

## Burmese clerics tell of relief struggle in cyclone aftermath

By Ed Beavan



Desperate survivors: children wait at food-distribution centre in Irrawaddy Delta HTEIN WIN/TEARFUND

THE Archbishop of Burma and a Burmese priest who is visiting the UK have described the devastation wrought by Cyclone Nargis in their country. One aid worker called the scene he found there a “nuclear landscape”.

In a statement issued on Monday, the Archbishop of Myanmar, the Most Revd Stephen Than Myint Oo, said that the official number of deaths was 78,000, and more than 56,000 were counted as missing. Aid agencies estimate that deaths are nearer to 128,000, and the UN says that 2.4 million people are in grave need of aid.

The Archbishop said that the Church had formed a relief committee and had sent four teams to the affected areas. “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. The overall situation is still relatively fluid, with government policy shifting in response to new developments.”

The Archbishop thanked brothers and sisters in the Anglican Communion for their support, particularly a team from the diocese of West Malaysia who had brought medical supplies.

At a memorial service in Holy Trinity Cathedral, Rangoon, on Wednesday of last week, Christians of different denominations had come together to remember the victims of the cyclone. “We covet your prayers and seek whatever financial support you can give for the suffering people of the delta region of Myanmar,” the Archbishop said.

The Burmese priest, the Revd Saw Maung Doe, who was formerly Principal of Holy Cross Theological College, Rangoon, where he lives, arrived in the UK on Wednesday last week.

In Oxford for a doctoral viva at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, he said that he was in email contact with his wife, who confirmed that there was still no electricity or running water at home. Without enough cutting machinery, workers were struggling to clear fallen trees that had flattened power lines.

Mr Doe said: “A lot of people don’t have clean water, and the water in Rangoon is polluted. Many historic trees at our university have been blown down. The roof has been blown off the library, and many of the books have been destroyed.

“Christian organisations are struggling to get to the affected people on the Irrawaddy Delta, as they have to give aid to the government to distribute, but they only have six helicopters.

“Many churches have had their buildings damaged, with roofs being blown off St George’s Church in Rangoon, and my church, St Andrew’s, in North Dagon.

“Aid agencies are focusing on getting food, shelter, and clothes to the affected people, but in the long term there will need to be more fund-raising for building repairs.”

Tearfund is funding two of its partners in the worst-affected areas, helping 55,000 people. Sudarshan Sathianathan, head of Tearfund’s Asia region, said that the situation remained desperate.

“The relief effort alone will take months, and to rebuild lives and communities here seems a daunting development challenge. Teams are reaching the homeless with shelter materials and clothing. Food is feeding the hungry and our partner medical teams are treating many of the sick and injured. But much more aid is needed for a crisis like this — on a tsunami scale.”

This week the Disasters Emergency Committee said that aid was now reaching more than 900,000 people, a 50 per cent increase on the previous week, as relief teams pressed further into the Irrawaddy Delta.

Dr Sean Keogh, an aid worker from Merlin, was on a boat to the Laputta region, carrying emergency supplies for 140,000 people. He said: “When I arrived, it was like a nuclear landscape: everything had been destroyed. Thousands of people are still in desperate need of food, water, and shelter.”