



PHOTO: AP

WASTE NO TIME: Myanmar children drinking clean water distributed on the outskirts of Yangon. Aid groups have emphasised the distribution of clean water and food to cyclone victims, but human waste is a weapon of mass destruction and must be dealt with swiftly.

» CURBING SPREAD OF DISEASES IN POST-CYCLONE MYANMAR

Send in the toilets

By ROSE GEORGE

IT IS the rainy season in Myanmar. It is also cholera season. When Cyclone Nargis arrived earlier this month, the waters it unleashed destroyed houses and killed people and livestock. The storm also devastated other things that have not made the headlines, but that can mean the difference between life and death: toilets.

Even before the cyclone, 75 per cent of Myanmar people had no latrines. Like some 2.6 billion other people worldwide, they do their business by roadsides, on train tracks or wherever they can. But the few latrines that did exist in the Irrawaddy delta are now flooded or flattened, and their contents have seeped into already filthy waters.

So what? There are other priorities, are there not? Food, shelter and clean water are what aid agencies emphasise. But human excrement is a weapon of mass destruction. A gram of human faeces can contain up to 10 million viruses. At least 50 communicable diseases – including cholera, meningitis and typhoid – travel from host to host in human excrement.

It does not take much: a small child, maybe, who plays in soil where people have been defecating, then dips his fingers in the family rice pot. The aftermath of a disaster like Cyclone Nargis – with masses of weakened people on the move – is a communicable disease paradise.

The priority is containment. That is as fancy as it sounds: With the water table only 20cm below the surface in Myanmar, it is of little use to dig pit latrines, so buckets or tanks for human waste are needed instead. Providing such things is made harder by the refusal of Myanmar's government to accept help. And it is also hampered by our unwillingness to even talk about it.

In our sanitary, plumbed lives, the toilet – an engineering marvel – removes waste out of sight and out of mind. As Steven Pinker recently wrote in *The Stuff Of Thought*, the vocabulary of excretion has sneaked in and taken the taboo place previously held by religious words – and this switch parallels the rise of sewers and the sanitising of excrement.

A substance common to

us all, and as vital to life as breathing, has become unspeakable, and particularly in the polite and powerful circles that could do something about its deadly effects.

There is no place for squeamishness when – even without complicated and difficult disasters like Myanmar's – diarrhoea trails only pneumonia as the biggest killer of small children in the world, greater than tuberculosis, Aids or malaria, in numbers equivalent to a jumbo jet crashing every hour.

Humanitarian aid agencies use the shorthand "WatSan" for "water and sanitation". There is a reason those two words are not in alphabetical order, and it is not poetry. When it comes to prioritising aid, water has always received the lion's share of attention and money.

Mr Eddy Perez, a sanitation expert at the World Bank's Water and Sanitation Programme, often shows an image of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito from the movie *Twins*. One represents water and the other sanitation, and he does not have to spell out which is which.

Most developing countries spend less than 0.5 per cent of their gross domestic product on WatSan, and only 12 per cent to 15 per cent of that in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa goes to sanitation, according to the 2006 United Nations Human Development Report.

Celebrities like Matt Damon and Jay-Z line up to talk about water. Shiny taps and clean water make good pictures. I have never seen a movie star pictured in front of a new latrine, though it can double its user's lifespan.

Of course food and water are crucial. But faeces can undermine both. If people are eating faecal particles, no amount of high-energy biscuits will make them well.

In poor countries, diarrhoea is the reason you find malnourished children in well-fed families. It is why millions of girls drop out of school, and why millions of dollars' worth of productivity is lost from workers sick with this week's bout of dysentery.

Good disposal of human excreta can reduce diarrhoea by 40 per cent. Washing hands reduces it still further. Health economists reckon that every dollar in-

vested in sanitation can save US\$7 (\$\$10) on health costs and lost productivity. No wonder the readers of *The British Medical Journal* last year voted sanitation the greatest medical milestone ever, over penicillin and anaesthesia.

In Myanmar, aid agencies are struggling to recruit Asian workers who are more acceptable to the country's paranoid junta. If these people can get in, they will start dispensing buckets.

These are very early stages, Mr Patrick McCormick, a spokesman for Unicef, told me. Everything is still chaotic. But these early days of disaster aftermath provide the cracks into which cholera sneaks.

This year, the International Year of Sanitation, is a fine time to address a pointless and damaging conversational taboo. Solving sanitation is about more than semantics. But our refusal to talk about it says something about us, and none of it good.

The writer is the author of the forthcoming *The Big Necessity: The Unmentionable World of Human Waste And Why It Matters*.