

Commons adopts motion urging Myanmar military to accept world aid

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OTTAWA — The Commons unanimously adopted a resolution Friday urging Myanmar's reclusive military regime to accept international relief teams in the wake of last weekend's catastrophic cyclone.

The government acknowledged how hard it is to deal with the "very difficult regime" and said it will do all it can to help the storm victims. The xenophobic Burmese junta has said it will accept aid, but is leery of allowing foreign aid workers into the country.

Liberal Bob Rae suggested the world should invoke the "responsibility to protect" doctrine and force the junta to accept help.

"The time has come for Canada to contact our allies - France, the U.S., the U.K., and other allies - to discuss the need to invoke that doctrine," he said.

Conservative House Leader Peter Van Loan fended off the suggestion, saying Canada is leading the way in relief efforts.

Canada has already offered to send the military Disaster Assistance Response Team to the hurricane-ravaged country and has pledged \$2 million for relief efforts.

The disaster team is an air-portable organization of about 200 soldiers.

It includes doctors and medics who can provide basic medical care. Its engineers can rebuild basic infrastructure and run water-purification units that can produce up to 50,000 litres of drinking water daily.

It can also provide sophisticated communications services.

The team has been deployed to Turkey, Honduras, Sri Lanka and Pakistan since it was established in 1996.

The Commons motion denounced the military junta's foot-dragging since the disaster and condemned its seizure of international relief shipments.

It urged the regime to open the borders to relief efforts.

The motion came as the UN announced it would resume aid shipments on Saturday after briefly suspending its airlift into the country because it said the military was seizing the supplies.

A spokesman for the World Food Program in Bangkok said the junta had confiscated 34 tonnes of high-energy biscuits, among other things.

But a Myanmar government spokesman dismissed the UN's complaint as baseless Friday and said the government took control of the aid to distribute it "without delay by its own labour to the affected areas."

A Toronto-based rapid-response team trying to get into the country has been stymied in efforts to get visas for its workers.

Rahul Singh of GlobalMedic told The Canadian Press in an interview from Bangkok that the Myanmar embassy was closed Friday for a public holiday in Thailand.

"It is a frustrating time right now. There's a lot of very highly qualified, highly experienced folks with aid distribution that are trying to get in and a lot of aid that's trying to get in," Singh said.

He said he is still hopeful the team will be able to get visas on Monday - even though Myanmar's government has said it doesn't want foreign aid workers entering the country.

The International Federation of the Red Cross said Friday it has not had problems with aid being seized and was expecting flights to go in every day next week.

"We received a flight in last night that came and arrived," said Michael Annear, the Red Cross's Southeast Asia disaster management co-ordinator.

"Those items are in our warehouse ready to be distributed."

He also said the Red Cross has also been able to secure visas for foreign aid workers, although he admitted the approval process has been slow.

Cyclone Nargis, which crashed over the low-lying Irrawaddy Delta on Saturday is believed to have killed more than 100,000 people and left countless others without clean water, food, medicine and shelter.

Myanmar's isolationist regime has indicated it wants international relief but not foreign aid workers.

GlobalMedic's team, which left Toronto on Wednesday, was equipped with five million water-purification tablets, 21 water-purification units and \$1 million worth of medicine to stave off water-borne diseases.

Singh says the team plans to train aid workers from Myanmar on how to use the purification equipment in Bangkok and start sending it in with them to Myanmar this weekend.

"Ideally our stuff will be in and then hopefully we'll get the visas and we'll be able to go in. Now if we are unable to go in, then at least our gear gets in there and people start getting clean water," said Singh.

With files from Pat Hewitt in Toronto