



# VOICES OF NARGIS SURVIVORS

THE STORY OF SURVIVORS FROM CYCLONE NARGIS





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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established on 8 August 1967. The Member States of the Association are Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam. The ASEAN Secretariat is based in Jakarta, Indonesia

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We thank the ASEAN Member States for their unwavering support during such a critical juncture. Our experiences over the course of the Task Force's two-year mandate are certain to shape ASEAN's approach to disaster management and humanitarian relief for generations to come.

It is due to our collective efforts that two years after Cyclone Nargis we now see signs of recovery in Myanmar's Ayeyarwady Delta. Rice farmers plant seeds where rice fields once stood fallow, brand new school-cum-cyclone shelters dot the landscape and bamboo plants and mangrove bushes are sprouting up around the once devastated areas.

This book is dedicated to the survivors of Cyclone Nargis, whose strength, courage and resilience in the face of unimaginable adversity is at once humbling and inspiring and, no doubt, will spur the ongoing recovery effort in the months ahead.



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## Foreword by the Secretary-General of ASEAN

**D**eath, destruction and despair followed in the path of Cyclone Nargis. As news spread that the Cyclone had flattened entire villages, killing or injuring hundreds of thousands of people, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) felt compelled, out of a sense of compassion, urgency and fraternity, to support one of our Member States. The ASEAN community immediately reached out to help Myanmar recover from the worst natural disaster in the country's recorded history.

The complexity of the emerging tragedy called for a cohesive and coordinated plan. ASEAN was urged to take the lead. Never before had we undertaken such an ambitious and large-scale undertaking. But buttressed by the Government of Myanmar and the international community, ASEAN's confidence grew and our association was "baptised" by the Cyclone that wreaked havoc on one of our Member States.

Cyclone Nargis occurred at a pivotal time, when ASEAN Member States were embracing the ASEAN Charter and the association was striving to become a more collective, dynamic and inclusive entity. The disaster provided ASEAN with a window of opportunity to make meaningful progress on the goals of the Charter to bring ASEAN closer to the people, enhance the well-being and livelihood of ASEAN peoples, alleviate poverty and narrow development gaps through close cooperation with the Government of Myanmar.

Experience from Nargis demonstrates that ASEAN, with support from partners, can strengthen disaster risk reduction among Member States and provide an effective coordinating mechanism to facilitate the delivery of international assistance in a Member State during the post-disaster relief and recovery process. Our collective response in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis is an example of the benefits that broader integration and closer partnerships can yield.

ASEAN's response to Nargis, in cooperation and collaboration with the United Nations, the international humanitarian community and civil society, helped ease the pain and suffering that the Cyclone inflicted on people living in Ayeyarwady and Yangon Divisions of Myanmar. Since the region as a whole is prone to disasters, it is imperative, particularly as we reach the end of the mandate of the ASEAN-led coordination mechanism in Myanmar, to document and disseminate the lessons ASEAN has learned in the wake of Nargis.

Through this publication, we wish to share within and across the region what we have gained from our experience carrying out ASEAN's first-ever large-scale humanitarian operation in a Member State. It is our sincere hope that our lessons will be of service to others and our best practices replicated in the event of future disasters.



SURIN PITSUWAN



# Introduction

**V**oices of Nargis Survivors brings together 20 stories based on interviews with people who lived through the worst natural disaster ever to hit Myanmar. The interviews were conducted during three trips to the affected areas during May and June of 2010.

The objective was to capture the resilience and courage of people, first as they struggled to survive the terrifying wind and flood waves that swept away whole communities, and then in their attempts to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives.

The interviewees include people from many different walks of life: farmers and labourers; fishermen and shopkeepers; men and women; the old and the young; the rich and the poor; figures of authority and those who look to them for leadership.

Some details of the survivor stories in this publication may make for uncomfortable reading. To respect the authenticity of their "Voices" and to honour the strength of spirit that was required for these everyday heroes to overcome their adversity, their stories are deliberately presented in the same way the survivors revealed them. As such, their personal accounts include graphic descriptions of the trauma they endured

as the Cyclone carved a path of destruction through their communities.

The survivors of Cyclone Nargis have not received as much aid as communities hit by comparable natural disasters in some other parts of the world. Many of those whose experiences are chronicled here have survived thanks to their own self-reliance, resourcefulness, strong family bonds and sheer determination.

In any case, material help cannot resurrect the dead, restore lost life savings, or erase the mental scars left in so many minds. Yet, even those with the most painful personal tales are coming to terms with their losses and painstakingly rebuilding their lives.

Many have a new roof over the head and a school to send their children to, often thanks to humanitarian assistance. Family networks have provided a safety net for others. Some have re-married or sought to start again in a new location. Some are even daring to dream again about the future.



Myint Myint Aye  
Cook

# Back from the brink

**M**yint Myint Aye considered suicide after the loss of her father, two sisters and her own young family to Cyclone Nargis. She turned the corner when a relative offered her a job and urged her to pull herself together.

“At first, I thought I would just let myself die. That relative told me that if I did die, the person who would really suffer is my mother,” the 27-year-old says.

“He asked me to come and work as a cook in his tea shop and he gave my younger brother a job as a waiter. They gave us clothes, meals and a salary. That’s how I got back on my feet and started feeling human again.”

Her resolve to meet her widowed mother’s medical bills, guide her brother through his teens and re-make her own future stands in bold contrast to her tale of extreme suffering at the hands of the Cyclone.

On 2 May 2008, Myint Myint Aye, her husband and their two daughters, aged 3 and 6, took their boat to a nearby island to buy wood. The family lived from selling the timber in Bogale and other towns.

The family planned to sleep in the boat. They saw nothing unusual in the wind, which gathered steadily through the afternoon. But by 9 p.m. it had reached a force so frightening that they abandoned the small craft for the shore and scuttled into the first house they could find. Some 25 others were already cowering there.

As the Cyclone approached, it drove massive waves up the vast tidal rivers that drain from the Ayeyarwady Delta into the Indian Ocean.

The floodwater surged over the island where Myint Myint Aye’s family were marooned, tearing the house from its stilt legs and driving its collapsing structure into a nearby haystack.

“I couldn’t see anything. All I know is that people were grabbing the haystack and trying to hold on to each other as the water pulled at us. My husband and I held hands and we each held one of the children.”

Cast into the water, the couple grabbed the branches of a tree only to be swallowed up by the drifting haystack. Myint Myint Aye lost her husband’s hand forever. Minutes later, she says the realisation crept over her that life was also slipping from her 3-year-old daughter, who was still in her grasp.

*“I just want to look after my mother properly and to set a good example for my brother.”*



Stricken by grief, she gave herself up to the current, preferring to hold the tiny body of her daughter than try to save herself.

“Although I knew that my little daughter was dead, I told myself I would never let her go. The wind and the water had been too much for her, and she became as limp as a piece of cloth.”

Myint Myint Aye says she slipped in and out of consciousness until fortune saw her washed up on another island.

“Bits of wood were piling on top of me and I was stuck beneath them. I struggled to get out, and realised I had let go of my child. I tried to grab her again, but could only find her leg. Then another wave hit us and, because her body was so slippery, I lost her.”

Myint Myint Aye passed the days after the Cyclone in a kind of numbed madness.

The first morning, a boy helped her to drier ground and found clothes to cover her cut, bruised body. As dawn broke, other desperate survivors staggered out of the gloom.

The next day, she and a dozen others launched a boat they found on the island. After dark, the boat sank, casting her into the black water once more. Myint Myint Aye says she reached the bank by clutching a large plastic water container.

Two days later, she reached her home village, Tha Zin Ngu. Her mother, as well as an elder sister and brother who had stayed home, were safe. However, her father and two other sisters were missing. Her younger brother was the only one to return from that group.

Back in the village, what remained of her family lived in a makeshift shelter made from scattered wood and survived on rice rations distributed by monks.

Myint Myint Aye sank into depression. She says she ate so little that she barely had the strength to get out of bed.

But then she made a short trip to Bogale town and chanced upon the distant relative who listened to her story and helped her change her fortunes.

At the tea-shop, Myint Myint Aye is up every day at 4 a.m. to cook more than a dozen different curries with the help of an

assistant. She falls into bed not long before midnight.

“I never cooked for a shop before and just did some things at home, in my own style. At first, the owners taught me what to do and now I can manage by myself.”

She earns K25,000 (US\$25) a month and her brother another K15,000 (US\$15).

The money was vital when her mother was hospitalised in 2009 with heart problems and racked up medical costs of K400,000 (US\$400). Myint Myint Aye and her brother got a five-month advance on their salaries to help settle the bill.

The Cyclone carried away the family’s boat and spoiled 250 baskets of paddy stored in their house as well as the contents of their small grocery store. (Families in the Delta commonly hold their wealth in the form of stored paddy. One basket holds about 20 kilos.)

There is not enough money for her 13-year-old younger brother to return to school. Their mother’s health has not completely improved and the prospect of additional medical bills looms.

“Mum’s health has not been good and she has mental problems because of the Cyclone,” Myint Myint Aye says. “When she sees me, she remembers her children and grandchildren and she cries. That’s why I don’t often go back to my village. If mum needs money, I send it. If she’s sick, I visit.”

But Myint Myint Aye hasn’t given up on her dreams. One day, she’d like to strike out on her own by running a small store or a market stall. She helped run the family shop before the Cyclone, but still lacks the capital to launch her own business. Aid groups offered short-term loans in her village, but she is wary of debt and hopes instead to save the K200,000 (US\$200) to pursue her dream.

With her own family still heavy in her thoughts, she has no plans to re-marry.

“I just want to look after my mother properly and to set a good example for my brother. He shouldn’t carry on as a waiter for too long,” she says. “If I can set up my own little business, hopefully he will be able to follow in my footsteps.”



## Khin Moe Wai Orphan

Khin Moe Wai lost her parents to Cyclone Nargis. Like many of those orphaned by the disaster, she has found refuge with relatives. The 16-year-old lived first with an aunt and then with her brother’s family and has to work for her keep, including helping handle large fishing nets from a boat.

*She says she feels lonely but cheers herself up by visiting other relatives in her village near Kungyangon town.*



Bhaddanda Kosalla  
Buddhist Monk

“I’d made no practical preparations. But I was prepared in my heart”

**M**oral authority, good fortune and a willingness to go far beyond his spiritual role thrust Bhaddanta Kosala to the forefront of relief efforts on the most exposed headland jutting out into the Indian Ocean in the direct path of Cyclone Nargis.

The Buddhist monk harboured some 3,400 survivors at his half-demolished monastery on the southern tip of Middle Island in Labutta Township. To keep them from starving, he tapped the better-off for supplies, fixed the local rice mill, diverted relief ships and then collated data on the local population in a bid to ensure aid was fairly shared.

Two years on, the pragmatic spiritual leader is worrying about climate change and agitating for more education for his vulnerable villagers, who also suffered under the Indian Ocean Tsunami, and is quietly running a development programme of his own.

“Whenever anything happens, I just have the will to give and to help out,” says Kosala, a 60-year-old with an assured air and a penetrating gaze. “When people are in trouble, their priority is food, clothing, housing and work. Religion cannot come first.”

Buddhist monks took a prominent role during and after the Cyclone in many of the affected areas. As the storm gathered, many thousands of Myanmar people sought refuge in their monasteries, far sturdier sanctuaries than the typical rural family home. The buildings left standing became islands of hope for those seeking to reunite with loved-ones, and relief distribution points for the hungry and the homeless.

Kosala’s village of Dee Du Kone was spared the very worst of the Cyclone. While the Delta region is almost uniformly flat, a long outcrop of rock separates the village from the eastern shore of the peninsula, providing some shelter from the wind, and a raised refuge from flooding. Neighbouring villages were obliterated and their inhabitants swept out to sea.

Like some other survivors, Kosala describes a peculiar lull in the Cyclone. He compares it to the moments before the 2004 Tsunami, when the tide retreated so far that villagers were gathering stranded fish until the water roared back in, killing dozens on this stretch of coast.

For a short time on 2 May, “the sun came out and I was taking photos of some of the initial damage. Mangoes had been scattered around by the wind and thousands of coconuts



had fallen down ... But about 20 minutes later, the water level began to rise and the wind returned. I told people that the radio was forecasting a [3.5-metre] flood wave."

While some fled to higher ground, the monk and other frightened villagers sat out the worst of the Cyclone in the first-floor dining room of the monastery. Even when the sea was pouring through, they remained certain it was the safest place to ride weather the storm. The wood-and-brick building lost its roof but didn't collapse.

The survivors emerged to a landscape coated in mud and the wreckage of their homes and livelihoods.

"Boats, motorcycles, TVs and every type of living creature" were washed up in the grounds of the monastery, remembers the monk.

Kosala says a large stock of rice at the monastery was still dry because it was stored in sealed tanks, and the compound soon became a muster station for bedraggled survivors from Dee Du Kone and other nearby settlements.

A stone tank contained enough drinking water for all. However, the rice supplies were quickly depleted, so the monk marshaled groups of survivors to convince villagers who still had supplies to make donations to the monastery for widespread distribution.

"We got about one-third of what we needed," he says. "I gave priority to children, the elderly and the sick."

Next, he called on the owner of a local rice mill and requested half of his unspoiled paddy stocks. "We quickly fixed the mill and on day three I found enough diesel to mill about 500 baskets of rice."

Survivors in Dee Du Kone were frustrated and demoralised to see boats carrying relief supplies sail past without stopping on their way to nearby Hainggyi Island.

"From 10 May, I got the telephone connection back up and managed to contact the authorities. After that, some of the ships heading for Hainggyi turned back toward us," says the monk.

*“We got about one-third of what we needed.  
I gave priority to children, the elderly and the sick.”*



Food aid finally arrived on 11 May, when an aid agency delivered 1,000 sacks of rice. Other supplies followed, including materials to rebuild some 250 houses.

Kosala says his attempt to rally like-minded citizens and village officials and master the chaotic situation built on the Myanmar cultural inclination to help others in need.

He contacted aid groups and monks from across the country in a bid to drum up supplies, and then faced the headache of figuring out how to distribute them fairly. Some were handed out through a lottery system. Villagers knew their own priorities best, and often sold whatever they received in order to buy items that were more urgently needed.

Kosala says the Cyclone exposed the lack of basic population data needed to calibrate the humanitarian response. He has since carried out his own survey of 13 nearby villages and is often consulted by aid agencies that have been a tremendous help in rebuilding schools and clinics and erecting cyclone shelters. But he says the survey experience also underscored gaps and exposed new needs.

“You need boats as well as nets. If one thing is missing, people cannot work. People got houses but can’t find water” during the dry season.

Kosala is convinced the region is only going to suffer more extreme weather conditions, including drought as well as storms. He wants to educate people about how to tap safe water supplies and use them wisely, and says he has raised his own funds to build 30 wells and four ponds to improve access to safe drinking water.

Despite all of effort and hard work, he shrugs off questions about why a Buddhist leader became so deeply involved in earthly affairs.

“I am a monk living in a village on the Bay of Bengal, so I know disasters can happen. I had seen some storms, including the Tsunami, and knew something like that could occur again. I’d made no practical preparations. But I was prepared in my heart.”



Myint Swe  
Tree Planter

“Many elders were dead,  
and the young people  
asked me to help”

**M**yint Swe survived Cyclone Nargis thanks to an errant astrologer. Then he set about establishing more dependable ways for people to escape the next big storm.

The 46-year-old rode out the 2008 disaster on a sturdy cargo boat that had taken him to a distant farm in order to build a shelter for the upcoming wet season. An astrologer had picked 2 May as an auspicious date to start construction.

In his absence, Nargis almost completely erased his home village, killing his wife, two sons, a daughter and a grandchild.

Forced to re-examine his life, he has thrown himself into helping others, initially as the last village elder left standing, and then as an increasingly inspired advocate of programmes to reduce the dangers from future cyclones barreling in from the Indian Ocean.

Few places needed protection more than Ahr Ma Khan.

The village lies on a pancake-flat island in one of the big rivers up which the Cyclone drove wall after wall of floodwater. According to a local Government estimate, the Cyclone killed more than 80 per cent of the island's inhabitants. In Ahr Ma Khan, the number of households dropped from over 400 to just 150.

“After Nargis, the villagers that were left came to me and encouraged me to take the lead. Many elders were dead, and the young people asked me to help,” Myint Swe says. “I’d lost my family and didn’t have anyone to look after, so I decided to do it.”

Supervising the distribution of aid to get the shell-shocked survivors back on their feet has been a key task. Over the past two years, more than a dozen organisations have provided aid, from food to housing to coveted cash grants.

“My role is to make sure it goes to those who need it most. Sometimes there is only enough for 10 of the 100 households who need it. I have to make the selection and explain it to those who missed out.”

He says he monitors closely how the aid is being used, and has observed that abuses are minimal.

“I remind people that the grants are to stock their shop or their fish stall, to buy pigs or chickens. I tell them to build up their livelihoods first, then they can buy the things they want or pay their debts. They usually follow my advice.”

## *“The boat was tumbling through the water and we tumbled with it.”*



Not everything has gone according to plan, he admits. After a donor built a row of new houses on the bank of a major river, the locals refused to inhabit them because they feared the dwellings were too exposed to the wind. After a year, the villagers quietly dismantled them and used the materials to strengthen their existing shelters.

It is all a far cry from his previous life, when Myint Swe managed a swath of farmland on behalf of a wealthy landowner.

It was the landowner’s boat that ferried Myint Swe and five workers to the fields on 2 May 2008. The workers included his son-in-law, who had brought his wife and two young children along. They unloaded the boat, and began to work, but returned to the craft in the evening as the wind stiffened.

Myint Swe said the boat broke free of its moorings at about 8 p.m., and set off on a terrifying odyssey across the flooded landscape.

“The boat was tumbling through the water and we tumbled with it. We were all dizzy and exhausted and could only grip the boards as best we could.”

By dawn, they were aground in the neighbouring township of Labutta, wedged between two coconut trees. The boat became a rallying point for survivors.

“About 200 people gathered at the boat, men, women and children. Many of them were. We had five bags of rice on board, and we gave them what we could. We wrapped some of the women in mosquito nets to cover them up.”

After two days, Myint Swe managed to borrow a row boat and found another of his daughters in nearby Kyein Chaung Gyi village. He took his surviving relatives to the town of Mawlamyinegyun, where the landowner gave him work and a place to stay.

After a month, he returned to his village with a stock of food and tarpaulins to build a house. He resumed managing the farmland. But he gave the job up after a year to focus on his humanitarian work, even though much of it is unpaid.

The aid work “makes me feel better,” he says. It helps make up for my loss.”

What really fires him is disaster risk reduction.

Approaching Ahr Ma Khan by boat, he thrusts an arm toward a line of trees on the bank: “Those are the ones that I have planted. They will protect us from the wind. But they need to get much, much thicker.”

Reversing the deforestation that left swathes of the Delta defenseless against strong winds and flooding is just one part of multipronged plans to reduce the risk that another cyclone will reap the same grim toll as Nargis.

To boost the effort in Ahr Ma Khan, an aid group delivered seedlings. But they died in the heat of the dry season. Myint Swe says he scoured the creeks and fields for replacements, and has so far transplanted some 500 trees.

For several months, an aid group put Myint Swe in charge of a risk reduction programme in the village. Teams have been set up for search and rescue and first aid. The local video hall – a long thatched hut with a generator and a loudspeaker – doubles as a cyclone early warning system.

A false alarm about an inbound cyclone in 2009 helped them hone their evacuation plan. Half the villagers wanted to be ferried to a larger village on a nearby headland and half wanted to stay put. They reached a compromise whereby 17 villagers stayed back as long as possible to look after livestock and guard against looting.

Myint Swe says it was a useful dry run that could on day save lives.

“Previously, we didn’t know about these things. That is why we lost our families. I would like this to be my legacy.”



## Than Tun Wood Harvester and Farmer

Despite his failing health, Than Tun says he joined other men from his village in Bogale Township in the backbreaking task of harvesting wood and leaves from nearby forests to provide building materials for communities recovering after Cyclone Nargis. The 44-year-old, whose wife and infant child died in the Cyclone, has rebuilt his house and provided for his three surviving children also with the help of a grant from a humanitarian agency.

***His 13-year-old daughter has dropped out of school to cook for the family.***

Tun Nyein  
Fisherman

# "A snake-bite to the head"

**T**he 54-year-old fisherman's steady gaze and measured speech reflect the focus he has found in his misfortune. Deprived of his wife and two of his three children, he now concentrates all of his energy and responsibility on his teen-aged daughter.

"It's like a snake-bite to the head. But I am thankful that I am old enough to cope with this," says Tun Nyein, at his home in a tiny settlement perched on the bank of a deep creek.

"My daughter has been greatly affected. If I want to go out and fish, particularly at night, I don't like to leave her alone. So my livelihood is a struggle. I might not have anything to eat, but I'll stay with her and keep her safe."

Tun Nyein's daughter is 17. She smiles nervously as her father tells their story, but slides away to whisper with a friend at the back of their hut rather than add to the tale, even though much of it is about her.

Father and daughter escaped the Cyclone because that day she had accompanied him to another, higher-lying, village to buy bamboo poles to pin the family's fishing net to the riverbed.

When he returned in a boat two days later, Tun Nyein says he found it hard to spot the place where the houses had been. He came across seven villagers and transported them to safety. But only 27 of the 300 people in the village of Ah Htet Su survived.

Tun Nyein and his daughter spent several months living with relatives in Labutta, the nearest town, and in his native village, a period during which the girl struggled to come to terms with their loss.

"My child had psychological problems. She was thinking so much about her mother and sisters. Her mind couldn't rest."

He says he wanted to set her up with a small shop in his native village. Then he tried to persuade her to become a nun and spend time in a Buddhist convent. Yet, she insisted on returning home with him.



*“My child had psychological problems. She was thinking so much about her mother and sisters.”*

In early 2009, a handful of villagers re-built a row of shacks near the water’s edge, using tarpaulin sheets supplied by emergency workers. Aid agencies have since supplied materials for the villagers to upgrade their homes.

The fisherman seems to command respect in his small community.

Neighbours cram into his stilted house to hear him talk. One dips a hand into a sack near the door and pulls out a gray crab, its claws bound neatly with a long green leaf. Men spit red betel leaf juice down between the floorboards.

Tun Nyein says he lost a “good-sized” boat and net to the Cyclone. The Government has since given him a new boat. But it is smaller, and he has to make do with just part of a net that he recovered from the debris.

He fishes mainly for prawns and crabs. Prices have recovered following a dip after the Cyclone. But there don’t seem to be as many fish in the river now, he says.

He is trying to save for a bigger net, and hopes to strike a deal with the local fish collector – a middleman between the villagers and the wholesalers – to provide him with one soon. In return for the net, he will promise to sell his catch only to the collector.

“We all try to help each other, because everybody here has lost family. It has left us all with the same feeling,” says Tun Nyein.





Htay Aung  
Village Chief

“We have a brain to think, and it is up to us to work out what to do”

**S**tanding atop a 5-metre-high pyramid of sun-baked clay, Htay Aung smiles and thumps his fist against the trunk of a tall coconut palm on the edge of his village.

“These trees here already saved 30 people. We hope they can save a lot more if such a disaster ever happens to us again.”

In many families, the only survivors were those strong enough to cling to the coconut trees as the floodwater surged around them. The flesh and milk from the fruit kept people alive in the desperate days before help arrived.

Htay Aung, 51, owns much of the land on which the small village of Tha Pawt Aing has been rebuilt.

During the Cyclone, many of its 200 inhabitants crammed into a larger wooden house they hoped would prove stronger than their huts. Survivors recall two fierce bursts of wind. The house withstood the first, but not the second, which was so strong that villagers heard its howl before it arrived. More than half of the terrified people were crushed or drowned.

Village leader Htay Aung, who lost a house, two boats and seven buffaloes as well as several relatives, believes his earthen platform will fare better if the waves return.

In all, six palm trees poke through the cracked surface of the pyramid, and Htay Aung plans to expand it to include several more – a design he hopes will give it strength and accommodate a population that has recovered to 140. A long ramp on one side will let people clamber up.

“We have a brain to think, and it is up to us to work out what to do. The strong, the men, must look after the old, the young and the women.”

A few days after the Cyclone, boats ferried survivors from many stricken villages including Tha Pawt Aing to the town of Labutta.

“I came back a week later, and brought seven men to help me. There was enough wood lying around for us to rebuild five small huts. We got tarpaulin sheets from aid groups in Labutta and used them for the roofs.”

Aid agencies delivered emergency rice rations.

Others, tired of living in makeshift camps and other people’s homes, also returned.

“It was hard for them living in monasteries and schools. People wanted to get back and recover whatever they could.”

*“We will have to work very hard to get things back to normal.”*



After burying their dead and burning the corpses of their animals, Htay Aung says he and the villagers managed to plant a few paddy fields that year but rats destroyed much of the 2009 crop before it could be harvested.

A rodent plague has afflicted many of the affected areas since the Cyclone. Villagers say the loss of their grazing animals means there is much fallow land and long grass in which the rats have thrived. Others blame the lack of predators, such as eagles and snakes.

Labutta Township authorities have launched a campaign to encourage every household to kill 15 rats a week. At his brother's house, Htay Aung unhooks a blue plastic bag from a nail, and opens it to reveal a tangle of dozens of shriveled rat tails.

Villagers use traps and dogs to catch the rodents, or dig them out of their holes. Some have refined their hunting techniques to include a wooden rattle that imitates the sound of an insect that the rats like to eat. Lured from its hole, the animal is clubbed with a stick. The meat is a local delicacy.

Htay Aung says aid groups have given him four buffaloes, bringing the total in the village to eight. They also received two mechanical tillers. A year after the Cyclone, aid groups helped build dozens of new houses in two rows near the edge of the river, as well as a pond to collect drinking water. Some villagers were reluctant to rebuild their homes in the nearby grove of trees where so many of their loved-ones perished, because of the heartache it evokes.

With the population rebounding, there is enough manpower to work Htay Aung's 10 hectares of land and tend his repaired shrimp ponds.

“We have high hopes for this year's crop, now that so many people have come back,” he says. “We will have to work very hard to get things back to normal. We're not there yet. But if we don't get ourselves organised, we'll never do it.”

## Myint Thein Farmer and Fisherman

Myint Thein says the two buffaloes he received from a humanitarian agency in 2010 will help him get all his paddy fields back under cultivation for the first time since Cyclone Nargis. Aid agencies say it will take years to replace more than 220,000 draught animals lost to the Cyclone. In the meantime, Myint Thein, who lost his wife and their three children, has rebuilt his prawn ponds in a village in Labutta Township. The 43-year-old farmer has also re-married.

*“I have to think about the future.”*



Chit Oo  
Emergency Response Volunteer

“After the experience I have had, I can do a lot more to help people”

*“It was our home village and we knew everybody there.”*

**A**rmed with flashlights and an urgent mission, the eight men waded house-by-house through the chest-deep water to herd as many terrified villagers as possible into the only two buildings likely to withstand the gathering Cyclone.

Nargis wreaked most of its havoc during the night, making it hard for anyone caught up in it to do more than save themselves and their immediate family. Yet Chit Oo and his friends managed to act before all was lost.

The 22-year-old is a member of a civil defense organisation that trains volunteers in first aid and emergency response. That background gave him a head-start when it became clear that his relatives and neighbours faced disaster.

On the afternoon of the Cyclone, Chit Oo, a slight young man with a few wisps of beard under his chin, was already out clearing paths of the branches blowing down by the rising wind.

When it got too strong and the river began to overflow into the fields, he says he headed home and persuaded his family to move from their wood-and-bamboo house to his grandmother’s brick-built dwelling.

Chit Oo hails from Kyein Chaung Gyi in Bogale Township. He says the village is split in two and that he, his parents and two siblings had to wade through the flooded landscape for half-an-hour.

Having seen his family to relative safety, Chit Oo says three strong men and four of his friends hatched a plan to guide others to that two-storey house or to the only other brick home in the settlement.

“It was our home village and we knew everybody there. We felt we should do whatever we could to save them.”

Working in small groups, they waded through the storm to the darkened houses, sometimes swimming under the water to get past fallen trees.

Some people were scared of the flying debris and had to be talked into moving. Chit Oo says he carried one woman to safety on his back after she had fallen unconscious. Others flat-out refused to move.

He recalls “one family of eight who argued that their house was just two years old and would be strong enough to [withstand the Cyclone]. They were also worried about their possessions. They said if they were going to die, they would rather die together in their own home.”





Chit Oo says only three of them survived.

The rescuers had to turn back from the monastery, where a monk was holed up, because the water was even deeper there.

“Near the monastery, we met another monk. He was with us on the way back, but a seed warehouse came drifting through the water and carried him away.”

Even his grandmother’s house was not safe.

Chit Oo says the current drove a bundle of bamboo logs into the wall on the upper floor, causing the roof to collapse. A falling ladder hit and killed a pregnant woman. Chit Oo says he had to push up through corrugated iron roofing sheets with his head to save himself from drowning. Then another piece of timber knocked him unconscious.

When he awoke, the Cyclone had passed.

Only 200 of the 1,000 inhabitants survived, including 100 in the two brick houses.

Of the eight rescuers, two were among the dead, including a fellow civil defense volunteer swept away along with a house that he had been checking for survivors.

Days later, Chit Oo and his family took a repaired boat to the town of Mawlamyinegyun where they stayed with relatives for

the next three months, selling remnants of salvaged jewelry to keep themselves fed and clothed.

After they’d spent all of the money, they returned and Chit Oo and his father found work with a private company that was re-building homes for the survivors.

Nearly a year after the Cyclone, Chit Oo’s family was able to move into one of the houses, and agreed to let him go to the town of Bogale to continue his work with the civil defense force, which has taken a prominent role in the humanitarian effort.

Chit Oo, fed and housed along with several other volunteers at a monastery in Bogale, says he has helped with projects to provide housing, medical assistance and safe drinking water. He receives K5,000 (US\$5) for every day he works in the field.

While he is sorry that he cannot save enough to send money back to his family, he says he has discovered a passion for humanitarian work.

“Before the Cyclone, I didn’t really understand its importance. But after the experience I have had, I can do a lot more to help people.”



## Thein Kyaw Wood Screen Maker

After suffering a stroke, Thein Kyaw sold his land and used the proceeds to start a money-lending business. A year later, Cyclone Nargis wiped out his borrowers. He lost his savings and his dream of funding his only grandchild's education. Still, he is grateful for humanitarian assistance that fed him during the first year and helped rebuild a home for him and his wife, who are the oldest survivors in their village in Bogale Township. A donated boat helps the elderly couple get around.

*"If I hadn't received this help, I'd still be squatting in the dirt."*



The' Su Hlaing  
Teacher

# Building schools to be proud of

The chug of a concrete mixer echoes through the village of Damma Thu Kha and helps turn the teacher's thoughts to the new academic year. The second school building will be finished soon, leaving the village with far better facilities than it had before Cyclone Nargis.

"It will be a great help. We can have separate lessons going on in separate rooms. Before, everything was in the same space," The' Su Hlaing enthuses. "It's also a cyclone shelter, so we have somewhere to run to if it ever happens again."

Cyclone Nargis damaged or destroyed thousands of schools, many of which were too weak to give much protection to people fleeing their even-flimsier homes. The Government and aid agencies have tried to make new schools much stronger and the biggest are visible far across the flat Delta landscape.

The' Su Hlaing had attended a friend's wedding on the morning of the Cyclone. At noon, the 28-year-old gathered fruit shaken from a tree by the rising wind, and thought little of it. But by evening, she and her relatives were cast into the flood as the wind and water tore their homes apart.

Survivors flailed among the trees and roofs for hours, calling out to each other in the darkness. The' Su Hlaing tells of pulling

her drowning mother back to the surface by her hair, and pinning her against a tree until dawn.

Her mother gradually revived over the following days. But dozens of others were killed, including The' Su Hlaing's aunt and 12 of the pupils from the primary school. Her father, who lived apart from the rest of her family, also died.

Just a month later, when The' Su Hlaing and her mother were staying with relatives in Bogale Town, education officials told her the school would re-open as usual and gave her four days notice to report for duty.

"I was not in the mood to teach. I couldn't help thinking of those who had died," she says. "There were four particularly bright pupils in first grade, and three of them had passed away. When I did the roll call, I called their names, one after the other. I even imagined that I heard a response. Tears came into my eyes."

The Cyclone had quickly leveled the old wooden-framed school, with its leaky thatched roof and walls. In its stead, an aid group erected a temporary tent-classroom using tarpaulin sheets and bamboo poles. Schoolbags, exercise books, a blackboard and other materials were also provided.



*“Sometimes, we encouraged them to draw whatever they wanted, and some would draw the Cyclone.”*



The' Su Hlaing says that, for three months, the 80 pupils in her classes were hard to control and easily scared.

“They just sat there as if I wasn't even talking to them. When the rain fell, some children would cry and want to go home,” she says.

“Sometimes, we encouraged them to draw whatever they wanted, and some would draw the Cyclone. One boy drew raindrops and the flood, people in the water and a child in the tree.”

The child was the boy himself; the adults his drowned parents.

The Government built the first new school building in the village in 2009, allowing the primary school class to move out of their tent. The Su Hlaing says parents raised K500,000 (US\$500) to help purchase the new site. When the second building, funded by foreign donors, opens in 2010, there will also be space for middle school classes.

Many communities hit by the Cyclone are still appealing for new schools and many families can no longer afford to keep their children in school. However, facilities such as those in Damma Thu Kha are helping some pupils and teachers get over their trauma, as well as keeping their careers and education on track.

The' Su Hlaing has been able to rely on her regular monthly salary of K49,000 (US\$49) and her family has re-established their village shop.

“I'm happy that the new school year is almost upon us and that I will see all my students again,” she says. “I've been for training at another one of these big new schools, and I've told the children all about it, particularly the playground. They are very excited that they will soon have one, too.”



## Saw Le Khu Carpenter

Saw Le Khu fled his village in the Ayeyarwady Delta in despair after failing to find the bodies of his wife and daughter. He wound up in the former capital, Yangon. He says he put his faith in hard work and human nature and has been rewarded. The 29-year-old now restores furniture for a project that raises money for street children and is putting his trauma behind him.

*“I had in mind that if I work hard and am honest, I will find good people, and that is what has happened.”*



Tin Win  
Farmer

“You just have to get your strength back and work hard”

**T**in Win feels things are looking up. His family survived the Cyclone unscathed, his farm is back on track and his orchard re-planted. Humanitarian assistance has helped his village to its feet. But he says the aid would have been more effective if survivors had more say in how it was used.

The 55-year-old reaps two crops a year from 2 hectares of paddy fields in Ywar Lae Su, a village in Mawlamyinegyun Township. While the community was spared the appalling death tolls inflicted on nearby areas, people are still struggling to rebound from their material losses.

Tin Win says the Cyclone killed his two buffaloes, destroyed his house and 400 baskets of paddy saved from the previous harvest and prevented him from planting at all during the wet season of 2008.

He borrowed K800,000 (US\$800) to buy a mechanical tiller and seed to sow the fields again the following dry season. The harvest was good enough for him to re-pay his debt. But he raises his eye-brows at the suggestion that things have returned to normal.

Even farmers who own their own land – a relatively wealthy class in the Ayeyarwady Delta – have to diversify their sources of income and Tin Win had turned an acre of his land into an orchard.

He thought his investment had paid off—his income from the betel nut, coconut, mango and guava trees was matching that from his paddy fields. But the carefully nurtured plantation was wrecked in the Cyclone.

Tin Win says it will be five years before the orchard he re-planted recovers. He had thought about loading up his boat with the produce and selling it in the surrounding villages. Instead, he sold the boat and invested in a village electricity business.

Mains power is scarce in rural Myanmar and some households are wired up to small private grids driven by diesel-powered generators. Powering a single light typically costs about K100 (US\$0.10) per evening.

The orchard lies on raised ground and provided a refuge for Tin Win’s family on the night of the Cyclone, when the rising water drove them from their home. They grabbed blankets and mats, and searched by flashlight for fallen trees under which they could safely shelter.

Tin Win had pulled his boat to the edge of the plantation to protect it from the floodwaters. The grounded craft, under a canopy of fallen branches, became his family’s emergency home in the days that followed.



*“We couldn’t wait. We’d already rebuilt as best we could.”*



Only two people died in the village, and Tin Win said there was a strong sense of solidarity among the survivors.

“Everybody helped everybody. Not just farmer-to-farmer, or fisherman-to-fisherman. Nobody was left alone with their problems.”

Tin Win praises the post-Cyclone humanitarian effort for supplying survivors with food, clothing and materials to rebuild their homes. Teams of doctors visited Ywar Lae Su within a month, he says.

Still, some programmes seem to have gone awry.

While he and other farmers received expensively purchased seed to help them survive following Nargis, Tin Win says they were offered a single variety suitable for only certain types of

soil.

“Many of us got the wrong kind. They should have consulted more, or just given us the money to buy the seeds for ourselves. The only people smiling were the seed merchants in Bogale.”

Another organisation failed to deliver housing materials in time for the monsoon season that followed the Cyclone.

“We couldn’t wait. We’d already rebuilt as best we could. When the materials came, we had nowhere to store them and they were left out in the rain. It was a waste.”

Still, he insists he has no grounds – or time- for despair.

“We were in a bad situation. We lost a lot. But you just have to get your strength back and work hard,” he says. “We lost no family, so we were luckier than so many others.”



Htin Aung  
Chair, Local NGO

# Helping Myanmar help itself

**H**tin Aung says he was surprised to read in an early newspaper report that Cyclone Nargis killed only a few people from his township of Pyapon. Surprise turned to dismay when trucks loaded with aid simply lumbered through the community without stopping.

Concern that thousands of needy survivors in his region were missing out on assistance spurred the businessmen and four friends to build up a network that not only has become a vital partner to relief agencies, but also has managed projects worth more than US\$17 million.

It is an example of the spontaneous, grassroots activism that characterised the domestic response to the Cyclone and made visible a civil society in Myanmar that is more robust and active than many external observers had assumed.

Htin Aung, his friends and family escaped the Cyclone unscathed in their brick-and-concrete houses and factories in Pyapon town. But so certain that was he more remote areas of his township had been devastated that he immediately travelled to Yangon to urge wealthy friends who were eager to support Cyclone survivors not to ignore his township.

They didn't listen, and it was not until 11 May that aid first arrived in Pyapon: 10 truckloads of supplies sent by private donors from the central Myanmar city of Mandalay. Htin Aung and others were more than willing to help distribute the much-needed relief items.

A guesthouse owner agreed to store the supplies and a former high school teacher made space in the dormitory of his private college for the 60 people accompanying the convoy. For 12 days, other volunteers organised boats and the manpower needed to haul the goods to hard-hit areas – and the impromptu relief network known as Aung Yadanar was born.

Htin Aung says he and his associates had the knowledge and contacts to quickly determine which areas were hardest-hit and what kind of assistance was needed most. His printing firm – the original Aung Yadanar – became the first port of call for many donors and aid organisations seeking a local partner.

The numbers who turned up and the outpouring of assistance astonished them.

“People didn't know where to go, and they were soon directed to us. All kinds of donors came, including writers,





## *“People were still coming, wanting to build monasteries, schools and bridges or distribute seed to farmers.”*

musicians, TV stars and private companies,” he says. “About 80 different groups contacted us in the first year, sometimes six or seven in a day.”

“Some would just have a sum of money and an idea of what they wanted to do, from handing out rice to building houses. We would buy and distribute the things and then take the donors to see it for themselves.”

After a year, some of the 30 or so volunteers from the township association who had been assisting in the relief effort felt that they needed to focus on their own businesses, leaving the five original friends to shoulder the burden.

“People were still coming, wanting to build monasteries, schools and bridges or distribute seed to farmers,” says Aye Myint, the jovial former teacher and now Chair of Aung Yadanar. “We thought that, if we stopped, the donors would be disappointed and the villagers would suffer. Some projects were only half-complete. We had built a network and learned about the problems, so we decided to keep going.”

The five men, aged between 46 and 62, have known each other for years. Aye Myint, the oldest, once taught Htin Aung and is the uncle of another member, Thein Htun. When they

get together, they answer questions collectively, sometimes completing each other’s sentences.

None of them draws a salary, despite the drain on their time. Still, they have taken steps to make their group more professional. They are applying for registration as a non-governmental organisation.

While big decisions are taken together, each manages a different area of Aung Yadanar’s work. A rice miller, for instance, handles support for farmers. The owner of a fisheries business takes the lead in that sector. And the boarding school has turned into an office buzzing with dozens of staff hired for a major foreign-funded project to improve local farming practices.

They are pleased that they got involved back in 2008 and have been able to do so much. They have also helped on programmes in neighbouring Dedaye Township and Htin Aung says they will soon begin building a hospital.

But they worry that the overall relief effort is running out of steam too soon.

“Helping was the right thing to do. We had capabilities, and the need was there,” says Aye Myint. “The need is still there.”



## Thet Thet Aye Fish Seller

Unable to face the “nightmare” of returning to her village, where the floodwaters of Cyclone Nargis killed more than a dozen of their relatives, Thet Thet Aye’s family have joined many others survivors in a bustling new quarter in the town of Bogale. With a grant from an aid group, she has set up a small fish stall in the market and brings home about US\$1 a day to supplement her labourer husband’s meagre wages.

*“My earnings fill the gap when my husband can’t find work. All of it goes on food.”*



Ye Yint Aung  
Orphan

# From boy to breadwinner

**Ye Yint Aung** reddens with embarrassment when his grandmother snaps out of her reverie, pulls a cigar from her toothless mouth and declares her devotion to the shy boy who saved her life.

“His parents are dead so it is up to me to give him love,” growls the 82-year-old, to the giggles of indulgent neighbours used to her outbursts and chain-smoking. “And he’s not a bad boy. To me, he’s a very good boy.”

As well as paying for her cigars, Ye Yint Aung has kept his grandmother and an aunt housed, clothed and fed since Cyclone Nargis orphaned him at the age of 15 and thrust responsibility onto his narrow shoulders.

“Before the Cyclone, my parents made all the decisions,” says Ye Yint Aung, sitting cross-legged on the smooth boards of his neatly thatched home. “Suddenly, it was all down to me. It’s been difficult.”

The day of the Cyclone, his father was labouring on a farm outside the family’s village of Taung Kone, near Kungyangon town. His mother and two younger siblings were also there. Ye Yint Aung had helped in the fields since he left school at the

age of 9. But that day he was at home with his grandmother taking care of other chores.

That night, with the wind roaring “like an aeroplane” and floodwater splashing through the floorboards of their house, Ye Yint Aung says he loaded the rake-thin old lady onto his back and waded to a monastery built on higher ground.

While the wooden building remained standing, Ye Yint Aung feared the worst for his parents and his brother and sister, aged 9 and 7.

“I wondered if they had managed to come back to the village or if they were still out there. The next morning, I took a boat and looked for them. I searched every watery place for three days, but already after one day I realised that the water must have taken them.”

Ye Yint Aung says he felt sad and listless, but had no time to give in to depression.

Neighbours helped him build a shelter that at first consisted of just a roof and a floor. Food aid meant they had enough to eat for the first six months. But his grandmother fell ill repeatedly and he began labouring for an uncle in order to pay for her treatment.



*“Before the Cyclone, my parents made all the decisions. Suddenly, it was all down to me. It’s been difficult.”*



The work has been hard. With his uncle’s 8 hectares an hour’s walk from the village, Ye Yint Aung gets home only two nights a week. His aunt says he still manages to help her cook and clean.

He brightens up when he remembers how an uncle - a monk in Mandalay - took the journey to the Delta to check on them two months after the Cyclone. The uncle took him with him to Mandalay to give him a break from his misery.

“He took me to places that I had never been before. When I was travelling, I forgot everything that had happened. Afterwards, it all came back into my head again.”

With the planting season approaching, his uncle is teaching him and an older cousin how to plough the paddy fields.

“I’d never done the ploughing before. Now I can do it faster than my uncle can, but it’s very tiring.”

For his toil, Ye Yint Aung gets meals on the farm and earns about K2,000 (US\$2) per day.

He says it is just enough to cover their daily expenses and replace the palm thatch on the roof every year. He insists his debts of K20,000 (US\$20) — owed to shopkeepers, doctors and his uncle — are manageable.

To improve their situation, he says he would like to save up enough money to buy a mechanical tiller or land for a betel nut plantation.

He regrets having to grow up so quickly, and having no time for impromptu football games with his friends in the village.

“Sometimes I’d like to feel like a child again. Back then, when it was time to eat, I would eat. When I wanted to play, I just went and played,” he says quietly. “Now I don’t have time for games.”



## Tun Oo Carpenter

Tun Oo received two dozen ducks as part of an aid program designed to help families replace small livestock lost to Cyclone Nargis. For landless families, goats, pigs and wildfowl are an economic safety net, guaranteeing a small income when other work is hard to find. Tun Oo, a 51-year-old carpenter from a village in Mawlamyinegyun Township, says having his birds back is good also for his soul.

***“Losing our birds was a shock, and not just to our livelihood. We have a relationship with these creatures.”***

## Yit Moe Rice Miller

Friends encouraged Yit Moe to rebuild his rice mill in Bogale town after it was destroyed by Cyclone Nargis and lent him the money to do so. He expects it will take three more years for the rice industry to recover and for his machinery to whirr at close to full capacity. His mill's 22-metre chimney is a permanent reminder of the region's losses.

*The workers who rebuilt it painted the date of the Cyclone and the letters "NK" near the top. In Myanmar language, they stand for "Nargis Kan." In English: "The Kick of Nargis."*





San San Mar  
Midwife

# Fighting for the health of her neighbours

**S**an San Mar wears her midwife's uniform like a suit of armour. The new clinic in her village is her castle. She is armed with donated drugs and equipment and an indefatigable nature. But she is scarred on the inside by the impoverishment of her family and the scramble for aid that Cyclone Nargis imposed.

"There were times when I had to go to meetings, I had to go on doing my work. But I was like an actress on a stage," reflects the 51-year-old, nursing a shy daughter on her knee at the clinic in the village of Zee Hpyu. "While I was hurting in my heart, in front of my patients I had to keep on smiling."

San San Mar tried hard to help fellow survivors in the wake of the Cyclone. She organised and cajoled villagers, lobbied officials and relief workers, and resumed her duties, even as she and her husband tried to pick up the pieces of their lives and take care of their four children.

Zee Hpyu in Labutta Township suffered catastrophic damage and has received a large injection of assistance. A huge earthen embankment guards the village against future flood waves. Behind it, a new school and a cyclone shelter as well as the

clinic loom over the houses re-built in neat rows – the tidy effect a clear indication that little of the old village remains.

San San Mar and her family survived by moving from rooftop to rooftop and eventually to a firmly rooted tree, which they clasped tightly held for hours, calling out and shining a light from a torch to hearten one another.

When the water receded, San San Mar says she was surrounded by voices in the muddy darkness crying for help. As the midwife, she was a figure around whom people could rally, and she took charge of a desperate situation.

She led about two dozen people to a low hill where the village pagoda stood. After sunrise, dozens more climbed down from the trees or emerged from a damaged monastery. Bodies lay all around.

"Everyone was crying, including me. Everyone was searching for their relatives and I tried to encourage them. I told them not to despair, that they might find them again alive."

In the following days, she says she organised survivors into groups, one for cooking scavenged rice and making curry with meat from dead pigs and goats, another for building shelters using wood and plastic tablecloths.



With the few medical supplies she had left, she treated bruises and flesh wounds with a paste made from mothballs containing camphor. Drinking water was scarce, so she gave bags of saline solution to children to drink. Often, she says, reassuring words were the most important and only thing she had to offer.

Five days on, she encouraged some of the villagers to repair a boat so that she could seek help in a large village nearby.

She returned with supplies including tarpaulin sheets, cold remedies and oral rehydration salts. But food and water became so scarce that many left the village on boats for relief camps inland. San San Mar's own family went to stay with friends.

She and her husband returned to the village on 15 May to help distribute the first delivery of aid to the 38 families who had remained – washing kits, more tarpaulins and more medicine.

San San Mar's list of what her family lost in the Cyclone — TVs, hairdryers, jewelry — reveals them as rich by local standards. Their spoiled paddy alone was worth tens of thousands of dollars, she says.

She is embittered by her losses and complains that because her family owned land and she was a Government employee they were ineligible or elbowed aside when aid was handed out.

While San San Mar threw herself into her work, she says the family's financial fall cast her husband into a depression that contributed to his death a year later from tuberculosis. Once a wealthy farmer, he was repairing tilling machines and TV sets before he died.

The family relies on her monthly Government salary of K30,000 (US\$30) and a reduced income from their land, where hired hands grow paddy and peas.



Her 21-year-old son abandoned his computer studies in Yangon to return and work as a mechanic in the village.

Despite the strains, San San Mar says she has tried to do her best for her patients and neighbours, many of whom she helped bring into the world during her 24 years as the village midwife.

In the weeks after the Cyclone, she was treating patients lying on planks of wood at her leaky makeshift shelter, and safely delivered her first post-Nargis baby “using scissors and a tap that I had found lying around the place.”

A month later, a relief agency set up a temporary clinic in a tent, providing women with an alternative to giving birth in their own cramped shelters, where the risk of infection is higher.

The new permanent clinic opened in April 2010. It also serves eight nearby villages, and San San Mar hopes to oversee up to five births a month in its spacious, hygienic rooms.

Asked how she will feel when it is finally in use, she gives a pointed, professional answer, confirming that her sense of duty has conquered all that the Cyclone has thrown at it.

“I will be glad to deliver the first child here, because there is less reason to worry than when the mother gives birth at home,” she says. “This is a safe place.”

Zaw Moe  
Fisherman

# “I’m starting to care about the future again”

Cyclone Nargis hit Zaw Moe’s village so hard that officials urged the survivors to rebuild their lives elsewhere so they’d be safer. The fisherman and his neighbours declined to go, despite the haunting memories and the risk of future disasters.

Authorities have sought to move citizens from some of the most affected areas into a smaller number of larger villages, arguing that it will be easier to provide services and protect them from future cyclones.

But fishing and farming communities alike are reluctant to leave their homesteads and livelihoods, despite promises of financial help to re-establish themselves in new surroundings.

“I am a fisherman, I don’t know how to do anything else. I would end up as a labourer if I couldn’t do this,” says Zaw Moe, a muscular man of 35 who chews ceaselessly on a wad of betel leaf. “Besides, we lost so much that it seemed meaningless to worry about it happening again ... I was no longer afraid of death.”

Zaw Moe was selling dried fish in the town of Mawgyun when the Cyclone struck. The next day, he hurried home in a borrowed boat in search of his estranged wife and his two sons.

“People were saying that everything was gone, and I couldn’t believe that. But the closer I got, the more I began to believe.”

In his village, Kant Ba Lar, hardly a tree stump or wooden pole was left sticking out of the muddy ground. Bodies choked the waterways en route.

He found no trace of his relatives there or on a trawl through the neighbouring villages. But when he returned to the house of friends in Mawgyun five days after the Cyclone, his eldest son was waiting for him.

The boy, now 15, told Zaw Moe that he survived because he had waded out of a house filled with terrified villagers in a vain attempt to stake it down. A wave lifted the building out of the ground and swept those inside to their deaths. The boy managed to climb a tree.

Zaw Moe’s wife, who had separated from him before the Cyclone, survived, but their six-year-old son did not.

Only a few dozen of Kant Ba Lar’s 350 inhabitants were still alive. The consensus in the village shop, where Zaw Moe is telling his tale among the snacks and instant coffee sachets, is that no one younger than the fisherman’s surviving son or older than 45 made it through the storm.



*“We found a small boat and a net in the bushes and fixed them up.”*



For those who remained, there were opportunities as well as difficulties. Zaw Moe says food aid in the first few months after he returned to his village gave him and his son the breathing space they needed to re-build their home and resume fishing.

“We found a small boat and a net in the bushes and fixed them up. We were earning up to K6,000 (US\$6) a day. There were plenty of crabs and no one else to catch them. They had grown big and strong.”

Within a month, he had saved K30,000 (US\$30): enough to replace the large ‘tiger net’ he had lost in the Cyclone and to buy back his own, bigger boat from the man who had found it in a village across the river.

Before the Cyclone, the fisherman in Kant Ba Lar stretched 20 large nets in a staggered pattern along the tidal channel in front of their homes. It was a highly effective technique, says Zaw Moe.

But two years after, they have just five nets at their disposal and their fishing license limits them to a small section of the river. Zaw Moe says their catch is poorer as a result. After paying the license-holder, he says he earns K10,000 (US\$10) per month.

He also worries that the late arrival of the rains in 2010 and correspondingly lower volume of fresh water coursing through the Delta will make it harder for fish to reproduce in the vegetation along the banks.

But his bleak post-Nargis mood has begun to lift.

The stubborn villagers dismantled the houses erected for them in the village they were supposed to move to and carried the valuable materials back to Kant Ba Lar. A private company has built them a new school. Migrants have swelled the village population to some 100 inhabitants.

And Zaw Moe is looking forward to his teaching his son – “too big and strong to sit on a school bench “ – the tricks of the fishing trade.

“Now I am starting to care again,” he says, lounging on the floor of the tiny shop. “I have my business, some savings. I’m starting to care about the future again.”



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