

MEDIA RELEASE

UNICEF hails decision to allow international aid workers into worst-affected cyclone areas

Yangon, 26 May 2008 – With access granted to international aid workers, UNICEF plans to rapidly move forward with mapping the situation of children and women in areas severely affected by cyclone Nargis, says UNICEF Regional Director for East Asia and Pacific, Anupama Rao Singh.

Rao Singh is in Myanmar from 23 to 27 May on a fact-finding mission focused on cyclone Nargis and to participate in an ASEAN-UN conference held yesterday in Yangon.

In Myanmar, Rao Singh traveled to the Irrawaddy division, one of the areas badly hit by the cyclone which lashed some parts of Myanmar on 2 May.

Around 2.4 million people have been severely affected by the cyclone, and 40% of them are children. Many are now homeless, have lost their personal possessions, and are exposed to many risks. Access to clean drinking water, sanitation, proper nutrition and shelter are immediate priorities for children.

In addition getting children back to school is one of UNICEF's priorities – an essential step in helping children recover from distress and improve their quality of life.

Rao Singh said, "The sooner we can get education facilities or child friendly spaces going, the better it would be for children."

Myanmar aims to reopen schools in some of the affected areas by 2 June 2008.

Commenting on the ASEAN-UN conference which she attended on Sunday, Rao Singh said that with the assurances put forth by both ASEAN and the UN Secretary General, UNICEF hopes to access affected areas comprehensively and thoroughly assess the situation of women and children.

"I am very excited that our international staff have started their visits to the affected areas. Based on the meetings that I have been having with senior government officials here, I get the impression that they are committed to do the best that they can to address the consequences of the disaster. I really hope that we will be able to do much more than what we have been able to do so far."

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, UNICEF has been providing various health, education, water and sanitation supplies for the people affected as well as technical assistance for its local counterparts.

Rao Singh also met with three ministers to express UNICEF's support for the people of Myanmar and how to scale up relief efforts. The Minister of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement supports UNICEF and its partners' efforts to trace and reunite children with their families. UNICEF is also encouraged to continue its measles immunization activities as expressed by the Minister of Health. Later today Rao Singh will meet with the Minister of National Planning and Economic Development.

Staffed by 130 people, UNICEF has been present in Myanmar since 1950, working in the fields of basic education, child protection, health and nutrition, as well as water and sanitation.

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