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Aid trickles into Burma, but toll 'could reach 1 million if disease set in'

AFP in Rangoon

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Relief deliveries into cyclone-hit Burma increased today but aid groups said supplies fell far short of the enormous need and that foreign experts were still barred from the country.

A cargo plane chartered by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) carrying 35 tonnes of aid was one of the latest to arrive.

The ICRC said the medical supplies on board were sufficient to treat some 250 trauma patients and provide three months of basic health care for 10,000 people. The plane was also carrying sanitation equipment, including a mobile water-treatment plant to provide drinking water for 10,000 people, it said.

But other aid groups warned of a growing catastrophe. "It's really crucial that people get access to clean water sources and sanitation to avoid unnecessary deaths and suffering," Sarah Ireland, Oxfam regional chief, said.

She said the death toll from the May 3 cyclone could go up to 100,000, a figure also suggested by other aid groups.

"There are all the factors for a public health catastrophe which could multiply that death toll by up to 15 times," she said.

Cyclone Nargis, which smashed into the rice-growing Irrawaddy Delta region in the country's south on May 3, left 60,000 people dead or missing, according to an official toll.

The junta, deeply suspicious of the outside world, has refused to let in foreign experts who specialise in getting aid to disaster victims, and said that only the government would be allowed to distribute emergency supplies.

"Some opening-up on the part of the (Myanmar) authorities is allowing us to get these materials to their destination," said Stephan Goetghebuer, director of operations of medical charity Medecins Sans Frontieres.

"But it's no more than a drip-feed, really, given a serious response is more than required. We still need more back-up aid and personnel ready to leave," he added.

"Clearly our priority is to ensure victims of this terrible disaster access to clean drinking water, shelter, food and health care," said Pierre-Andre Conod, head of the ICRC's delegation in Myanmar.

"It's not true that nothing is happening at all, but not enough is happening," said Frank Smithuis, Myanmar country manager for MSF.

The medical charity said that a cargo plane carrying 35 tonnes of shelters, water-treatment equipment, first-



Chinese aid is unloaded by Burmese troops, but relief agencies say supplies are a fraction of what is needed

aid supplies and food was en route from France.

A second plane, an Airbus A300 combining aid from MSF and the French Red Cross, was also due to depart, but remained grounded due to flyover restrictions applied by unnamed countries.

A second joint load was also scheduled to depart on Monday and MSF said a flight would leave Belgium on Sunday after having obtained landing authorisation from Yangon.

MSF said it was working overtime to have shipments ready as and when they receive green lights, with another plane also on standby in Jakarta for the coming days.

The international community has spoken out in increasingly concerned tones over Yangon's apparent sluggishness or suspicion when it comes to taking up offers of overseas and even non-governmental aid.

Both President Nicolas Sarkozy of France and the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, spoke on Saturday of their dismay at Myanmar's stance, with each having pressed the United Nations Security Council to intervene.

The UN has itself said that a week after Cyclone Nargis hit, only one-quarter of the victims have received any help at all, and it has called the relief effort "a race against time."

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