Human Security and Myanmar's Response to Cyclone Nargis: More Continuity than Change

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine whether the government of Myanmar has dedicated attention to human security after so many years of prioritizing state and regime security. Based on the paper's content and other authors' observation, this paper makes two interrelated argument. First, the government of Myanmar continues to undertake a half-hearted effort to protect human security. Second, the government's half-hearted approach to human security primarily reflects deep concern of foreign intervention.

INTRODUCTION

One concept that has permeated Southeast Asia and become a popular catch phrase for some academia, and activists is human security (Acharya and Acharya, 2002: 1; Caballero-Anthony, 2004:178-185; Nishikawa, 2010:30-37; Emmerson, 2008). Parallel with the adoption of human security agenda by these non-state actors is the endorsement of a human security perspective by the main regional governmental organization in Southeast Asia, which is ASEAN (Caballero-Anthony, 2010; Feigenblatt, 2009:11; Gerstl: 2010:1).

Human security principally concerns the security of individuals and communities; it marked contrast to the traditional discourse that emphasises the security of the 'state', or that of a territory or government. The notion of human security proposes a shift in our point of reference, placing people as the focal point of security considerations for both analysis and policy (Nishikawa, 2010: 1).[i]

Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, the Secretary General of ASEAN, recognises the importance of human security and has been a strong advocate of human security. At a symposium on Realizing Human Security in Asia in 2010, co-organised by the

University of Tokyo and the Japan-ASEAN Cooperation, he remarked, "The concept of human security needs to be disseminated more, needs to be integrated more into state policies everywhere. It is no longer enough to secure the state; rather we have to secure the people by first looking at their security needs. This includes the provision of education, of access to earn a living, of protection to the migrant workers for example" (Message from the Secretary-General of ASEAN, H.E. Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, for the "Realizing Human Security in Asia, 2010).

During his speech, Dr. Surin emphasised the need for the adoption of a more people centered measures in all Asian states. This is particularly true in the case of Myanmar as the most reviled ASEAN member state (Nishikawa, 2010: 3; Emmerson, 2008: xi,xii,3,5). [ii]

Scholars and policy-makers, whether they support a broad or a narrow conception of human security, agree that the situation in Myanmar poses serious threats to human security. The sources of threats are multiple, ranging from physical violence to psychological oppression. The previous studies conducted before 2008 showed that the government of Myanmar is more focused on state and regime security. In other words, human security is ranked low in Myanmar's national priority (Than, 2007 in Ganesan and Hlaing, 2007:172-218; Emmerson, 2008:3-56; Gerstl, 2009:2-6; Feigenblatt,2009:1-22; Nishikawa, 2010: 103-105).

In light of the call for the improvement of human security in the region and the lack of protection of human security in Myanmar, it is important to try to determine the kind of improvements needed. But first of all, this paper has to take time to reflect on where Myanmar has been with regards to the protection of human security. This paper seeks to uncover the government of Myanmar's progress toward the promotion of human security. Specifically, this paper asks the following questions: what did the government do to help the disaster victims? Did the government adopt the human security approach in the immediate response to the Cyclone Nargis or prioritise helping the disaster victims? If not, then why?

In examining this, the paper looks at the government's response when the Cyclone Nargis hit the country back in 2008. This is a major event that provides a critical test for the government's commitment to the protection of human security because the impacts on the people in the affected areas are immediate and overwhelming. To organise an analysis of the government response during Cyclone Nargis, this paper employs Securitisation/Desecuritisation Theory. It provides a systematic framework in determining how and why a specific matter becomes securitised or desecuritised.

This paper makes two main interrelated arguments. First, there is continuity between the past and the 2008 policies concerning human security. It would be a mistake to think that the military government completely ignores the safety, well-being, and dignity of the people. While the government has undertaken policies that protect human security, it is important to note that they often have done so only half-heartedly. Second, the government's decision to personally distribute the supplies from the other countries, including the United States, primarily reflects deep concern that the external powers might exploit Myanmar in their vulnerable moments and launched an operation to topple the military junta.

While the second argument is not a new one within the larger literature on Myanmar, this paper does represents the first attempt to assess the human security situation in Myanmar as the most brutally ruled ASEAN state in 2008, in light of the call for the improvement of human security in the region. In addition to that, this paper refutes the claim that the government of Myanmar's half-hearted effort to protect human security was primarily driven by the desire to have an uninterrupted constitutional referendum, which would bestow stronger legitimacy upon the military regime. The other contribution that the paper hopes to make is providing an assessment of human security situation in Myanmar, through which the paper tries to provide a platform for further research, particularly with regard to tracking the progress of human security in Myanmar.

This paper proceeds in four sections. The first section introduced the background of the research, the definition of human security, and the research problem. Following the first section, the second section presents a brief summary of the securitisation/desecuritisation framework. The third section applies the securitisation theory to examine whether there is sufficient human security policy in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis. This section asks if the government prioritises the relief effort and the victim of this natural disaster. If yes, then what kinds of assistances provided by the military government? If the answer is no, we have to discover the reason why. The fourth section provides conclusion.

Securitisation/Desecuritisation: What, How, and Why

Before the paper examines whether or not the human security approach was adopted for addressing the pain and suffering Cyclone Nargis victims, and the reason behind the government interest or lack of interest in the human security approach, it needs to first explain what securitisation and desecuritisation are and what these processes involve.

The Copenhagen School, through the works of Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, Jaap De Wilde have developed theory of securitisation and desecuritisation. They defined

securitization as a process where 'an issue is dramatised and presented as an issue of supreme priority or life and death situation. By labeling something as a security issue, the securitizing actor (government, political elite, military, civil society, and so on) claims the need for and a right to threat this issue by extraordinary or whatever means to block the threatening development. This includes the adoption of emergency or extraordinary measures, and mobilization of state resources. It is important to note that the securitization process is not reducible to a purely verbal act or a linguistic rhetoric: it is a broader performative act. (Buzan, et.al., 1998:26,28).

What do the terms existential threat and extraordinary or emergency measure mean? There is no universal standard as to what constitute an existential threat and extraordinary or emergency measure. Existential threat can only be understood in relation to the particular character of the referent object in question. Referent object can be individuals and groups (refugees, victims of human rights abuses, etc.) as well as issue areas (national sovereignty, environment, economy, etc.) that possess a claim to survival and whose existence is ostensibly threatened. In the political sector, the referent object is traditionally defined in terms of the sovereignty of the state. Sovereignty can be existentially threatened by anything that questions legitimacy, recognition, or governing authority (Buzan, et.al., 1998:21-22). In the case of natural disaster, the range of possible referent objects is large, ranging from the survival of the victims, infrastructures, farm production, etc (Fatamura, et.al.,2011). These objects can be existentially threatened by various types of natural disaster.

The other important concept in this theory is the emergency measure. According to the Copenhagen School the type of emergency measure can take many forms. The types of measures to be adopted in response will obviously depend on the circumstances and the context of the threat. An existential threat to the environment, a sector of economy, or a state ideology will demand different emergency responses (Emmers 2009 in Collins, 2007: 114)

The exact criteria of emergency measure are constituted by intersubjective process among a particular group of people (Buzan, et.al., 1998: 25-31). In the case of human security and natural disaster, for example, by saying "human security approach to natural disaster", we are automatically in the area of urgency. It encourages us to consider the needs of the most vulnerable parts of the population, most notably protecting women, children, and the elderly. It also emphasizes the need for extensive cooperation involving state and non state actors, provision of assistance for the victims, coordination of responses, common action plans, etc (Fatamura, et.al.,2011; Emmerson, 2008:3).[iii]

Desecuritisation is the reverse process of securitisation. It involves the 'shifting of issues out of emergency mode sphere. (Lipschutz, 1995: 55-57)

Power holders or political elites frequently involve in securitization or desecuritization process. The motives behind such acts are varied: self-serving purpose, improving interstate relations through desecuritisation, fostering regional integration through invocation of external threat, and so on. The motives are not always in a negative sense, in this light (Lipschutz, 1995:55-74 ;Buzan, et.al., 1998:55).

The next section will turn to a discussion of securitisation / desecuritisation process in the aftermath of the Cyclone Nargis by assessing whether the military government as the securitizing actors prioritizes the survival, well-being, and dignity of the victims of the natural disaster as the referent object , and the motive behind their policy.

Desecuritisation of the Cyclone Nargis victims

Cyclone Nargis struck Myanmar on 2 and 3 May 2008 with winds up to 200 kph, sweeping through the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) delta region and the country's main city and former capital, Yangon (Rangoon). Damage was most severe in the delta region, where the effects of extreme winds were compounded by a sizable storm surge that destroyed an estimated 95 percent of housing. Yangon sustained a direct hit, that inflicted major damages to power and communications lines, and buildings, such that six days after the storm people remained largely without electricity, piped water and communications. Many roads into and out of the city, as well as vital roads into the delta region, were blocked by flooding or debris. For much of the delta region, whose most significant transportation is normally by waterway, water transport infrastructure had been severely damaged (Myanmar Tropical Cyclone Nargis Flash Appeal 2008, 2008).

The toll of people killed, missing, or affected was difficult to assess, with the numbers continuing to increase daily. As of 6 May, international media sources cited a total figure of approximately 23,000 dead and 40,000 missing. Several hundred thousand are estimated to be without shelter and safe drinking water (Myanmar Tropical Cyclone Nargis Flash Appeal 2008, 2008).

According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, 65 percent of Myanmar's rice, 80 percent of its aquaculture producs, 50 per cent of its poultry and 40 percent of its pig production came from Yangon, Ayeyarwady and Bago Divisions, and Kayin and Mon States, which were badly affected by the cyclone (Selth, 2008:386).

Given the scale of destruction on human life and infrastructure, countries, international organisations, and international Non Government Organisations or NGOs were in a rush and ready to provide assistance for the victims of this tragic event. But,

instead of taking quick and straightforward action to help its suffering population, the junta hindered access for foreign aid to the country.

The Myanmar authorities' reaction to the cyclone shocked the world. Instead of allowing humanitarian assistance to be delivered urgently to survivors, like the countries affected by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, and China after huge earthquake devastated Sichuan Province, the Burmese military government prevented international humanitarian agencies from entering the delta during the crucial first weeks after the cyclone (Letter to Donors on Reconstruction after Cyclone Nargis, 2008).

There are three important points that have to be underscored related to the way the ruling military junta deals with the Cyclone Nargis. First is the practice of desecuritisation. This tragic event is actually concerned with the survival of the human being in Myanmar. As mentioned in the theoretical part, state ideally should be responsive to the people's need in a disaster situation. The government should provide assistance for the victims, and cooperate with other states and disaster relief workers to ensure a timely and appropriate response.

Clearly, the world leaders sought to gain access to deliver aid to Myanmar and wanted to make sure that the victims receive those aids. Yet, the response by the military junta, which is led by the Senior General Than Shwe, to the cyclone disaster shows that they care little about the sufferings of its people.

The international community's requests to send the aid to help the surviving victims were rejected. The refusal by the military government frustrated the world leaders who were deeply concerned with the well-being, safety, and dignity of the victims. At the same time, the refusal by the government turned the natural disaster into a man-made catastrophe.

Second, there is continuity between the past and the 2008 policies concerning human security. It would be a mistake to think that the military government completely ignores the safety, well-being, and dignity of the people. While the government has undertaken policies that protect human security, it is important to note that they often have done so half-heartedly.

Three days after Nargis passed, on May 6, the Myanmar representation in New York formally asked the United Nations for help. As of May 7, the government of Myanmar had not officially endorsed international assistance, but stated that they were, 'willing to accept international assistance, preferably bilateral, government to government (Honda, 2009:2).'

Myanmar's neighbor, Thailand, was the first country to send medical and food supplies (worth US $100,000) via the Thai Red Cross. Additionally, Chaiya Sasomsap,

the Minister of Public Health of Thailand, stated that the Government had already sent medical supplies valued at more than one billion baht (US $31.3 million) to Myanmar (Honda, 2009:3).

Furthermore, the Government of Thailand dispatched, upon the permission of the junta, 20 medical teams and communicable disease suppression units. Samak Sundaravej said that if Myanmar allowed Thailand to help, the Royal Thai Air Force would provide C-130 aircraft to carry the rescue teams there, stating that, 'This should not be precipitately carried out; it has to have the permission of their government.' The rescue teams were permitted to land in Yangon on May 7, carrying drinking water and construction materials (Honda, 2009:3).

The junta also permitted Italian flights containing relief supplies from the United Nations, and 25 tons of emergency equipment such as stretchers, generators, water purifiers, and consumable goods. The flight arrived in Yangon and was the first aid flight from a Western nation, preceded only by the aid from Thailand (Honda, 2009:3).

Officially, international and local NGOs were not allowed to assist the affected victims directly (MYANMAR: Nargis one year on – progress amid challenges, 2009). Even if they finally granted access, the relief distribution process met constraints and challenges. Within the first week in the aftermath of the cyclone, the military junta granted limited access to international aid within a week after the cyclone first hit Southern Myanmar. A total of 23 international agencies were providing aid to people in the devastated areas. This number was considered small and only reached 220,000 cyclone victims, which was a small fraction of the number of people affected. There was an occasion where the government confiscated the aid which was brought by the World Food Programme to be distributed personally by the government staff (Burma Junta Turns International Aid Into Form Propaganda Sunday, 2008).

At that time, ASEAN asked for government cooperation in the relief effort. The Secretary General of ASEAN Dr. Surin Pitsuwan was reported to have asked the junta to work with the international aid community "before it's too late" by unlocking its borders to allow aid in (Burma lets cyclone aid into country, 2008). However, it took more than two weeks after the Cyclone Nargis devastated the Irrawady Delta before ASEAN members could persuade Burma to meet to discuss aid for the storm's victims (VOA, 2008). U.N. General Secretary Ban Ki-Moon publicly expressed "deep frustration" at the junta's slow response to the emergency" (Analysts Say ASEAN Trying to Bridge Burma's Trust Issue With West, 2008).

Meanwhile, European Union, French, Germany, and Britain were considering the option of bringing the issue to the United Nations Security Council, which could

open the way for humanitarian intervention. In their view, the failure to let in international aid to cyclone victims could amount to a crime against humanity (EU wants to push Myanmar to accept more aid : Official warns that not taking the aid is a 'crime against humanity', 2008).

The most outspoken supporter of coercive methods to send the supply was France Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner. He even said that this was a proper case for coercive intervention under the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P) principle which had been unanimously endorsed by 150 heads of state and government at the 2005 UN World Summit. The French minister was angered by the response of the junta to an offer of French aid. One French naval ship loaded with 1,500 tons of medical equipment, food and water was waiting off the coast of India for Myanmar government authorization to enter territorial waters. But the junta leaders accused France of sending 'a warship (Honda, 2009:6).

US Defense Secretary Robert Gates expressed similar sentiment by commenting that Myanmar was guilty of 'criminal neglect' for blocking large-scale aid to victims, and that more Myanmar people would perish unless the military regime reversed its policy (Honda, 2009:6).

The United Nations and World Food Programme said that the delay in relief effort is unprecedented in modern humanitarian relief effort (Burma Seize Aid Flights Burmese Government Impound Aid Destined Victims of Cyclone Nargis, 2008). The relief programme should have started without any delay, especially with the massive impact of the storm and the shared commitment among ASEAN members to promote well-being of the surviving victims.

Organisations already present in the country, such as *Medecins sans Frontieres* and Save the Children were able to get relatively small numbers of aid workers into the affected areas but they reported a tightening of restrictions (Tun, 2008). Other NGOs, UN Agencies and states have offered assistance but the Myanmar government has been slow to issue visas for foreign aid workers and UN personnel, and insists on distributing the aid itself. It is also insisting on restricting aid workers. Movement (Ban Ki-moon to Send UN's Humanitarian Chief to Myanmar, 2008).

However, UN Agencies, including the World Food Programme, World Health Organisation, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) were able to launch a .major effort to distribute supplies and by 16 May had delivered assistance to approximately 100,000 of affected people (Reuters, 2008). Independent of one another, some ten days after the cyclone struck, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and Oxfam reported that, at the most, only a quarter of the required aid was being allowed into Myanmar

and the aid that did arrive was not being effectively distributed (World Fears for Plight of Myanmar Cyclone Victims, 2008).

After a week-long rejection of U.S. aid offer, Myanmar's isolationist regime indicated that it wants foreign relief supplies but not foreign workers to help recover from a devastating cyclone. However, the government was still unwilling to allow full access to foreign disaster relief workers. The Foreign Ministry released a public statement in the state-owned New Light of Myanmar newspaper, saying that, "Currently Myanmar has prioritised receiving emergency relief provisions and making strenuous effort delivering with it with its own labor" (EU wants to push Myanmar to accept more aid : Official warns that not taking the aid is a 'crime against humanity, 2008).

The stalemate was finally broken by ASEAN countries, mainly Thailand and Singapore. ASEAN and neighboring countries played an active role in changing the mind of the junta to allow international aid after the initial refusal. ASEAN appealed to the international community to send relief supplies through Thailand, and decided to develop rescue activities and send medical personnel in cooperation with the UN. It set up a task force for redistributing foreign aid via Thailand.

After encouragement from British and American envoys, Thai Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej persuaded Myanmar's government to accept Western aid. In this way, thanks to the efforts of ASEAN and neighboring countries, Myanmar allowed aid supplies from the west but foreign humanitarian relief personnel and journalists were still not allowed visas (Honda, 2009:6).

Third, the desecuritisation involved both verbal and non verbal act. The verbal act was evident in the public statements or speeches delivered by the military junta in the aftermath of the Cyclone Nargis. The Myanmar leaders maintained the position that the condition in Myanmar in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis does not require emergency measures such as mobilisation of resources. For example, General Than Shwe published an opinion in state-run media, and went on to suggest that the situation was not bad enough to warrant the acceptance of, and potential transfer of power to, international forces (Trouble Brewing; Before, During and After Cyclone Nargis, 2008). This move created condition whereby the basic survival needs of victims could not be adequately met, intentionally causing great suffering, serious injury, and damage to citizens' mental and physical health (Honda, 2009:4).

The non-verbal action took the form of a refusal to let the humanitarian assistance enter the country. Despite the massive scale of the humanitarian catastrophe confronting Myanmar and the government's obvious inability to respond in an effective

and timely fashion, the country's military regime has allowed only limited humanitarian access.

The reason behind desecuritisation of the victims

Cyclone Nargis is the worst cyclone in Asia's history since 1990 (Cyclone Yasi: worst cyclones in history, 2011). After the storm hit Myanmar, the government deliberately denied immediate help and slowed down the delivery process of foreign assistance offered by the international community. It was clear that Myanmar badly needed the external assistance to cope with the aftermath of the cyclone. Despite its natural riches, Myanmar is still a poorly developed country, with few modern facilities, particularly outside the main population centres. Despite major improvements since 1988, the transport and communications infrastructure is very weak. In addition, while it exercises enormous power, the government is not the efficient and well-resourced military machine that is sometimes portrayed (Selth, 2008:386).

The regime's unhelpful attitude sparked widespread criticisms. Both the state media and international aid agencies reported that the death toll was rising every day, although the estimated figures presented by various reporting agencies were different. This condition can be attributed to the refusal of humanitarian assistance by the government (Myanmar: Cyclone Nargis Timeline, 2008; Burma eases restrictions on aid, 2008; Myanmar: Cyclone Nargis Timeline, 2008). UK Foreign Minister David Miliband said the Burmese military government had made the tragedy worse. He said, "A natural disaster is turning into a humanitarian catastrophe of genuinely epic proportions in significant part because of what I would describe as the malign neglect of the regime" (Burma eases restrictions on aid, 2008).

At one point, some countries even considered coercive methods to disburse the aid. Indeed, the application of the R2P Principle in Myanmar's case was dropped in the end. Observers and most aid agencies were quick to point out that simply dropping supplies would be of little assistance without a structured long-term plan for aid delivery and the presence on the ground of specialists able to manage such a massive relief effort (Selth, 2008:390).

An important question to ask is, 'Why did the government desecuritise or deprioritise the protection, safety, well-being, and dignity of the surviving victims?' There are two main reasons behind the government's persistence to isolate the country from foreign assistance during catastrophe.

Firstly, the military government is deeply suspicious of the outside world. Andrew Selth (2008) points out several major factors that explain the junta's worldview towards external countries. First, the military junta lacks domestic and international legitimacy. The military junta failed to secure consent from their people to govern Myanmar because they rose to power through illegitimate means. Back in 1990 they

refused to honor the National League for Democracy's victory in the 1990 election, and unilaterally took over the power. The second reason for their paranoia is the history of external military attack, western intervention on internal situation of other countries in other regions, and the aggresive rethoric that has been levelled against the regime since 1988. Myanmar exiles, foreign activists and other commentators have repeatedly called for foreign intervention including, at times, an invasion. The United States, for example, has repeatedly grouped Myanmar with other notorious "rogue states" against which it has contemplated, threatened, or taken military action as a result of the regime's repressive actions towards its people. In addition, since the thirteenth century Myanmar has suffered multiple invasions by China, India and Thailand. During the nineteenth century, the British Empire invaded Myanmar in three stages, defeating it in 1826, 1852 and 1885. Japan invaded Myanmar in late 1941 and early 1942 (Selth, 2008: 380,399).

Secondly, the military junta was preoccupied with its constitutional rreferendum plan, scheduled for 10 May (Selth, 2008: 388; Honda, 2009:5). The constitutional referendum is very important for it paves the way for democracy, provides legitimacy, and ensures political participation for the military junta in the future. Under the new Constitution, military is to be entrenched in every institution of State, including the Presidency, the Parliaments, the Central and the local Governments. (Myanmar: Draft Constitution by the Military- An Analysis, 2008).

The referendum was postponed for two weeks in the worst cyclone-affected areas, but arrangements for the poll in all other parts of the country went ahead, despite the national emergency (Selth, 2008: 388). After being cancelled due to cyclone, the referendum was finally held on 24 May, 2008. Soon after the referendum, where 92% vote say yes to the new constitution, the government began to show willingness to cooperate further with international community (Myanmar: Cyclone Nargis Timeline, 2008).

Pundits assigned different weigh to these two different motives. Selth argues that the regime's determination to play down the extent of the disaster is produced primarily by the deep sense of insecurity among military elites. On the other hand, Honda put more emphasise on the role of constitutional referendum as the drivers of the junta's uncooperative attitude.

This essay refutes the claim that constitutional referendum is the main drivers behind the government's behavior towards the external state and non state actors. The government's decision to personally distribute the supplies from other countries, including the United States, reflects the concern that the external powers might exploit Myanmar in their vulnerable moments and launched an operation to topple the military junta. The ruling junta believed that the referendum must be completed soon in order to

pave the way for democracy and grant the people of Myanmar greater political rights. If that was the case, then why the not let the international aid agencies enter the country to repair the damage of the country quickly? Logically, they should have welcomed the international aid workers since it could have contributed to the government plan to complete the referendum. The aid workers could have assisted the victims and helped them in their recovery process, so that they could participate in the referendum.

In addition to that, they also refused to let international or independent staffs to monitor and help the voting process. Another indication of the absence of trust towards the international community can be seen in their refusal to grant aid worker's visa requests until the referendum was completed (Myanmar: Cyclone Nargis Timeline, 2008).

Human security in Myanmar: the same old story

Faced with the massive impact of a natural disaster the government had two options: prioritise the relief efforts and put its people's lives first or their survival first. In the end, the military junta chose a policy that did not benefit the affected victims. The government ended up sacrificing cyclone victims in favor of promoting survival of their political career and protecting the state from potential foreign military attack.

Their decision to rank a political process as the highest priority at that moment, had affected the allocation of resource and attention. Foreign aid did pour in, but were stymied.

It has been four years since Cyclone Nargis hit the country. Activists and international leaders continue to call for respect for human security in Myanmar. As the current Myanmar government and international community try to formulate the best policies to advance human security in the country, it is important to reflect on what the Myanmar government has and has not accomplished so far in the process of promoting human security. The preceding analysis has showed that until 2008 the human security approach has yet incorporated whole-heartedly into the national policies.

There are huge challenges ahead of human security for advocates who seek to see a deeper protection of the people's lives in Myanmar. Hopefully, this paper will be useful for the human security activists who try to formulate a people-centred approach in this country.

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Notes:

[i] Human security debunks the question of 'security' from its traditional conception of the safety of states from military threats to concentrate on the safety of people and communities. Once the referent object of security is changed from state (territorial integrity) to individuals, it then proposes to extend the notion of 'safety' to a condition beyond mere existence (survival) to life worth living, hence, well-being, and dignity of human beings. Thus, poverty, for example, is conceptualised as a human security threat – not because it can induce violence, which threatens the stability of the state, but because it is a threat to the dignity of individuals. The term security attached to the word human also aims to prioritise human related issues, and make it worthy of special attention and resources. For more detail on the definition of human security, please see Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy (2007:9), Acharya (2001:2-8), Acharya and Acharya (2002:2-5), Nishikawa (2010: 11) , Feigenblat (2010:5). It is important to note that there is no single definition of human security today. The European Union, Canadians, Japanese, the United Nations Development Programme or UNDP and scholars have all come up with different definitions for the term, ranging from a narrow term for prevention of violence to a broad comprehensive view that proposes development, human rights and traditional security together. Despite its straightforward claim, and active engagements by institutions and scholars, human security – its concept, framework, or policy agenda – has no agreed definition (Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy, 2007:9, 39-58; Acharya, 2001:2-8; Acharya and Acharya, 2002:2-5; Nishikawa, 2010: 8-37; Feigenblatt, 2010: 1-7).

[ii] Any discussion of human security in Southeast Asia today must inevitably address the situation in Myanmar (Nishikawa, 2010: 3 ; Emmerson, 2008: xi,xii,3,5). Myanmar's security discourse remains state-centred rather than human-centred. This point is clearly illustrated in the way the military junta known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) deals with ethnic and political rebelion groups. Since the military took power in Myanmar on 18 September 1988, the successive Myanmar governments have always adopted a state-centric national security policy approach with much emphasis on national sovereignty, territorial integrity and national unity (of all ethnic nationalities). There is also a tendency to conflate national security with regime security. According to Than, the preoccupation of the government with national security has led to intra-state war characterised by violent challenges from a variety of ethnic and ideological insurgencies in the borderland of Myanmar's territory as the most serious threat to the state and regime security (Than 2007 in Ganesan and Hlaing, 2007:172-218).

In attempt to protect national unity, the government has signed many peace agreements with political and ethnic rebellion groups and engaged in the reconstruction programmes in those areas. The government has spent millions of dollars mainly to improve education, health, and infrastructure in the borderland areas of Myanmar's territory both in the east bordering Thailand and in the west across from Bangladesh.

From the foregoing, it is clear that peace is defined as the absence of internal military conflict has prevailed in Myanmar. Nevertheless, some people in the borderland areas are still experiencing fears such as threats of rape, extra-judicial killings, religious persecution, widespread rape, forced labour, and arbitrary arrests from the state, from external states, from violent individuals and sub-state actors (Than 2007 in Ganesan and Hlaing, 2007:189-192).

In the past Myanmar's obsession with state and regime security led to the use of unlawful means such as to tame the rebellions. During 2003 until 2004, for example, the Women's League of Burma (WLB) as umbrella group of eleven women ethnic groups from Burma released a detailed report about 125 cases of sexual violence against women in ethnic states and central areas of Burma. Another report by Thai-based women's-rights organisations reveals the use of rape by the Burmese military as a war strategy in Karen State and Shan State (Rights group documents further abuse of women by Burmese junta, 2004).

In addition to that, the military campaigns and human rights violation committed by the military junta over the years have caused massive internal displacemenent. As of 2011, there is approximately 451,000 internally displaced persons in Myanmar (MYANMAR: Displacement continues in context of armed conflicts, 2011:15).

Internal tensions within the ceasefire groups continue to threaten peace and security within their own communities. The national government apparently did not take into account the complex roots of conflict. Although the peace agreement has stopped military conflicts with the rebellion groups, it does not necessarily tackle the problem of corruption, power competition among the rebelions, unequal distribution of resource, unfair treatement of individual, rape, religious intollerance, and so on. In other words, the human security approach is partially incorporated in their policy to establish security (Than 2007 in Ganesan and Hlaing, 2007:195).

The ceasefire groups like the Kachin and Mon, though more politically sophisticated than the others, appeared to be suffering from internal rifts, mainly due to corruption and jostling for power in anticipation of the new political order, and problems of leadership succession as their leaders, who were involved in original peace deals, had passed away. For instance, there was a short-lived coup in mid-September 2005 against the New Democratic Army-Kachin (NDAK) Chairman, who was away in Yangon. NDAK is an armed group that entered into ceasefire in December 1989 and comprising ethnic Kachins also known as Red Shan, from the defunct Maoist Burma Communist Party or BCP War Zone. The coup collapsed in two weeks' time due to a counter-coup by troops loyal to the chairman, backed by government authority. In November, the splinter group from the Kachin Independence Army or KIA further split when some refused to follow their leader Colonel Lasang Aung Wa when he moved to a new area designated as their quasi-autonomous territory by the government. KIA is the military arm of the ceasefire group Kachin Independence Organization that broke away in 2004 after being accused of attempting to stage a coup (Than 2007 Ganesan and Hlaing, 2007:193).

The absence of comprehensive conflict resolution is also apparent in the unequal distribution of resource among the rebel groups. Different individuals, families, and communities reap differential benefits or suffer differential losses from the state project for peace and reconstruction. Many belabour under the dual authority of the central state authorities as well as the local rebel elite-turned "national race leaders". Predatory taxation and pillage by insurgent groups in the past are replaced by rent-seeking and business monopolisation by, more or less, the same groups led by state-endorsed "leaders of national races", the latter resorting to garner patronage from the military leadership instead of fighting the military government (Than,2007 in Ganesan and Hlaing, 2007:193).

Other threats to human security also present in Myanmar. Many people in Myanmar suffer from various threats to their well-being from poverty, stagnant wages, deficit of job opportunities, shortage of food, prevalence of communicable diseases, deforestation, forced labour, and human trafficking. Even though they acknowledge the problem, the solutions were deemed inadequate (Than, 2007 in Ganesan and Hlaing, 2007: 172-191).

[iii] Human security also emphasises empowerment strategies, enabling people — both individuals and communities — to act on their own behalf, and on the behalf of others. Particularly during rebuilding, it would suggest a bottom-up approach and incorporation of the voices of all those affected. In disaster preparedness, human security would assist in guiding policy development by ensuring resilience measures and scenarios include consideration of human and community needs. For a brief discussion on human security and natural disaster see Natural disasters and human security (2011).