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A year ago, Cyclone Nargis wrecked Burma. About one hundred forty thousand people are thought to have died, with another 2.2 million people displaced or otherwise affected. The storm destroyed homes, killed livestock, salted rice paddies, sank fishing boats and shredded what little respect anyone had left for Burmas ruling military junta.

Indeed, to the horror of people around the world, the so-called State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) rejected most outside assistance. Denunciations and even threats of military intervention filled the air. Today Burma is healing, though deep scars from the storm remain. Political progress has been nil: No one expects next years promised elections to be fair. Today, however, some humanitarian groups offer measured words of praise for Burmas government. Looking back, its apparent that attempting coercion would have been disastrous. ()

The horror was compounded when the junta remarkable for its brutality, irrationality and inscrutability refused to freely allow outside aid. The regime kept American and French naval ships offshore, refusing to permit the landing of supplies. Foreign plane shipments of assistance were impounded. Aid workers were denied permission to enter the delta. What little assistance was accepted was distributed by the Burmese military, which even interfered with attempts by Burmese citizens to help those in need. Before the cyclone hit, few people would have imagined that the juntas reputation could fall any lower. But fall it did.

As the misery of the Burmese people increased, so did support for military intervention. The Washington Posts Fred Hiatt pointed to UN Security Council Resolution 1674, passed three years ago, which established the **responsibility to protect** populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, whose report undergirded the resolution, also had called for applying the principle during overwhelming natural or environmental catastrophes, where the state concerned is either unwilling or unable to cope.

French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, among others, invoked the so-called **responsibility to protect** to force aid upon the SPDC. He left unspecified what that would mean beyond a Security Council resolution insisting on cooperation. British Foreign Secretary David Miliband argued that all instruments of the UN should be available, including, apparently, military force. ()

Slate columnist Anne Applebaum called for consideration of alternatives in order to help the Burmese even against the will of their irrational leaders. Ideas on exactly what to do varied from full-scale military intervention to more limited measures dropping aid from planes, flying food from ships via helicopter, or convoying assistance across the Thai border and daring the junta to shoot. () But more concerted resistance would have threatened the lives of military personnel, aid workers and storm victims alike. Kenneth Bacon of Refugees International boldly declared:

forceful efforts to interfere with relief deliveries would turn the responsibility to protect into a right to protect. But that would have required more forthright intervention, including military strikes or boots on the ground. ()

For understandable reasons, then, most policy makers remained unenthusiastic about attempting to coerce Burma. John Holmes, UN Undersecretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, opined: I'm not sure that invading Burma would be a very sensible option. And the SPDC gradually opened the delta to Western aid even as it tried to profit from the international community's activities. Three months later Holmes reported that much-feared second wave of deaths from starvation or disease has not happened. He also said that this is now a normal international-relief operation. The Burmese military's turnaround led some NGOs to develop a strange new respect for the SPDC. For instance, one unnamed UN program director told the New York Times that after the Burmese recognized they could not handle the disaster, they did a lot. A huge national response occurred. ()

Of course, no one sugarcoats the regime's human-rights record. But the relationship between the domestic military junta and outside humanitarian agencies has been transformed. Which would not have happened had the West attempted coercion. Forcible intervention would certainly have destroyed the prospect for cooperation over the long-term and likely spread conflict across Burma, even to areas not directly affected by Cyclone Nargis. ()

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