
Burma: Cyclone proved the failure of “development” based on mangrove destruction

In the first weekend of May, a cyclone ravaged Burma. Cyclone Nagris hit the Irrawaddy delta with winds reaching 190km/h. However, most havoc was played by a sea surge that came with the storm: a wave up to 3.5m high swept away and inundated half the houses in low-lying villages. People couldn't flee and figures of dead people are estimated at more than 100,000.

The storm was strong indeed, but the root of such an enhanced devastation can be traced back in the country's so called “development programmes” in the industries of tourism and shrimp farming, that implied the destruction of formerly lush mangroves.

The importance of mangroves as buffering zones that protect inhabited areas from storms and big waves is widely acknowledged. Mangroves are salt-tolerant and grow along coastlines, rivers and deltas where the saltwater and freshwater meet, often covering a few kilometers inland. They form a dense protection barrier of intertwining roots, branches, and trunks that dissipate the force of storm surges.

Whenever coastal zones are being deprived of their mangrove protection, the damage of big waves is much more dramatic. The BBC reported several studies that reveal the importance of mangroves to human lives and settlements: a study of the 2004 Asian tsunami found that areas near healthy mangroves suffered less damage and fewer deaths. Also a study published in December 2005 said healthy mangrove forests helped save Sri Lankan villagers during the Asian tsunami disaster, which claimed the lives of more than 200,000 people. Researchers from IUCN compared the death toll from two villages in Sri Lanka that were hit by the devastating giant waves --while two people died in the settlement with dense mangrove and scrub forest, up to 6,000 people lost their lives in a nearby village without similar vegetation (1).

According to Mangrove Action Project (MAP), the loss of mangroves started in Burma under British colonial rule, “in order to clear space for rice production. Since that time, mangrove loss has continued; during WWII [Second World War] to satisfy military demands, and more recently, for fuel wood and unsustainable developments, such as industrial shrimp aquaculture and urban expansion.” MAP reports Burmese researchers revealing that “during a period of 75 years (1924-1999), 82.76% of the mangroves of the Irrawaddy were destroyed.”

“The conversion to large-scale shrimp and fish farms is the most significant threat to mangroves world wide, and other pressures include tourism developments and rising populations. This is worrisome to those who believe that global warming and rising sea levels will cause more frequent and intense storms, and that the loss of mangroves will make the coastlines more susceptible to damage.” (2)

The December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami that ravaged several Asian coasts, the 1999 Super Cyclone that hit the coast of Orissa (India) killing more than 10,000 people are sad memories recalled by the recent disaster in Burma, especially because they could have been “greatly lessened and

much loss in life and property damage could have been averted if healthy mangrove forests had been conserved along the coastlines of the Irawaddy Delta," said Alfredo Quarto, MAP's executive director.

The cause of the evil is well known by national and international authorities. An FAO officer has acknowledged that "There are very limited areas that you would describe as pristine or densely covered mangrove in the Irrawaddy area" and though there are some efforts to rehabilitate and replant mangroves, the loss rate is quite substantial still. The officer said that "During the 1990s, they lost something like 2,000 hectares each year, which is about 0.3% being lost annually. But that does not give you the whole picture because the majority of these tidal habitats are being degraded, even if they are not being completely destroyed." (1)

How many other lives should be lost in order to gain the political will to change the present "development" policies that have so dramatically proved to be unsuccessful? No development is possible on the long run when it implies destroying our home, our nature. Burma's people can sadly tell you that.

Article based on information from:

(1) "Mangrove loss 'put Burma at risk'", Mark Kinver, BBC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/7385315.stm>;

(2) Press Release: "Destruction of Mangrove Forests Increased Devastating Impact of Cyclone Nagris", MAP. http://www.mangroveactionproject.org/news/current_headlines/press-release-destruction-of-mangrove-forests-increased-devastating-impact-of-cyclone-nagris/