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Tsunami Catastrophe

Not Just a Natural Disaster

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The December 26 2004 tsunami disaster in South Asia was yet another of those 'natural' disasters which impacts mainly on the poor and the dispossessed. This time there are thousands of Western tourists dead, tragedy enough in itself, but the thousands of bereavements suffered by Western families (especially from the Scandinavian countries) are dwarfed by the losses suffered by the people of Aceh province, Sri Lanka, Tamil Nadu, Thailand and the Indian-administered Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/banda_aceh-4.jpg]

Devastation in Banda Aceh

In the short and medium-term the impact of this disaster is comparable to the detonation of a nuclear bomb on a highly populated area.

For the people of Aceh the disaster is a double one. At least 80,000 people have been killed and the capital Banda Aceh has been wrecked. The area is the centre of an armed independence movement and is a militarily occupied province. In the first days after the disaster aid the Indonesian army did not allow teams in.

There are now fears that the ultra-brutal Indonesian army will use the situation to kill supporters of the independence movement, actions, which will be 'lost' in the general chaos. If this sounds far-fetched, it will not to people who have followed the actions of the Indonesian army in East Timor, against political dissidents in Indonesia, and the methods used against the Aceh rebels.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/0BAAC51B2D414DB1ACECC7BFD144B280-2.jpg>]

Indonesian troops in Aceh

This disaster immediately tells us lots about the way that wealth and power (and their corollaries like health care and physical security) are distributed in the world.

First of all the massive figures for deaths, horrific as they are, are all likely to be under-estimates. In poor countries with bad communications and weak emergency services, the true death toll may never be known. In any case why will government bureaucrats, in countries where life is cheap, be bothered to keep an exact count of the bodies?

Second, why was there no tsunami warning system in place for the Indian Ocean? It's not true that there is no previous experience of tsunamis in the Indian Ocean; there was one in 1994, which killed 400 people. In any case the Indian Ocean is the site of the monsoons which have killed hundreds of thousands in Bangladesh and elsewhere in the last 30 years.

It has been revealed that the issue was debated at the 1997 meeting of the International Oceanographic Commission, with Indonesian scientists pushing the case for an early warning system. Why wasn't it taken up?

Probably a mixture of lack of resources and bureaucratic negligence, what you normally expect from capitalist governments, in poor countries as well as rich. But the most obvious fact that stands out is that such a system does exist in the Pacific, which is bounded by advanced capitalist countries, not least the United States, with the US state of Hawaii right in mid-ocean. This discrepancy is hardly an accident.

In any case, the second impact of poverty on the disaster was the inability of scientists in the US and elsewhere who

tracked the earthquake and tsunami to get the information through. Who should they have informed, when the structures for emergency communication don't exist with poor countries? And how could the information have been given out to people like the poor fishing communities of Tamil Nadu when communications are so poor, and when virtually no one in the impoverished villages has a phone, let alone a mobile phone?

One of the most telling aspects of the disaster is the huge gap in the advanced capitalist countries between the response of the governments and the immediately generous response of ordinary people. The US government's response was unbelievable; three days after the catastrophe it had offered a miniscule \$35m dollars, hardly what it spends in one day in Iraq. Colin Powell was forced to shed crocodile tears on television, but could hardly conceal his boredom, bizarrely stating that the US was prepared in this instance to 'reach out to Muslim nations', as if all the affected countries were mainly Islamic nations.

Not to be outdone in meanness, the British government announced two days after the tragedy that it had put aside Â£15m (\$28m) for the relief effort, although the catastrophe was not enough to move Tony Blair from his holiday sunbed in Egypt. But by one day later more than 500,000 British people had overwhelmed the government's effort and contributed Â£25m to the emergency appeal. Every day in Britain, as elsewhere, the amount contributed by ordinary people increases by millions. Finally the British government upped its aid figure to Â£50m (\$90m). And to put that in perspective, Â£50m is about the cost of one Eurofighter, a technologically obsolete combat aircraft, of which the British government has ordered hundreds.

The American government was finally shamed into increasing its aid to \$350m, still a pitifully small amount, which the shameless Colin Powell takes as an index of American 'generosity'.

The flood of money donated by individuals in the West is mirrored in the donations being made civic associations and the workers movement. One example: the Swedish metalworkers union has pledged one million kronen (100,000 euros).

The amounts offered so far by Western governments are tiny when compared with the immediate need to urgently rush food, drinking water, medical supplies and shelter to the hardest hit. And tiny when compared with the costs of reconstruction.

Among most Western governments there is little sense of the urgency felt on the ground, where people know that many more will die from disease, their injuries or starvation unless the aid reaches them very soon. On the contrary, Western governments have been more concerned to play petty politics, with George Bush trying to push the UN into the background and Silvio Berlusconi coming up with his own plan for a meeting of the G8 countries to co-ordinate the response.

In the face of such a disaster, the contrast between what the US (and British) governments are spending in Iraq and what they are prepared to spend in disaster relief is obvious. Doesn't the United States and the other advanced countries have the ability to make an emergency mobilisation, to send hundreds of aircraft full of food, medicine and clothing? Right now? To send thousands of experts and construction workers to rebuild the infrastructure? Of course they do. And of course they won't. Not just because they are callous, but because it doesn't fit in with their priority economic or political goals.

And against the hugely generous response 'from below', where are the giant donations from the Microsoft Corporation, from Coca-Cola, from Ford and General Motors?

Numerous tourists in Sri Lanka, Thailand and elsewhere reported acts of kindness shown towards them by local

people, many of whom had lost their own homes and family members, but who still found the time to look after people who were guests in their country.

In these neoliberal times it is generally assumed that the near-universal motive of people is personal gain and selfish competition. Of course world capitalism promotes these values, and you can see them played out everywhere. But that is no more 'natural' than hundreds of thousands unnecessarily dying in these kinds of disasters. What is on display, in the ravaged countries and in the advanced capitalist world, is the contrast between the social and human solidarity which is habitually shown by ordinary people, and the contempt for the poor habitually shown capitalist corporations and governments.

Two final points. First, reconstruction will be a long-term process. To aid that, an obvious first step would be for governments and international banks to cancel the debt which hinders the development of the countries concerned. For example, Sri Lanka has an external debt of about £80bn. What is going to be done about that? Probably nothing.

Second, welcome to the future. Tsunamis may be rare, but they are rendered more likely by rising sea levels, a consequence of global warming. Even without tsunamis, extreme weather is going to generate more of these extreme disasters, unless long terms steps are taken to massively reduce greenhouse gases - as well as taking the elementary civil defence and warning measures discussed above.