

## **UK to double aid to Myanmar**

Bangkok: One of the main aid donors to Myanmar (formerly Burma), the UK government, has announced it is doubling its humanitarian aid to the impoverished country over the next three years, in response to what it describes as a "staggering" humanitarian crisis.

The UK provided around ?8 million in humanitarian aid in 2007, supporting projects run by UN agencies and non-governmental organisations in the fields of health, basic education and poverty alleviation.

It also provided nearly ?1 million to help Burmese refugees who have fled the country.

Over the next three years, the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) will gradually increase aid to Myanmar's most needy people to around ?18 million per year by 2010/2011.

"The scale of humanitarian crisis afflicting the Burmese people is, quite simply, staggering," Douglas Alexander, the UK's secretary of state for international development, said during a recent visit to Bangkok.

### ***Challenging environment***

Myanmar is a highly challenging environment for international humanitarian work, according to most observers. They say the military regime is highly suspicious of foreign aid workers, and domestic civil society groups, and seeks to tightly control their activities.

However, Alexander said DFID's partners, including UN agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), were already successfully delivering aid to Myanmar's needy, without channelling assistance through the government.

"There are very clear and established mechanisms which we use in a range of environments in which we are not able to work with the government, and those are fully implemented in Myanmar," he said.

According to the UN, around one-third of Myanmar's people survive on less than US\$ 1 a day, half of all children fail to complete primary school, and HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria claim hundreds of thousands of lives each year.

In ethnic minority border areas, where the army is still battling armed ethnic minority insurgents, many civilians have been displaced by fighting and conflict, and are living in desperate poverty, the UN and aid groups along the border say.

Myanmar's economic conditions, political repression and conflict have also pushed an estimated 1.5 million people into neighbouring Thailand, where around 140,000 are living in refugee camps, while the rest toil as poorly paid labourers, vulnerable to official harassment and exploitation, UN agencies say.

### ***How the money will be spent***

Alexander, who travelled to the Thai-Myanmar border to visit refugee camps, clinics and other facilities assisting the Burmese in Thailand, said he could not yet say precisely how the increased British humanitarian funding would be spent.

"We have not yet reached a judgement as to the balance of funding between in-country support and cross-border support," he said.

"There are urgent pressing humanitarian needs for people both who have crossed the border ... and those suffering [inside].

"We'll take quite a careful look at where we can secure the maximum return for our investment," he said.

Burma Campaign UK, an activist group, has been calling on DFID to provide greater support for Thailand-based groups that seek to aid people living in the sensitive but highly porous Myanmar border areas, where the military regime restricts aid agencies in-country from working.

Alexander said one of the purposes of his trip was to assess "the ability of the organisations working on the border to scale up their capacity" to address humanitarian needs in the otherwise off-limits border zones.

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