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MYANMAR: Aiding the Delta

Bringing Back Bo Kone

BY JACQUELINE KOCH

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In better days, Bo Kone was a picturesque and thriving farming village, perched on a riverbank in the Irrawaddy Delta. In the wake of the terrific force of Cyclone Nargis, it stands beaten and battered and strewn with litter. Villagers describe a wall of water over seven feet high that rose from the river and flooded the town. Flattening two schools, a health clinic and countless homes, the storm ultimately claimed 200 of 600 households — approximately a third of the population.

Michael Gabriel arrived in Bo Kone this week, to launch the first "Village Rehabilitation Program" or VRP. Over the last week, he has met with villagers to find out what they need to start rebuilding their communities. Gabriel is one of three Mercy Corps Emergency Response Team experts, who are piloting programs designed to accelerate the transition from emergency aid to longer-term recovery. The Mercy Corps team has been seconded to Merlin, the UK-based medical aid organization, which has been working in Myanmar since 2004 providing high quality medical health care in the Laputta District.

"Our goal is to get the village ready for seed planting — faster," Gabriel says.

And this vital initiative couldn't have started at a more critical juncture. Rice must be planted by the end of July to have a chance to grow sufficiently before monsoon rains end in August. However, seven weeks after the storm hit, the village is still under a thick blanket of debris, especially in the rice paddies, where planting should be underway. And farmers, who make up approximately 80 percent of the economy, are worried.

"Normally, I'd be planting now, but I lost all my equipment," says U Thein Tun. "All my cattle, my plowing tools and all the seed I need to plant are gone." Coming from a long line of farming forefathers, Tun, 49 and father of five, owns 20 acres — a relatively small farm by local standards.

Worse still, the storm also claimed his entire workforce. All four workers died, leaving no one to help him recover from the disaster. Tun explains he cannot afford to replace his seven buffalo, a valuable commodity required to plow the fields in these very remote and traditional communities.

While rebuilding his farm and restoring his rice paddies to planting condition, Tun also needs to rebuild a home. Facing multiple problems at once has proven to be overwhelming. "All alone, I might be able to plant one or two acres," Tun says solemnly. And the prospect of a much smaller harvest will be financially devastating.

"On just one or two acres, it's impossible to support my family," Tun exclaims. "It's simply not sufficient."

Many of his fellow farmers face the same hardships, in addition to greater financial responsibilities and pressures as a result of the storm. Si Thu Soe, who lost his brother and sister-in-law, now finds himself supporting his four nephews and nieces, who are now orphaned.

"I didn't have any savings, everything was in my home, and now it's all gone." Like many houses in Bo Kone, Soe's house collapsed and the tidal surge washed away all his belongings.

"I'm saddened," says Soe, a 24-year-old bachelor, "I can't do anything, I don't know how to start

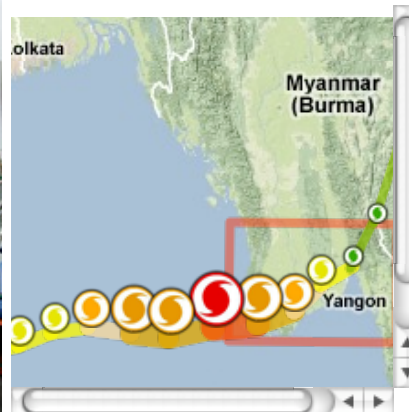


Michael Gabriel is heading up the Village Rehabilitation Program in Laputta District. Team members will be distributing tools and supplies and organizing work crews to clear villages of destruction and debris. The program aims to jump start the transition from emergency relief to early recovery.

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Cyclone Nargis Facts

- Cyclone Nargis swept across Myanmar on May 2 and 3
- Worst cyclone to hit Asia since 1991
- 12-foot storm surge flooded the low-lying Irrawaddy delta
- Up to 2.4 million struggling to survive, says UN
- Nearly 134,000 dead or missing, according to state TV
- Access remains an issue

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working again. But now I need to be making more money to support my nieces and nephews."

The storm surge robbed the farmers of all their tools, including axes and machetes, which are desperately needed to clear the debris from the trees that have fallen in the storm.

The collective frustration among the village farmers is palpable. "We have no one to depend on because everybody has the same problem," Soe adds. Some farmers claim they'll keep trying, but ultimately might abandon the village to find another place to find work and farm.

With the start of the the Village Rehabilitation Program, a large and much needed infusion of tools, materials and supplies have just been unloaded from the Merlin barge. This includes saws, axes, machetes, shovels, ropes and nails.

"For Bo Kone, we have hired 350 people to work over the next two weeks," Gabriel explains. They will be clearing debris from roads, school grounds, and rice paddies. Gabriel has also directed workers to dig drainage ditches to eliminate large ponds of standing water — ideal breeding grounds for malaria and dengue-carrying mosquitoes. Repairing the edges of the rice paddies and rehabilitating water ponds, used to store water are additional important tasks for recovery. The village is currently relying on rainwater for clean drinking water, which will present problems when the dry season arrives and rains stop for six months.

Gabriel explains that jump-starting the recovery process and salvaging this year's rice harvest is at the heart of the Village Rehabilitation Program. "By taking care these clean-up issues, the farmers will be free to focus on getting back to farming." The program will ultimately target upwards of 100 villages, employing 15,000 laborers.

"We were ready to abandon the village and find a place where we can work," says farm laborer Kyaw Soe, who's wife is seven months pregnant. "But we are willing to try, try once again."

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