

**San Jose State University**

---

**From the Selected Works of Gil J. Villagran**

---

May 17, 2008

# What Good is a Government If It Cannot Protect Its Citizens

Gil J. Villagran



Available at: [https://works.bepress.com/gil\\_villagran/71/](https://works.bepress.com/gil_villagran/71/)

# **What good is a government if it cannot protect its citizens?**

**Lessons must be learned by all governments before the next tragedy**

by **Gil Villagrán, MSW**

El Observador, San Jose, May 17, 2008

As we look to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in our nation and presently at China with thousands dead and more trapped, dying in collapsed buildings, and then at Burma after a cyclone destroyed whole cities, sixty thousand missing; it is critical to ask: What is the purpose of government, if not to protect the people from such forces that kill thousands in moments and then hundreds of thousands more due to inadequate government response? The only legitimate purpose of government is to create an infrastructure for harmonious living by all its citizens and to mitigate the harmful effects of natural phenomenon as earthquakes, hurricanes (cyclones), or public health crisis as epidemics, environmental toxicity.

A good government will create an infrastructure of agencies to anticipate such disasters which are usually not sudden and without warning, and act immediately to provide lifesaving services to victims. A smart government will use scientific knowledge to prevent human made tragedies by ensuring that all structures are well constructed and in areas that will not be subject to predictable natural events, will ensure that nature is understood and respected rather than modified to benefit developers who build on inter-tidal areas, marshes, bays or steep mountainsides. A smart government will ensure the safety of air, water, food, and medicine. A smart government will use science to determine safety, rather than allow industry to determine what is safe.

Hurricane Katrina was not a sudden storm that came out of nowhere, but rather one of dozens of annual storms capable of transforming the natural power of wind and ocean to wreck havoc. Such storms are tracked by satellites that reported Katrina was moving toward New Orleans days before it destroyed the city and surrounding areas. Our Commander-in-Chief was AWOL in the face of Katrina's attack and derelict in his duty to marshal all branches of government dedicated specifically to respond to such disasters.

Likewise in China and Burma we see tragic consequences of government ineptitude to prevent disasters and respond immediately, effectively after a disaster. In China, though earthquakes cannot be prevented, earthquake zones are known, as is earthquake survivable construction. But building code enforcement is often negotiated by bribes and governments more eager for development than safety.

In Burma, its military dictatorship holds an iron grip on its citizens even in the face of disaster-not allowing entry to foreign rescue workers, limiting even disaster supplies. There is evidence that food and other supplies are being hoarded by the military, while people living in fecal infested flood waters are offered moldy rice. Meanwhile, shiploads of food and supplies from other nations await permission from the military to allow entry.

Mendacity and ineptitude are a deadly combination in governmental decisions, deadly for victims of governmental action, such as in war, or governmental inaction as we now witness. Such governments are not worthy of public confidence.

What can be done? The United Nations begins to recognize the idea of "Responsibility to Protect" as a defining role of all governments, to protect all people living in its territory no matter ethnicity, gender, religion, class, or citizenship status. When a government fails to protect, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty seeks to establish "the foundations for a new normative and operational consensus on the role of military intervention for humanitarian purposes." To establish a "principle of international responsibility to protect foreign populations under threat of mass killings, ethnic cleansing, or inadequate and ineffective governmental response, where these governments are either complicit or ineffectual."

Unless the United Nations accepts its role, without timidity, to legitimately intervene to protect humans, without invitation when agreement cannot be negotiated with a nation state, we will continue to witness brutal, corrupt, or inept governments allowing massive suffering by citizen who are in realty--victims of these illegitimate governments. To protect its citizens is the only legitimate role of any government.