

# Nargis Documentary to Premiere in Rangoon

By [HPYO WAI THA / THE IRRAWADDY](#) | September 7, 2012 |

RANGOON—For nearly three years, the creators of this award-winning documentary would not reveal their true identities and could not screen the film in their own country.

“*Nargis—When Time Stopped Breathing*” is Burma’s first ever feature-length documentary made by native filmmakers who captured the aftermath of the 2008 Cyclone Nargis disaster in *the Irrawaddy* delta which killed nearly 140,000 people.

Fearing that their footage of mass destruction and death would be hugely embarrassing to the military junta, which was widely cited for incompetence in handling the post-disaster response, the documentarists chose to maintain a low-profile. They used pseudonyms on the film credits and did not release the film in Burma.

It was, however, screened at 16 international film festivals and won four awards.

Now, encouraged by reformist President Thein Sein’s moves to ease restrictions on media, the film crew has collectively decided to stage a national premiere on Saturday, Sept. 8, in Rangoon—but this time with their true identities run on the credits.

Pe Maung Same, one of the directors of the documentary, told *The Irrawaddy* that he would use the first public screening of the film as a platform to apologize and ask forgiveness from the cyclone survivors who appear in the 90-minute film.

“I feel ashamed that we had to hide under the cloak of anonymity while those in the delta who suffered so much appeared in the flesh in front of our cameras,” he said.

Film cameraman Thaidhhi is one of the organizers of the Wathan Film Festival which will premiere the Nargis documentary on Saturday. He said that it was a group decision by the film crew to use their real names on the credits this time.

“Even at international film festivals, we went with fake credits,” he said.

“But we think it’s time for a public screening in Burma—now that the government seems more flexible.”

German filmmaker Ulrike Schaz tutored several members of the documentary film crew at Yangon Film School (YFS). She said that she felt excited in anticipation of the screening in Rangoon this weekend.

However, she admits it was an anxious time for her when some of her students set off for *the Irrawaddy* delta just days after the cyclone had made landfall on May 2, 2008.

“At that time, we were sitting and waiting for their return,” she said. “We were worried that they would get arrested because filming the aftermath was strictly forbidden.

“But when they came back with the footage it was a tremendous relief. As their teacher, I’m very proud of what they did.”

Thaiddhi said the crew visited the affected area several times over a three-month period to shoot footage and interview victims of what was one of the world’s worst natural disasters in living memory.

“Our hearts went out to those people, and we wanted to record their suffering so that outsiders could understand,” he said.

Thaiddhi said the team rarely faced harassment from security forces because they always travelled with relief supplies for the people in distress, and the authorities simply ignored them or took them for a “bunch of shutter-happy city-folk taking pictures of their charity trip to the delta.”

At one relief center, he said, the crew met a group of parents who had lost their children to a tidal surge. One of the bereaved mothers told him: “I’d rather my family had died of poisoning than being taken by that cyclone.”

Another grief-stricken father whose baby girl was killed by the storm told them he cried himself to sleep very night, tormenting himself with the memory of his daughter dancing gleefully in the house on that fateful evening.

The disaster took its toll on the crew and many felt despair and trauma after returning from the harrowing experience.

“The more people we interviewed, the more we felt their pain. We were unable to smile for days after,” said Thaiddhi.

Myo Min Khin, one of the editors of the report, told *The Irrawaddy* that they tried to focus only on the human side of the disaster rather than look for someone to blame or analyze the authorities' stuttering relief effort.

“We concentrated on the emotional nightmare the survivors bore—what was going on inside their heads. We edited the footage to emphasize their trauma and how they struggled to survive in the wake of the cyclone.”

As the founder of YFS and the co-producer of the film, Lindsey Merrison said she was proud of her students who did an incredible job under difficult circumstances. She said she was deeply affected by the humane dimension of the unedited filmed material her students captured, and was immediately convinced that this footage would be crucial in providing evidence of what happened during and after the May 2, 2008, tragedy.

“I'm honored to have been a part of the whole process—from inception to the final product,” she said.

“None of us can predict how this deeply emotional work will be received, but I would like to think that, given the recent moves towards reform and openness in Myanmar, this film will be judged on its own merit,” she added.

*“Nargis—When Time Stopped Breathing” will premiere at the Maha Santi Sukha Buddhist Center in Rangoon on Sept. 8 as part of the Wathan Film Festival 2012.*