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Price of Burma intervention

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

From Prof David N. Gibbs.

Sir, Philip Stephens ("Burma's victims pay the bill for foreign policy realism", May 16) advocates military intervention in Burma to alleviate civilian suffering and to aid victims of the recent cyclone. He neglects to consider two problems: Interventions can have unpredictable effects, and there is no guarantee they will help the target populations. There is always the risk that military action will leave the problem worse than before. Let us not forget that the Iraq war was sold to the public as being (in part) a humanitarian effort to save the Iraqi people from a tyrannical dictatorship.

A wide range of intellectuals endorsed the war on this basis. Yet the Iraq war has become a humanitarian catastrophe, causing hundreds of thousands of deaths and making the Iraqi people even worse off than they were under Saddam Hussein. Surely, this example should make us cautious about undertaking yet another "humanitarian" intervention, this time in Burma. Interventions are extremely expensive and divert resources from other, possibly more worthy activity. Consider once again the Iraq intervention, which is likely to end up costing (according to estimates by Joseph Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes) more than \$2,000bn.

In the long run, such profligate overspending on intervention will divert funds from such activities as fighting global climate change and endemic disease. De we need another military intervention that will yet again divert resources from more genuinely humanitarian action?

Mr Stephens is correct that the Burmese government has been criminally negligent, in preventing external aid from reaching the cyclone victims. But surely there are better ways to handle this problem than sending in the 82nd Airborne Division.

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