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BURMA: ONE MONTH ON: Aid getting through but thousands of children need help to return to school and rebuild their lives

As families affected by Cyclone Nargis continue their struggle to recover from the disaster, Save the Children, one of the biggest aid agencies operating in Myanmar (Burma), is focusing its attention on getting children back to school.

"Education is vital, and it becomes even more important in the aftermath of an emergency when families are trying hard to regain some sense of normal life for their children" said Country Director Andrew Kirkwood. "Schools are a safe place for children, allowing them to be with other children, to play and to begin dealing with the trauma they have experienced.

"From our experience of responding to emergencies all over the world, education is too frequently under-funded and under-recognised in an emergency response. Investment in education after an emergency is an investment in a child's recovery and the best way to improve the life of affected children and young people."

Hundreds of schools were damaged or destroyed by Cyclone Nargis and much needs to be done to rebuild the education system. Schools in the affected area are starting to re-open and it is vital that further work to rebuild the education system starts now. Damaged schools must be made safe before children can return, and in the meantime Save the Children will be working to ensure that some form of school lessons can be up and running as soon as possible and will be looking at various options including temporary schools in tents.

Save the Children is repairing 32 schools and providing education supplies for 15,000 children in Pyapon and Dedaye in the eastern delta and in Yangon. We are working on another 40 schools in Ngapudaw in the western delta. We have also trained a team of local education staff who are being deployed in the delta areas.

Children are more vulnerable after an emergency as their lives have been turned upside down and the safety and security provided by their homes and villages has often disappeared. As well as helping children get back to some sort of normality, being in school protects children from further harm that may follow a natural disaster, such as the risk of trafficking or child labour.

It is also important that children are provided with knowledge and an explanation of what happened and given the skills to prepare themselves if another disaster were to happen. Save the Children looks to introduce lessons on reducing the risks associated with disasters to help children to understand the risks they face and how to deal with them. Such lessons could include learning about safe places to run to in their village or simply teaching a child to remember where they live and their parents' names in case they become separated.

Kirkwood said: "Teaching a child what to do if they should face a disaster in the future reduces their fear that this will happen again and better prepares them. Simple things can make all the difference."

One month after Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar, Save the Children is getting aid through to the worst affected delta areas and has reached over 280,000 people, including 70,000 children, and is providing food, clean water, shelter equipment, household items and school kits. Save the Children has set up child friendly spaces in camps across the affected areas, which give children a safe place to play and helps them deal with the trauma they have experienced. The child friendly spaces also help trained Save the Children staff to identify and support children who have been separated from their parents by the disaster.

Save the Children is also providing health services through the operations of a floating clinic and several other mobile clinics.

Kirkwood said: "Due to our presence in the country before the cyclone, we were able to provide immediate support to the affected communities. Nevertheless, we urgently need to scale up our response to reach more of the surviving children and families and deliver what we know they need. Lack of food and shelter, access to clean water and education, as well as being separated from parents, are among those issues still faced by children in the remote delta areas."

About Save the Children:

Save the Children has worked in Myanmar for 13 years and has 500 staff in the country, with 300 of them now working on the emergency response. Save the Children is working in 14 of the 15 most affected townships in Yangon and the Ayerwaddy Delta.

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