NATURAL DISASTER / MYANMA

Did climate change cause cyclone Nargis?

More than 100,000 people,
according to unofficial esti-
mate are feared dead after
cyclone Nargis tore through Myanmar
late May 2 night. Another 43,000 people
were missing four days after the disaster. For over 10 hours, wind travelling upto 241 km per hour swept through the Irrawaddy delta region—known as Myanmar's rice bowl—and dumped 51 cm of rain. The cyclone ravaged the capital, Yangon, and other cities such as Bogalay, Labutta and Pyapon.
Myanmar's Ministry for Relief and
Resettlement said the cyclone was one of the country's worst natural disasters and the second largest in the region after the tsunami of 2004. India's meteorological agency, which monitors cyclones in the

Indian Ocean, says it warned the Myanmar authorities 48 hours before the storm struck. Citizens, however, complain they were not alerted about the severity of the cyclone.
The actual scale of disaster is gradu-
ally unfolding after Myanmar's military government cautiously allowed interna-tional aid agencies to begin relief opera-tions in the isolated country. While some, including the UN, are criticizing the military junta for its lack of prepara-tion for the disaster, ASEAN Chief Surin Pitsuwan has blamed the massive death toll on the destruction of mangrove forests that served as a buffer from sea waves and storms.
Meanwhile, intensification of
cyclone Nargis at the last moment—

changing gear from Category-one to Category-four cyclone just before it made the landfall—has spurred a debate among climate scientists: Are tropical cyclones occurring more often, producing more powerful storms, because of global warming?
Tropical storms typically begin to
brew in the Northern Hemisphere around this time of the year as ocean waters warm up. But their intensity has roughly doubled since the 1960s, news agency AFP quotes Kerry Emanuel, pro-fessor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the us, as saying. "The massive increase has especially occurred over the last three decades, mirroring a rise in global warming...The trend stepped up from the mid-1990s, when global mean temperatures began to scale ever-higher annual peaks," says Emanuel. Though many climate scien-tists argue that such judgments are pre-mature, cyclone Nargis is the third high intensity storm in the space of a year in the northern Indian Ocean.
The Intergovernmental Panel on
Climate Change (IPCC) too does not paint a rosy picture of the future. The 2007 IPCC report states: There has been a much larger increase in the intensity of cyclones since 1970 in some regions. It is likely that future tropical cyclones will become more intense, packing heavy winds and rain. •

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