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From Orlando Sentinel

# Disasters trigger 'donor fatigue,' experts say

## The recent series of global tragedies may have overwhelmed Americans.

Lisa Tolin | The Associated Press  
May 20, 2008

NEW YORK - The numbers are almost too large to fathom, so many stop trying. As bodies pile up in disaster after global disaster, even the most sympathetic souls can turn away.

Charities know this as "donor fatigue," but it might be more accurately described as disaster fatigue -- the sense that these events are neverending, uncontrollable and overwhelming. Experts say it is one reason Americans have contributed relatively little so far to victims of the Myanmar cyclone and China's earthquake.

Ironically, the more bad news there is, the less likely people may be to give.

"Hearing about too many disasters makes some people not give at all, when they would have if it had been just one disaster," said Michal Ann Strahilevitz, who teaches marketing at Golden Gate University and specializes in the factors at play in charitable giving.

Compared with disasters such as the Asian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina, those in China and Myanmar have generated just a trickle of aid. As of Friday, Americans had given about \$12.1 million to charities for Myanmar, according to the Center on Philanthropy at [Indiana University](#). The group said Monday that it was too soon to count contributions to China.

A number of factors may be at play in the slow American response, including a lack of sympathy for the repressive governments involved, doubts about whether aid will get through, and an inclination to save pennies because of shaky economic times at home.

But Americans also may have been influenced by the quick succession of monumental catastrophes in two distant lands. At least 130,000 people are dead or missing in the Myanmar cyclone, and the death toll in China's earthquake is expected to surpass 50,000.

"For the vast number of Americans, if they just gave to some disaster far away and then another disaster happens, in their mind that's clumped as 'faraway disaster,'" Strahilevitz says. "So they will feel, 'I just

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gave to a faraway disaster.' "

This problem came up after the 2004 Asian tsunami, an event that brought \$1.92 billion in charity from the United States, according to the Giving USA Foundation. Hurricane Katrina eight months later generated even more: \$5.3 billion.

But then fatigue seemed to set in. The earthquake in Pakistan that killed nearly 80,000 people generated just \$150 million from Americans. And the Guatemala mudslide shortly thereafter that killed at least 800 was virtually forgotten.

If one disaster can be galvanizing, several in a row can be paralyzing.

"It's too much pain, too much tragedy for someone to process, and so we tend to pull ourselves away from it and either close off from it out of psychological defense, or it overwhelms us," says Cynthia Edwards, a psychology professor at Meredith College in Raleigh, [N.C.](#)

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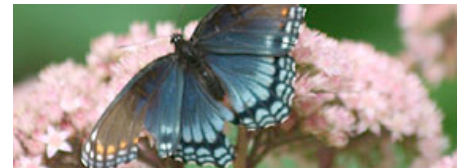


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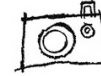
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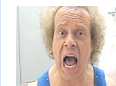
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