

US couple helps Myanmar cyclone victims

By MARGIE MASON, Associated Press Writer Tue May 13, 4:21 PM ET

BANGKOK, Thailand - As frustrated foreign aid workers plead to enter Myanmar, one American couple is already ferrying supplies to cyclone victims.

Curt and Cathy Bradner, who have been working on a water treatment project in Myanmar for two years, have secured the military regime's trust — and that has paid off with visas allowing them to come and go as they please.

"We have such a good relationship with the Myanmar people, and we never empower ourselves," said Cathy Bradner, 52, preparing to take a shipment of water purification tablets and filtration equipment into Yangon, the country's largest city.

"We always empower them, and I think that's why they like us."

Visas have become a sought-after prize for Western aid workers, foreign disaster specialists and journalists waiting for permission to enter Myanmar following the May 3 cyclone that flooded a large swath of the low-lying Irrawaddy delta. More than 60,000 people were killed or are missing, and more than a million are homeless, according to the U.N.

Some aid has started trickling in, with the first U.S. shipment delivered Monday by a military cargo plane. But the authoritarian government has restricted most foreigners from leaving the airport after supplies are unloaded. Many agencies fear relief is not reaching those who desperately need it, as diarrhea spreads and a lack of food and clean water heightens fears that thousands more could die.

"It's killing (victims) that we're sitting here," said Rahul Singh, a paramedic with Toronto-based Global Medic, who was stuck in Bangkok waiting for the go-ahead to enter Myanmar, formerly known as Burma.

"I was grinding my teeth so hard I snapped a tooth. That's how frustrated I am."

When Singh found out about the Bradners' access to the country, he asked them to carry in the aid group's supplies. On Sunday, Curt Bradner, 53, got in, followed a day later by colleague Bryan Berenguer of Virginia Beach, Va. They hauled in water filtration pumps that run on car batteries and more than a million purification tablets — enough to provide clean drinking water to about 20,000 people.

"We are giving it to local (aid agencies) who are distributing it out to needy areas," Berenguer said by telephone from Yangon. "We're basically trying to bring things in and coordinate with" Myanmar-run aid groups.

The military junta is extremely distrustful of the United States, which has been the loudest critic of its human rights record. But the Bradners, who spend nine months of the year in Myanmar working on their water project, Thirst-Aid, and the rest fundraising in the U.S., say their experience shows Americans can work with the regime.

"I really believe the world wants Burma to look like a horrible place, but it's not always evil," Cathy Bradner said.

While Myanmar's military regime encourages tourism, it limits most stays to two weeks, with longer ones granted to businessmen, especially those who fuel the economy, as well as U.N. and other aid groups. But long-term visas that allow travel in and out of the country, like those granted to the Bradners, are rare.

Cathy Bradner said she and the others at Thirst-Aid realize this rare opportunity allows them to ferry in much-needed aid.

"We're mules, we carry things in," she said. "Despite the disaster some really positive things are going on. The monks are helping distribute aid and they are setting up distribution centers."

Since the cyclone struck, even the United Nations has been having problems getting visas for its aid workers, especially Westerners. And for the few allowed in, most are confined to Yangon — hours away from the worst-hit delta areas where people are living without shelter and drinking water contaminated by dead bodies and animal carcasses.

The Bradners, who married 33 years ago, sold their house in Gunnison, Colo., along with their small engineering business and all of their possessions to go on a world tandem bicycling trek nearly a decade ago. They started working with Burmese orphans during that adventure and vowed to find a way to help people living in the impoverished country.

During the 2004 Asian tsunami, they used their mechanical engineering background to make ceramic water filters for victims in Thailand. They brought the technology to Myanmar in 2006 and say they started Thirst-Aid with the backing of UNICEF.

It is run by Burmese, who produce water filters at two factories. One was damaged by the cyclone, but Cathy Bradner said they are producing about 100 filters a day for victims desperate for clean water.

The filters, which resemble ceramic flower pots, are made out of clay with a rice-husk lining. They are porous so the water can filter through, trapping nearly all of the bacteria. A colloidal silver coating is added to kill any remaining bacteria.

The filters sell for about \$3 each and will last as long as they're not broken. But the Bradners do not profit from them.

"We don't get a dime," Cathy Bradner said, adding that the plan was always to turn the project over to Burmese — a local potter who operates one factory in Twante and a Myanmar non-governmental group in charge of the other in Yangon. "We just come and help set them up and build capacity."

They fund the project, which runs on about \$75,000 a year, through donations from Rotary and church groups, and by giving slide shows at sporting goods stores, private homes, coffee shops — "begging for dollars" from anyone willing to help, she said.

Daughters Bree Ervin, 29, of Eugene, Ore., and Willow Bradner, 31, of Denver, help with the fundraising, and run the group's Web site.

"I am so entangled in this country," Cathy Bradner said. "It's not about governments, it's about people and they need water."