

In U.S., a Multitude of Forces Drains the Spirit of Giving

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Maybe it's the pinch of \$4-a-gallon gas and the economic downturn. Maybe it's distrust of Burma's ruling junta or concern over human rights violations in China. Or maybe the American people are going through "disaster fatigue," the feeling that we've seen it all before.

But the simple fact is this: In the weeks since a cyclone laid waste to Burma's delta region and an earthquake devastated a central Chinese province -- catastrophes that collectively left 184,000 people dead or missing and displaced millions -- Americans have donated an estimated \$57 million to disaster relief charities as of yesterday.

Compare that with the \$207 million that Americans donated in the first five days after an Indian Ocean tsunami struck southern Asia in 2004. Or the \$226 million raised in five days after hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated the Gulf Coast.

Americans historically respond to natural disasters with an outpouring of giving, but the charitable response to the cyclone that hit Burma on May 3 and the earthquake that struck China on May 12 has been modest at best.

The relief group AmeriCares collected \$10 million within two weeks of the tsunami. But the charity said it has raised a combined \$1 million for its efforts in Burma and China.

"It's very clear that the breadth and depth of the people who have been touched emotionally doesn't compare to the tsunami," said Curtis R. Welling, chief executive of AmeriCares.

The \$57 million estimate was provided by the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University, which surveyed disaster relief charities. As of yesterday, about \$21.7 million had been raised for the cyclone, \$30.9 million for the earthquake and \$4.3 million for either disaster, the survey found. The center also tracked donations after Katrina and the tsunami.

The American Red Cross is leading its peers, having collected \$14 million for the earthquake, \$1.8 million for the cyclone and \$3.8 million for its international relief fund as of yesterday, spokesman Michael Oko said.

Experts attributed the downturn in giving to a medley of forces, including a domestic economy that has left many Americans with little disposable income, a distrust of disaster relief charities and geopolitical tensions.

Charities said they are expecting more donations, particularly from Chinese Americans, who are pooling resources to help in the earthquake's aftermath.

"We're seeing a mobilization of Chinese Americans and the Chinese diaspora that I have never seen before," said Randy Strash, emergency response director for the Christian charity World Vision.

At GlobalGiving, the online philanthropy marketplace, there is growing interest among donors in earthquake relief efforts, marketing director Joan Ochi said.

U.S. disaster relief charities have issued pleas for money to fund short- and long-term efforts.

"These people are going to be suffering for a long time," said Elizabeth Griffin, a spokeswoman for Catholic Relief Services.

In Washington, the Fourth Street Friendship Seventh-Day Adventist Church held a special service Saturday to raise money for victims of the cyclone and the earthquake. The small church collected about \$150 from its members, who said they gave what they could afford.

"We are all connected. . . . I think everyone should try to help," said Arnette Ramsey of Takoma Park, who gave \$25.

Overall totals are unlikely to reach the levels of giving seen after the tsunami and Katrina, but some charity leaders said these are unfair comparisons because Katrina occurred on domestic soil and the tsunami was an unusual global phenomenon.

The tsunami "had so many factors that cried out, that were of immediate interest to people around the world," said Mike Kiernan, a spokesman for Save the Children. "It hit 12 countries, it took place the day after Christmas . . . and there were individual stories focused on survival and loss that involved Americans and Europeans."

Some donors have lost confidence in disaster relief charities after some agencies' fumbled responses to Katrina and the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, said Eric Kessler, managing director of District-based Arabella Philanthropic Investment Advisors.

"I think a lot of people cringe when the check is written because there is not a lot of confidence in how the money is being used and overseen," Kessler said.

He said many clients are asking sophisticated questions about the impact of their dollars as they consider whether to give.

"They want to see a recovery plan," Kessler said. "They want to know how the money is being used and what impact it is having."

The overriding factor hampering donations, experts said, is geopolitics.

Burma's strict military regime has blocked many foreign reporters and aid workers from entering the country. This has resulted in little media coverage, particularly by television networks.

Experts said the round-the-clock coverage by cable news stations of the tsunami and Katrina influenced charitable giving.

In addition, Americans might be wary of donating to charities helping cyclone refugees, considering the limits imposed by the Burmese government.

Direct Relief International sent about \$200,000 worth of antibiotics, surgical kits and other medical supplies to Burma. But the government confiscated the supplies and has withheld them from aid workers, spokesman Jim Prosser said.

Patrick M. Rooney, research director at the Indiana center, said the Burmese government has created "a case study in how to botch disaster relief fundraising."

"They're making it almost impossible for anyone to want to give, in spite of their clear need, because of their insane and bizarre and idiotic behaviors," Rooney said.

In China, the Communist government has mobilized its military and resources in an extraordinarily public display of aid to an estimated 5 million displaced people. In the first three days after the quake, Chinese citizens reportedly donated \$192 million to help their countrymen, an unprecedented sum for a country that bans independent nongovernmental organizations and has no organized philanthropy.

This has left many Americans wondering how their charitable dollars can be useful in a nation trying to show that it can handle the relief efforts on its own, experts said.

"I think it's very wise for a lot of donors to be holding back and waiting until there's an opportunity to really get the resources to do the most good," said Melissa A. Berman, president of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors.