

Editorial

Imperialist Politics in the Name of Disaster Assistance

On May 3 a massive cyclone hit Myanmar killing tens of thousands and leaving hundreds of thousands homeless. Almost immediately, the western media began condemning the ruling military junta for allegedly refusing to allow foreign aid workers unrestricted access to the country. Various countries, including the U.S., Britain and France have been clamouring non-stop for the UN to authorize an intervention (up to and including military) into Myanmar under its policy of “Responsibility to Protect”.

At the same time that they were advocating an invasion, political spokespersons from various western nations and much of the international news media were expressing dismay that the Myanmar generals would refuse to open their borders to

foreigners. Several days after the disaster, a groups of American officials held a press conference to announce that the Myanmar government had rejected a U.S. offer of \$250,000 in “aid” (the UN has estimated that at least \$187 million is required) to be delivered by U.S. marines. “It’s not as if we’re trying to overthrow the government,” one U.S. official declared. However, that is precisely what the U.S. has been trying to do for the past 20 years or more, with the most recent attempt being just last fall.

The Myanmar government agreed almost immediately to allow aid workers from the International Red Cross, as well as aid workers from India, China and Thailand, to enter the country and

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Commentary

The U.S. and Israel Suffer Another Blow in Lebanon

Militia forces loyal to the pro-U.S. government of Lebanon have suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of Hezbollah forces, further weakening the influence of the U.S. and Israel in Lebanon and almost certainly postponing another anticipated invasion of Lebanon by Israel. The three days of fighting resulted in Hezbollah emerging as the most powerful political force in the country. Hezbollah, which carefully avoided any attacks on government buildings, and the Lebanese army, which refused to participate in the fighting, have also put an end to the speculation that Lebanon would slip into another fratricidal civil war such as the one that raged from

1975 to 1990 and threatened to destroy the country.

In the weeks prior to the outbreak of fighting, the U.S. positioned warships off the coast of Lebanon and Israeli officials were openly talking about another invasion to restore the honour of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), which were defeated by Hezbollah in 2006. The U.S. was demanding that Hezbollah allow the Lebanese government to elect a pro-U.S. president of the country. There can be little doubt that the pro-government militias were incited by the U.S. to attack Hezbollah and, if the fighting had continued for any length of time, it is likely that Israeli forces

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would have also invaded Lebanon in order to engage Hezbollah on two fronts. However, given Hezbollah's rapid victory those plans are now on hold. The Lebanese government has now been forced to accept a compromise candidate for president – the head of the Lebanese armed forces, the same general who refused to commit his forces to attack Hezbollah and defend the government during the recent fighting.

The current pro-U.S. government of Lebanon was installed as a result of the 2005 "Cedar Revolution", which was organized by the U.S. State Department and various "pro-democracy" organizations such as George Soros' Open Society Institute. The pretext was the February, 2005 assassination of Rafik Hariri, a former Lebanese prime minister and leading pro-U.S. politician. The U.S. and Israel, who some suspect were responsible for the assassination, pointed fingers at Syria and mobilized a broad movement to force Syria to withdraw its troops from Lebanon. Shortly after the installation of a pro-U.S. government, the U.S. and Israel began preparations for the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in July 2006, with the intent of crushing Hezbollah militarily and opening the way for an invasion of Syria. However, despite a massive Israeli bombing campaign and thousands of Lebanese casualties, the IDF was forced to retreat in defeat. Hezbollah, far from being defeated, emerged stronger both militarily and politically.

Hezbollah's 2006 victory led directly to the political impasse that has gripped Lebanon ever since. The government has tried to use its parliamentary majority, gained before the 2006 Israeli invasion, to push through various pro-U.S. measures, while Hezbollah has used its massive popular support as the saviour of Lebanon to block such measures, including the election of a new, pro-U.S. president. Hezbollah has used both its military and political power wisely, forbidding vengeance killings and acts of terrorism against civilians, and correctly reading the widespread opposition of the Lebanese people, including the army, to another bloody civil war. It has out-manuevered both the

U.S. and Israel, as well as their Lebanese puppets, at every turn, emerging as a political force capable of uniting the vast majority of the Lebanese people in defence of their nation.

The Hezbollah victory will have repercussions far beyond the borders of Lebanon. For the past year the U.S. and Israel have been beating the drums for a pre-emptive war against Iran, based on the tired claim that Iran is building "weapons of mass destruction", including nuclear weapons. The U.S. has also accused Iran of supplying weapons to insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan. The U.S. Bush administration has even been openly discussing the use of tactical nuclear weapons against Iranian military installations. However, a number of U.S. generals, both active and retired, have warned that such an attack would be certain to result in Iran retaliating against U.S. troops in Iraq and there is a fear that Syria, which is allied with Iran, would enter the war from the west. The U.S. army has proven completely incapable of defeating a lightly-armed Iraqi insurgency and cannot even dislodge the Mahdi Army from Sadr City in Baghdad, which means that it would find itself fighting on at least three fronts. Therefore, it is crucial for it to neutralize Syria and Hezbollah before it can launch an attack against Iran. To date all of its attempts to do so have met with abject failure.

This most recent failure of its puppet forces in Lebanon has put the Bush administration's entire Middle East policy in jeopardy. The U.S. can respond in one of two ways. It can either arrogantly ignore the reality of the predicament in which it finds itself and plunge ahead from one disaster to the next, or it can retreat from its current policy and adopt the more conciliatory policies being advocated by former president Jimmy Carter, the Democratic Party and a growing section of the Republicans. Unfortunately for the people of the Middle East, both options being advocated have the goal of maintaining U.S. imperialist hegemony in the Middle East, which necessarily means yet more death and destruction for the peoples of the region.

Al-Naqba Commemorated in Winnipeg



Photo courtesy of CanPalNet

To mark the 60th anniversary of the beginning of the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from their ancestral homelands, Al-Naqba, or the catastrophe, activists in Winnipeg organized the city's first ever commemoration event on May 15. Led by the Canada Palestinian Solidarity Network - Winnipeg (CanPalNet), participants from other organizations including Peace Alliance Winnipeg, Canadian Muslims for Palestine, Jews for a Just Peace, the Alliance of Concerned Jewish Canadians and Grassroots Women took part in the event.

Over the course of the evening, more than 100 people participated in the socio-political program that was organized across from the legislature in Memorial Park. There were speeches, cultural performances, the reading of testimonials from survivors of the 1948 atrocities and other activities. A symbolic refugee camp was set up, with several participants camping over night in the park.

As many speakers noted, the particular tragedy of Al-Naqba is that it continues today. In 1948, after the foundation of the state of Israel, nearly one million Palestinians (estimates range from 700,000 to 930,000) were forced out of their ancestral homes, villages and towns. Many fled to nearby refugee camps in what are now the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Jordan and Lebanon, where they and their descendents still live. The deeds to the homes and lands from which they were forced to leave have been passed down, from generation to generation, with each new generation hoping to reclaim what is theirs.

Since 1948, Israel has continued its policy of ethnic

cleansing, encroaching ever steadily on Palestinian lands. The latest aspect of the catastrophe is the construction of the apartheid wall between Israel and the occupied territories. The wall has literally split villages in half, keeping farmers from their lands, business people from their shops, students from their schools. Whole families have been displaced, and despite an International Court ruling that the construction of the wall through occupied territories is a violation of international law, Israel continues to build it.

Bassam Hozaim, a Palestinian refugee born in the Gaza Strip, discussed the impact of al-Naqba on the Palestinian people and underlined the right of return for all Palestinian refugees as a fundamental part of any solution to the ongoing crisis in the region.

Dr. Mark Etkin denounced the role of pro-Israeli groups in Winnipeg and Canada for supporting the continued ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people. He noted the Israeli occupation and ongoing crimes being committed by the Israeli state violate all the tenements of religious Judaism as well as the progressive, secular traditions of the Jewish people.

Several speakers highlighted the similarities between the colonial oppression of Aboriginal people in Canada and the Palestinian people. Making this link has become extremely important in Manitoba, as the pro-Zionist movement has been making a concerted aim at winning support for Israeli policies of ethnic cleansing amongst the Aboriginal communities.

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distribute supplies to victims of the cyclone. If the U.S., Britain and France were seriously concerned about the suffering of the people of Myanmar it would have been a simple task to funnel aid through those countries' agencies. The American offer, which was more of an insult than a serious offer of aid, was such a pittance that it could probably even be delivered by the Myanmar postal service. India, Thailand and China, the latter facing its own earthquake catastrophe, have sent tens of millions of dollars worth of aid to the stricken region. Even the Canadian government, despite bellicose rhetoric similar to that of the U.S. Bush administration, committed \$2 million in aid to be distributed through the Red Cross. Yet the richest country in the world refused to send a dime unless the Myanmar government allowed the landing of hostile troops on its shores.

Given the experience of New Orleans in 2005 where it took U.S. relief workers almost a week to arrive on the scene and where the first priority of the military (including Blackwater mercenaries) was to "shoot to kill" looters, one wonders what possible role U.S. marines would play in Myanmar other than organizing the overthrow of the government. The Myanmar army, which numbers 400,000, is much more capable of distributing relief materials to refugees than foreign troops would be.

The ruling military junta in Myanmar may very well deserve criticism for its indifference to the fate of tens of thousands of people. At the same time, as was shown by the example of New Orleans, sometimes even wealthy, industrialized countries can fail to respond appropriately in the face of massive natural disasters, including refusing offers of international aid. (The Bush administration vetoed a Cuban offer to send hundreds of specially trained doctors to New Orleans, although the mayor of New Orleans welcomed the offer.) Surely the appropriate response to such disasters is for peoples and nations everywhere to offer assistance with no strings attached and leave the criticisms and recriminations for when all of the facts are known. If the Myanmar government fails its people in terms of organizing disaster relief, it is up to those people to settle

accounts with their government, just as it is up to the people of New Orleans to settle accounts with their government for its failure to provide them with adequate assistance. Threatening to invade Myanmar accomplishes nothing, just as threatening to invade the U.S. in 2005 would have been counter-productive.

From the perspective of the U.S. imperialists, the real crime of the Myanmar generals is not their callous disregard for the welfare of their own people, for we have witnessed numerous examples of the U.S. pouring money and arms into similar brutal military dictatorships during the past 60 years. No, the real concern of the U.S. is that the Myanmar generals have refused to accept the dictate of U.S. imperialism and have entered an alliance with China, instead.

There have been suggestions that the refusal of the Myanmar military junta to accept foreign troops and aid workers on its soil could constitute a crime against humanity. If it is proved that the junta is actually blocking assistance from reaching the stricken areas, as some claim, they may very well be guilty of such crimes and should be held accountable. However, the attempts by the U.S., British, French and other imperialists to exploit the disaster in order to advance their own imperialist interests in Myanmar is certainly a crime against humanity and they should be held to account for their crimes.

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