

Justice in the Aftermath: Lawyers' Role in Natural Disaster Response in Myanmar

1. Introduction (2 minutes)

Good afternoon, everyone,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today on a topic that is urgent and often overlooked: “Justice in the Aftermath: Lawyers’ Role in Natural Disaster Response in Myanmar.”

Natural disasters not only destroy homes, infrastructure, and livelihoods but also violate rights, silence voices, and reveal deep social inequalities. During a crisis, people require more than food, water, and shelter; they need legal protection.

They deserve justice. This is why lawyers play an essential role, serving as guardians of rights during times of profound vulnerability. Their commitment to advocating for the oppressed empowers those who need support the most.

2. Myanmar's Natural Disaster Context (2 minutes)

Myanmar is recognized as one of the most disaster-prone countries globally, facing a multitude of natural hazards, including tropical cyclones, earthquakes, and flooding. The country's geographical location, combined with its diverse climate and topography, makes it particularly vulnerable to these events. Frequent monsoons bring heavy rains that can lead to devastating landslides and significant flooding, while the coastal regions are often affected by powerful storms. Additionally, the region's seismic activity poses a constant threat of earthquakes. These disasters not only disrupt the lives of millions but also challenge the nation's efforts towards sustainable development and recovery.

From Cyclone Nargis in 2008 to ongoing seasonal flooding and landslides, natural disasters have caused immense destruction, especially in rural areas and among ethnic minorities.

However, beyond the physical destruction, disasters often leave behind:

- People without identity documentation
- Families displaced with no proof of land or housing
- Unequal access to compensation or relief

Disasters do not affect everyone equally, and in Myanmar, the most vulnerable are often the most invisible in recovery efforts.

3. The Role of Lawyers in Disaster Response (3 minutes)

In such times, lawyers serve as legal first responders.

Their role includes:

Legal Aid and Representation

- Assisting victims in filing compensation claims
- Challenging unfair evictions or misuse of emergency powers

Protecting Housing, Land, and Property (HLP) Rights

- Ensuring disaster recovery does not lead to land grabs or forced relocation

Supporting Legal Documentation

- Helping people replace lost ID cards, land titles, or birth certificates, which are necessary to access aid

Monitoring and Advocacy

- Holding authorities accountable for fair, transparent recovery processes

Lawyers play a critical role that extends far beyond merely representing clients in court. They are vital advocates for human dignity and equal rights, especially during periods of crisis and recovery. In these challenging times, they work tirelessly to ensure that the rights of individuals are protected and upheld, navigating complex legal frameworks and providing guidance to those who may be vulnerable or marginalized. Their expertise enables them to address injustices, advocate for fair treatment, and contribute to the restoration of societal order, all while promoting a sense of accountability and justice that is essential for healing communities and fostering resilience in the face of adversity.

4. Legal and Human Rights Challenges (3 minutes)

Despite their importance, lawyers in Myanmar face serious challenges in disaster settings:

- Weak rule of law in remote areas
- Limited public legal awareness
- Restricted access to courts or legal institutions during emergencies
- Safety risks for lawyers challenging powerful interests or government decisions

In politically sensitive environments, even legal aid work can be dangerous. Yet many continue, because the need is too great to ignore.

5. Case Examples (2 minutes)

Cyclone Nargis (2008)

- Thousands lost their land.
- Lawyers helped communities resist land seizures disguised as "recovery projects".

Floods in Mon and Kayin States

- Local legal groups assisted displaced persons in applying for replacement documents, thereby enabling them to access aid.

These examples demonstrate that legal work is central to achieving a fair recovery, even if it remains unnoticed.

Earthquake in NPT, Mandalay, Sagaing, Inlay (2025)

6. Moving Forward: Recommendations (2 minutes)

To ensure justice in disaster response, we must:

1. Expand legal aid networks in rural and disaster-prone areas
2. Train lawyers in humanitarian law and emergency response
3. Ensure that disaster laws and policies protect rights, not just property
4. Build strong partnerships between lawyers, NGOs, and humanitarian actors

Most importantly, we must recognize that justice is not separate from recovery — it is a core part of it.

7. Conclusion (1 minute)

In summary, while natural disasters are unavoidable, the resulting injustices are not inevitable. Legal professionals need to harness their influence and fulfill their duty to ensure that recovery processes are equitable and grounded in the protection of rights.

Thank you.