



The Looming Health Crisis in Burma

The delay in treatment is costing hundreds if not thousands of lives daily

By Kathryn Halley, Partners Medical Team Member

On May 2nd 2008 a Category One cyclone pounded the South West region of Burma. Torrential rain, gale force winds in excess of 190km/hr and water surges have caused grave devastation. Unfortunately this region was home to 6.6 million people in the Irrawaddy Delta and a further 6 million in the city of Yangon. Already the majority of these people lived below the poverty line in village huts and earning their living as fisherman, rice growers and subsistence farmers.

The **human toll** from the initial impact is still not confirmed. Burmese official's report 22,000 dead and 40,000 missing however international agencies expect a loss of at least 100,000 people. Correspondents with Partners based in Burma indicate that the correct number is likely to be significantly higher. This is a human tragedy of mammoth proportions.

The loss of each of these lives is incredibly tragic and yet for survivors the real battle has only just begun as international relief has been severely hampered and the looming health crisis imminent.

As each survivor deals with their unspeakable grief, their battle for existence now rages. Reliable reports indicate that the Burmese military have closed off local and foreigner access into this delta region resulting in a cesspool of **death, disease, starvation, homelessness and destroyed livelihoods**. Water supplies initially contaminated by salt water, are now agents of disease as bodies, destroyed homes, trees and garbage remain rotting where they were strewn. Already Partners has reliable information that outbreaks of cholera have begun. **Cholera** is a life threatening water-borne disease resulting in excessive, frequent diarrhea. Without medical attention people die a gruelling death of severe dehydration and organ failure. Cholera is highly contagious and usually humanitarian relief would isolate these people to prevent the needless loss of many more lives.

Many of the survivors have **traumatic wounds and injuries** sustained during the storm. With limited access to clean water, wound care and antibiotics these wounds fester in the tropical heat and humidity placing people at significant risk of bacterial wound infection, boils and secondary bone infections.

There are currently post cyclone tropical thunderstorms pouring a deluge in the Delta and Yangon region. With 1.5 million people reported homeless due to the initial cyclone there is great need for shelter. Flooding and damp living conditions are the perfect environment for **fungal infections and mosquito borne diseases** such as Malaria and Dengue Fever. Already there are reports of malaria and with no access to anti-malarials many people are suffering needlessly and risk imminent death, particularly children and those with other health conditions.

Measles, a disease virtually unheard of in Western nations, thrives in this post cyclone environment. Measles is extremely contagious and has a high mortality rate. One case of measles in any group of people is considered by health workers to be an epidemic and yet, with access to immunization offered by relief agencies the disease progress is halted. Otherwise many hundreds of thousand lives, particularly children's, are in grave danger.

Please join with us and pray that doors to this disaster stricken region are opened so that medical aid and assistance can be delivered. **Already the delay in treatment is costing hundreds if not thousands of lives daily and each of these people's lives is incredibly valuable and priceless. Partners has joined with an extensive network of people who already live in Burma.** The delivery of aid/medicines/food has begun but we need your support so that the stream will become a river of life.¹