

U.S. Burmese community ready to help

Fundraisers planned to send cash, supplies to homeland

By Marisol Bello
USA TODAY

Across the USA, Burmese nationals anxious to help relatives hit by the devastating cyclone in Burma are raising cash, planning benefit concerts and holding prayer vigils.

Autoworker Ahr Yu is hoping that heaps of traditional Burmese, Thai and Chinese food will help the large Burmese community in Fort Wayne, Ind., raise money to send home. Ahr Yu, a community activist, is organizing a week-end food festival at a local park.

Like many Burmese living in the USA, Ahr Yu has not heard any news about his family in Burma's largest city, Rangoon, since Cyclone Nargis devastated communications when it came ashore Saturday.

The silence has been unusual and worrisome. Ahr Yu hasn't seen his elderly father, his wife and three children since he fled Burma, also known as Myanmar, two decades ago, but he is accustomed to regular phone calls and e-mails.

"I don't know what their situation is," says Ahr Yu, 55. "I have so many worries. ... I only know right now it is very bad there."

The U.S. Campaign for Burma, a Washington-based advocacy group, estimates there are 100,000 Burmese living in the USA. Most are in New York City; California; Amarillo, Texas; and Fort Wayne, Ind., the group says.

The U.S. Census Bureau does not track the Burmese population in the USA separately because it is too small.

Concern in the U.S. Burmese community has grown as the estimated death toll from the storm rises with each passing day. Burma's military regime said Sunday that about 350 people had died; it

now puts the official death toll at more than 22,980.

Phone service and electricity are still out in many parts of the country, and most foreign journalists have been barred from entering the country by the secretive junta. So those outside Burma are left to piece together details from members of the community who have been able to contact family back home.

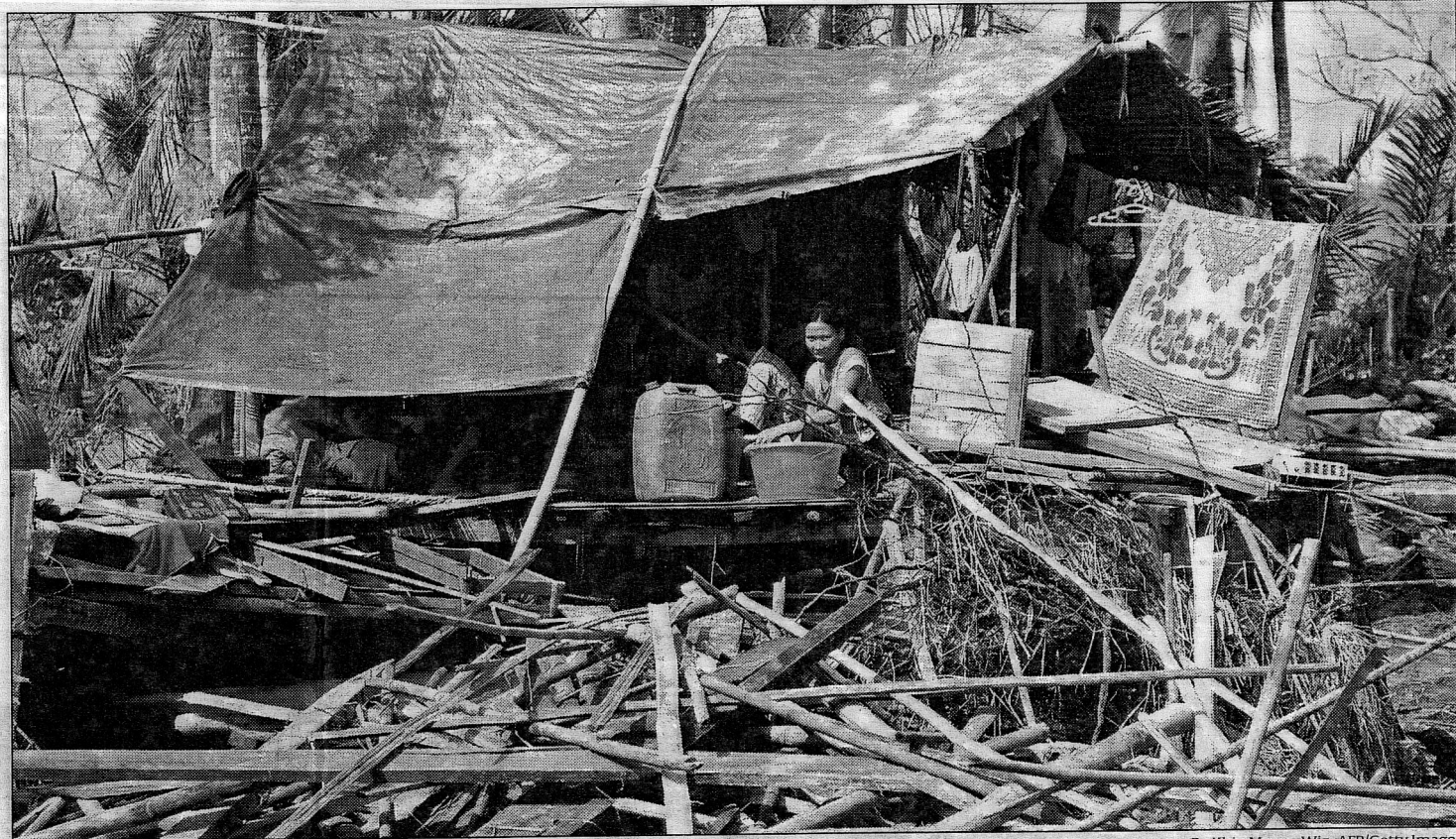
The accounts that do get through are bleak. About 1 million people are estimated to be without shelter and sufficient food and water, according to the United Nations World Food Program. Fights and scattered looting have been reported in food stores.

"People are scared at night," says Tin Maung Thaw, 60, of the Burma American Buddhist Association. "There is no fresh water, no electricity. ... Our main concern is people are using whatever water they find, but the water is contaminated."

Tin Maung Thaw is organizing a fundraiser at the association's temple in Silver Spring, Md., on Sunday. The group has raised about \$10,000 from its 500 members across the country. He says they are raising the money to send to one of the international aid organizations allowed to work in Burma.

He finally connected with his family Tuesday when he spoke with his 80-year-old sister and her daughter. After their home in Rangoon was crushed by a neighbor's tree, the women in the family were forced to flee to a motel about a half-mile from their home. He said two men tried to stay in the home, but they worried for their safety.

Aid groups, such as the American Red Cross, have received donations online and through their phone hotline since the cyclone hit, says Red Cross spokesman Michael



By Khin Maung Win, AFP/Getty Images

Food, fresh water needed: A family seeks shelter in a tent fashioned next to their destroyed home in Dedaye, Burma, south of Rangoon, on

Wednesday. The country's ruling military junta has approved four United Nations aid flights that were scheduled to arrive today.



By Fabio Serino, Reuters

International outreach: Supplies from around the world, such as these being loaded onto a plane in Brindisi, Italy, are being shipped to Burma.

Ok, but he could not provide a specific figure.

Aung Naing, 35, a civil engineer who promotes Burmese culture in California, is organizing a fundraising concert for the storm's victims early next month in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

He and other Burmese activists in Los Angeles are working to send money and supplies directly to community groups in Burma.

He and his wife spoke with her family Tuesday after her relatives found a working phone line. They said their home suffered roof damage, but they were otherwise OK.

They have two water tanks in the back of the house that will last for at least a week, maybe more, Aung Naing says. "They are not so poor, but the majority of people in the country are poor and they don't have much," he says.

Unrest builds as food, water supplies run low

The Associated Press

RANGOON, Burma — Hungry people swarmed the few open shops and fistfights broke out over food and water Wednesday after the devastating cyclone that swamped Burma's Irrawaddy delta.

American diplomat Shari Villarsa, who heads the U.S. Embassy in Rangoon, said the number of dead could eventually exceed 100,000 because safe food and water were scarce and unsanitary conditions are widespread.

The situation is "increasingly horrendous," she said in a telephone call to reporters. "There is a very real risk of disease outbreaks."

A few United Nations aid workers were let into the Southeast Asian country also known as Myanmar, which the ruling military junta has kept isolated for five decades. The United States and other countries rushed supplies to the region, but most of it was being held outside Burma while awaiting permission to deliver it. Entire villages in the Irrawaddy delta were still submerged from Saturday's storm.

A spokesman for the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF) said its staff members in Burma reported seeing many people huddled in shelters and children who had lost their parents.

"There's widespread devastation. Buildings and health centers are flattened, and bloated dead animals are floating around, which is an alarm for spreading disease," Patrick McCormick said at UNICEF offices in New York City.

Burma's state media said Cyclone Nargis killed at least 22,980 people and left 42,119 missing.

A few shops reopened in the Irrawaddy delta, but they were quickly overwhelmed by desperate people, said Paul Risley, a spokesman for the U.N. World Food Program in Bangkok, quoting his agency's workers in the area. "Fistfights are breaking out," he said.

Andrew Kirkwood of Save the Children in Rangoon said the "most urgent need is food and water. Many people are getting sick. The whole place is under saltwater, and ... they can't use tablets to purify saltwater."