people were farmers, focusing on betel leaves. There was some coconut planting, and some animal husbandry, and also some fishing. All of these have been destroyed. Quick-yielding cash-crops may be necessary as an interim measure. Some external expert advice on agriculture may be required. Exact details have yet to be discussed.

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