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Tsunami disaster

# Two weeks on - necessities still lacking

- IV Online magazine - 2005 - IV363 - January 2005 -

Publication date: Friday 14 January 2005

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**In the days since the tsunami hit South Asia, the enormous death toll has been rising daily. It is likely that we will never know how many lost their lives. More than two weeks after devastation struck so many communities, thousands upon thousands lack the necessities of survival - clean drinking water, food and in many cases medical supplies.**

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/30-tsunami.jpg>]

While some of that tragic loss of life is an inevitable consequence of the movement of tectonic plates, many, many others could have been saved if the human reaction both before and after December 26 had been different. Western "civilization" prides itself on spending billions on exploring space but cannot or will not provide the essentials to poor fisherman, traders and other poor people whose lives, livelihoods and communities have been destroyed.

The unfolding of events has confirmed the basic framework of our first responses; that the poor and oppressed always pay the greatest price for ecological disasters and the stark contrast between the generosity of working people and the cynicism of politicians. A number of new features have become clear, while others have evidently increased in importance.

The effects of the tsunami were worst in those areas which are among those where capitalist globalisation has been wreaking its greatest profits - and destroying the natural environment. The Thai and Sri Lankan coasts in particular which have become increasingly developed as tourist resorts for Western holiday makers suffered greater devastation than those areas where the ancient mangrove swamps were left undisturbed.

It is not just the growth of tourism either, but the developing of factory measures in the fishing industry in particular through the development of shrimp farms - which also have had the effect of depriving thousands of traditional fishermen of their livelihood.

Mangrove swamps used to cover 75 per cent of the coastlines of tropical and sub-tropical countries, according to the US based Mangrove Action Project, but today less than 50 per cent remains - half of which is degraded. Yet again, capitalist globalisation has blood on its hands.

While the Jakarta summit has as yet reached no conclusion on a limited moratorium on debt servicing, the countries affected by the tsunami pay \$78 billion dollars per annum - or \$214 billion per day. Indonesia alone pays out \$25 billion annually. Activists need to demand the complete cancellation of the debt for the region.

This is not at all counterposed as some have suggested to fighting poverty in Africa - a victory against the debt anywhere in the world would give an enormous boost to campaigners elsewhere.

Once he decided to emerge from his festive holiday on his Texan ranch, George Bush president of the world's only super-power tried to use the sense of shock engendered by the tragedy to recoup the image of US imperialism, which has taken such a battering as a result of the murderous intervention in Iraq.

This, together with his long-running feud with the UN, was behind his short-lived attempt to set up his regional core group to co-ordinate the response to the calamity, And if TV screens and newspaper front pages filled with pictures of the devastation wrought by nature kept the continued disruption to the US plans for the Iraqi elections at the end of the month by the Iraqi resistance out of the headlines, so much the better. Few in the region are likely to buy the notion that this proves that Bush and the US establishment have nothing against Muslims - but perhaps it helps PR at home.

The regimes in the region don't have clean hands either.

Even the mainstream media have noticed some of what has been going on in Aceh, which has been under military rule since May 2003 when the Indonesian government in Jakarta poured in more than 50,000 troops in an attempt to crush separatist rebels. The area remains under the effective control of the army, which is responsible for much of the relief effort, or lack of it.

Initially the central authorities tried to keep NGO relief workers out of the province close to the epicentre of the quake, where vast areas of the country had been completely destroyed.

On December 30 David Nabarro, head of the World Health Organisation crisis team, was quoted as saying about Aceh "Perhaps as many as five million people are not able to access what they need for living. Either they cannot get water, or their sanitation is inadequate or they cannot get food."

Hospitals were overwhelmed by patients, with one of the three hospitals operating in Banda Aceh on having to turn away victims the same. One doctor said that the hospital needed at least 200 more doctors and 600 paramedics, as well as vitamins and basic medicines to treat diarrhoea and influenza. With this amount of media attention focused on them, exclusion was no longer an option, so the military then resorted to maintaining tight control. But the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (Free Aceh Movement or Gam) has been complaining since January 2 of increased military activity against them while Indonesian authorities said on January 8 that there had been at least three fire fights between soldiers and Gam in recent days.

Even Sidney Blumenthal, former senior advisor to President Clinton has pitched up complaining about the activities of the Indonesian military and Bush's for them against what he refers to as a "popular separatist movement" in an article in the Guardian on January 6. This critique comes as he says in the context of a battle by the neo-cons in Washington to lift sanctions against the Indonesian military. While having no confidence in Blumenthal's motives - and no memory of him supporting the people of Aceh when his former boss was in the White House, on this occasion we agree with him.

In Sri Lanka even the mainstream press have noticed the contrast between the well-organised relief efforts in the areas under the control of the Tamil Tigers and the pathetic efforts of the government in Colombo. On January 8 the government in Colombo prevented UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan travelling to areas under the control of the LTTE - the Tamil Tigers - during a visit to the country. UN officials protested, and so have the Tigers rather more vigorously.

At the same time, with the connivance of the government of Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunge US troops have been quick to arrive in Sri Lanka. As the New Left Front statement points out elsewhere on this site ([hyperlink](#)) "On the one hand, this is an opportunity for the US to gain a foothold with designs to suppress the LTTE and control the Tamil liberation struggle on behalf of local capitalist rulers. On the other, it also provides an opening for the US not only to arm-twist Sri Lanka to go along with global capitalism, but also to use Sri Lanka's strategic location to consolidate its neo-colonial agenda all the more blatantly."

The left internationally needs to join with those in Sri Lanka and Indonesia campaigning for self-determination for the Tamils and the people of Aceh, and for the withdrawal of troops whether sent by Washington, Colombo or Jakarta from these areas.

Meanwhile, the military regime in Burma has denied that there have been a more than a handful of deaths in that country and is still preventing outside agencies visiting to see for themselves.

The Thai government has been accused of playing down warnings of the disaster in an attempt to protect the country's lucrative tourist trade. Officers from the country's meteorological department said information sent to tourist resorts had deliberately underestimated the threat. One hour before disaster struck the Thai coast the authorities

knew a wave was out there, but they were not sure how big it was and if it would reach Thailand. They therefore decided to take the risk of not warning the threatened coast areas because a failure in the prediction would be harmful to the tourist industry. According to the Bangkok newspaper "The Nation" the decision was taken at an emergency meeting at Cha-am led by the director-general of the Meteorological department of Thailand.

In India, where Congress were re-elected to government after the defeat of the BJP in the General Election last May returned to that country's traditional line of non-intervention and self-sufficiency, party to portray itself as an important power in the region. This also may lie behind its apparent competition with Japan for control of an early-warning system in the Pacific if one is eventually installed.

As far as the situation on the Andaman and Nicobar islands, which have been Indian territories since independence in 1947, it seems likely that the presence of an Indian Air Force base on Car Nicobar plays more of a role in this insistence than concern for the fate of the indigenous peoples. This suspicion would seem to be confirmed by the visit of Prime Minister Singh to Port Blair, capital of the territory, on January 9, as he only met with military personnel and did not bother with other communities.

Many of the indigenous tribes live on high ground away from the coast and therefore didn't suffer such loss. Hardest hit was the Nicobarese, a community that lives by the sea and may have lost as many as one fifth of its population of 28,600.

In terms of ecological destruction, some of the smaller coral islands have been completely washed away, while one island, Trinket has been cut in two by the flooding. Turtles, salt-water crocodiles and sea cows have been seriously affected, though the long-term effect on these populations will take longer to see.

Elsewhere in India, there are reports of lower caste people being forced out of refugee camps in Andhra Pradesh without as yet any response by local or national government. Yet again the most oppressed suffer the most.

But if we are critical of the actions, or inactions of governments in the region, we are clear that it is the project of US imperialism that will benefit most from these developments, whether in terms of increasing militarisation or through "reconstruction" projects which will line the pockets of multinational companies, and local middlemen while further impoverishing the majority of the population of the region and damaging the local environment yet more. Very few poor people in these countries have any title to land and so are under enormous threat of loosing even more if "megadevelopments" are put in place.

But we don't want the rest of the region to become like the US military base on Diego Garcia - which of course did have ample warning of the tsunami - where the indigenous people have been completely driven out.

We know that global warming and other results of human intervention under capitalism will make dramatic weather patterns and other catastrophic events more likely.

The response of governments and rulers to this cataclysmic event has confirmed, time and again, many of the most barbaric features of late capitalism. At the same time, the humanity and generosity of ordinary people has been also underlined.

The relief efforts and subsequent reconstruction needed when such events do take place need to be under the control of local people not governments and the military.

We want health, education, transport, food and shelter for everyone, not war for profits.

## **Two weeks on - necessities still lacking**

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Our conviction that another, socialist world is urgently necessary has been strengthened over these last days.