



# The RC Interview



*Bishow Parajuli*  
MYANMAR

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Bishow Parajuli could scarcely have imagined a more challenging transition to his new post as Resident Coordinator in Myanmar.

His predecessor had been expelled, the country was facing major political challenges, and the military government was deeply suspicious of foreign engagement. Then, on May 2, a devastating cyclone ripped through the Delta region – leaving 140,000 people dead and 2.4 million displaced.

Into this maelstrom came Mr Parajuli, previously the head of the World Food Programme in Egypt, with 25 years of humanitarian and development experience in several countries. He arrived to find an office of one—himself—and the need to prepare a humanitarian response to the worst disaster in the country’s history as well as a visit by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

“When I arrived, I was the only person in the RC office. There was a major disaster, and in a week the Secretary-General was arriving” he recalls.

**What to do?** For Mr. Parajuli the answer was clear. Build trust, demonstrate by example, stay positive and keep the focus on the fundamental mission: to address the humanitarian needs of a population recovering from cyclone Nargis, and to provide overall support for improving the lives of ordinary people.

Yet that is easier said than done. “There is so much to do, so much complexity to the issues; from the simplest administration to very complicated negotiations,” he explains.

“The range of factors that needs to be engaged on a daily basis is enormous: from delicate political negotiations, delivering humanitarian support, the issue of protection, lobbying for donor resources, coordinating among the UN system—and also thinking through how we can plan and prepare ourselves in the long term.”

Complicating matters, an RC faces “conflicting priorities, conflicting interests. Some people want to talk about pushing the agenda on sensitive issues. Yet if you push that, then you can break relations and then you can’t go forward. So it’s a

balancing act. You need patience, to be strategic, tactful and positive. Persistent.”

“For me the success of the UN is the key, and we needed a team effort. I am committed to doing my share to bring that success. I am behind that principle, and will make it happen; pushing from my side to rebuild effective working relations with the authorities so that we can help the most vulnerable throughout the country. Because everything falls on that parameter.”

“You need to be very neutral, very objective, and very honest in what you are doing. You need to clearly demonstrate that with actions,” he says.



The post-cyclone recovery has provided a powerful focus for relationship-building in a context where “the affected population is in the front row.” A new tripartite group was formed—between the government, the UN and ASEAN—which meets weekly. There has been a steady improvement in working relations.

Mr Parajuli now wants to continue the improvements during the recovery phase and to extend these to the rest of the country. “At the moment my preoccupation has been to push this successful story for the period of post-Nargis recovery and extend the good practices to outside the delta region, for the benefit for the other parts of Myanmar,” he says. “At all opportunities, I am bringing that out in public discussion.”

He also hopes to expand the UN’s growing coherence in the relief effort to the longer term development sphere. “As a starting point, we held a two-day retreat—to identify jointly with the country team what we’re going to do.

“Now we are moving to action; making a strategic assessment and developing a framework of assistance.”

But meetings alone are clearly not enough. “I want every meeting to come out with added value; otherwise I will feel it’s a waste of time. That comes from my WFP engagement. I like to deliver results,” says Mr Parajuli.

“In the UN we talk a lot. We need to steer towards action, deliverables. How we are improving the lives of the people today from yesterday.”

It isn’t easy. To begin with, Mr Parajuli has had to build his own office’s capacity from scratch. “The RC Office didn’t have many resources as such. I had to depend on others... and you belonged to everybody, which means you belonged to nobody.”

There are also significant challenges to meshing the system into a seamless whole. “There are lots of inconsistencies even within the UN Development Group; so we need to come to a common point,” says Mr Parajuli.

His fundamental belief is that if everyone pulls together, “the UN really can make a huge difference”. ODA per capita for this country is less than \$2 a year, compared to 20 times more for the neighbor next door. There is a huge disparity. We want to contribute to continuous engagement and increased assistance, reaching the people, to make their lives different for tomorrow.”

Ultimately, says Mr Parajuli, people-focused commitment is what makes it all possible. “I grew up in a village. I have seen the poverty, I have seen the suffering; and I feel I am in a very fortunate position to work towards making a difference,” he says.

“It’s in my blood, it’s in my heart, it’s in my mind. That’s why all this energy comes to me. I have this opportunity, and I don’t want to miss it. That’s why I give the maximum I can every moment in my life in the job I’m in. That’s me.”

- Mark Turner



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