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## Un-natural Disasters\*

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The Myanmar cyclone of early May, 2008, began as a purely natural disaster, but the military regime quickly added political action, or inaction, to the storm's devastating footprint. Moving much too slowly to accept aid from the outside world, the junta has piled up scores of preventable deaths through starvation, diarrhea, and diseases like cholera and malaria, which are waiting to take their toll.

The most reprehensible elements of a natural disaster are not natural, but human. Two other recent disasters also made that clear. The Indian Ocean earthquake/tsunami and Hurricane Katrina were severely aggravated by technical, societal and political failures. The acting up of nature is bad enough, but unscrupulous human action, or inaction, is worse. Social and political factors always play a crucial role. They can easily, and decisively, worsen the destruction initially caused by nature.

The human fault in the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami of December 2004 was first of all technical: The affected countries had failed to install a tsunami watch, warning, and information system. The removal of sand dunes, coral reefs, and coastal mangrove trees around the Indian Ocean played a supporting role. The event now ranks among the ten deadliest natural disasters. However, the up to 100 feet-high waves of this "natural disaster" could kill a quarter million people only because of human negligence. It was of no help that the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center in Hawaii, an American scientific agency, detected and reported the massive underwater quake. The missing regional warning system was the fault that counted.

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina taught us another lesson about human faults and warning systems. The benefits of accurate forecasting and plentiful lead time were squandered when the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) held up hundreds of volunteer firefighters in Atlanta for days and thousands of bottles of water on trailer trucks near Camp Beauregard; when the Louisiana National Guard managed to get its barracks flooded and communications equipment and vehicles disabled; and when the local government of New Orleans passed up the chance to

evacuate people with the trains Amtrak was pulling out, or to use local school buses.

Katrina, the costliest natural disaster in U.S. history by tens of billions, exposed not only the technical failures of flood walls and levees, but also that a country's wealth does not automatically translate into an optimal disaster protection for all. The third world is not only abroad but also nearby; poverty and inequality are at home in first world nations, too; and lack of leadership and humane concern is not restricted to developing countries.

The aftermath of Cyclone Nargis is establishing a new benchmark for how far an antidemocratic elite in possession of a state will go to keep a hold on power. How many thousands of preventable deaths will its indifference to the suffering of the Burmese people cause?

There are global lessons about Earth's natural disasters that must be learned.

First, we must leave the old concept of "natural" disasters behind; it is no longer applicable and deadens the much-needed sense of global responsibility and capability. No doubt, ice ages, moving continents, growing or shrinking oceans, earthquakes, storms, floods, and meteors have punctuated earth's history. Nature has displaced and wiped out millions of lives without remorse. For most of human history, humans had no choice but to suffer earth's blind violence as fate. Yet the power of humankind to domesticate earth's nature has grown enormously in the last century. Natural disaster mitigation and prevention have now become possible and are therefore not a luxury, but a global obligation.

Second, we must rejuvenate the ancient idea that "history is the teacher of life" (*historia magistra vitae*). Historical ignorance worsens the natural challenges that earth is throwing at us. As the human race has become responsible for the well-being of life on earth including plants and animals, it must complement its power over nature with a pragmatic history that teaches not only the facts but also the lessons of the past. Useful lessons about successful and unsuccessful interactions between humans and nature can be gleaned from environmental history. It transcends the traditional perspective of the history of nations and explores border-crossing processes like air pollution or the nexus between deforestation of local rain forests and worldwide climatic consequences.

In the last few years, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has led efforts to install an Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning System and further plans for a global warning system. This is a good step. But purely technical fixes are always incomplete. Complete disaster management must include sound social, economic, and political elements.

The May 12, 2008, earthquake in China's Sichuan Province illustrates this clearly (not least because China is more open to the world than is Myanmar). A trembling Earth revealed once more that social ills aggravate natural havoc. China's one-child-per-family-only policy, which in many cases leaves no siblings behind when disaster strikes, and official corruption, which permits and incites rampant low-quality building

construction, meant that the Sichuan tremor was able to crush more schools than necessary, kill more children than necessary, and utterly destroy more families than necessary.

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