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Sri Lanka

Democratise the relief programme

- News from around the world -

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This is a moment of unbearable sorrow and despair. People have nowhere to turn, in particular the fishing folk along coastal lines. In those regions Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim poor people have been made destitute. In a time of cyber power and satellite technology nobody could warn these innocent people.

They were told that new technology has converted the entire world into a village. But nothing of that sort existed for these poor masses. An earthquake registering nine on the Richter scale occurred at 7am Sri Lankan time. The tsunami reached Sri Lankan shores nearly three hours later. In the meantime a lot could have been done to save lives, if only the message that came through the warning system had reached us. We did not get because we are poor and marginal. It is not technology that failed us, we were let down by Global Capital and its imperatives.

The tribal people who could observe the behaviour of animals, warned the king Kelani Tissa, in the 3rd century B.C. The old knowledge of Neolithic peoples must have saved some lives at that time. But today we are more helpless than the Sinhala clan of Kelani Tissa.

Never has Sinhala chauvinism was more exposed than in this event. Only few months ago they were vehemently talking about the conspiracy behind ISGA of the Tamil Tigers (the LTTE), to take control of major part of Sri Lanka marine resources. This time "Marine terror" struck devastating a large part of Tamil Muslim homeland.

The coastal belt became a deathbed. On the one hand it affected the JVP strongholds Hambantota and Matara. On the other hand it severely damaged LTTE-held areas. While Tamil soldiers are looking into the damage in the North and East NE region (NE), Sinhala soldiers kept in the NE are forced to think about the plight of their villages. Many of them saved their lives thanks to the help of Tamil people.

At the same time they were helping Tamils including Tamil Tiger soldiers to counter the effect of the tsunami. Whether Tamil or Sinhala, it is the fishermen who have been primarily hit by this calamity. Behind the fisherman come the craftsman and the petty service workers that thrive on the tourist trade.

At first both the state and the media gave attention primarily to the devastation in the Sinhala dominated areas though worst hit was the Eastern Province.

However by 30th December Chandrika denying the reports that the North and East had been neglected in the relief operations, and said nearly 80 percent of the foreign medical and rescue teams have been dispatched to the North and East!

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/ltterelief.jpg>]

LTTE relief camp

She appealed to the LTTE to join in the reconstruction work and on 31st the LTTE agreed to work with the government to get supplies to the survivors.

However will this understanding move towards the formation of an interim civil administration for the NE? It is very unlikely. Already disaster management is moving in the opposite direction. It is centralized around presidential power.

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The National Operations Center will remain the focal point for the centralized command structure of the Government and is the nerve center for all operations 24 hours a day. The National Operations Center (NOC) will be managed by Dr. Tara De Mel, a top bourgeois adjutant of the President and supervised by the secretary the President.

Chandrika expects close collaboration for this center from the UNP leader Ranil. Already racists have started a campaign to strengthen this process. They say that all elections should be post phoned and Presidential center should handle all construction and development. On the other hand plans are made to take over all coastal areas for mega development projects with the participation of MNCs.

The Nation Rebuilding Task Force of the NOC consists of top businessmen. Large numbers of displaced fishermen and petty producers do not have legal documents to prove their possession of land. Hence it will easy to hand over coastal land for mega projects on Fisheries, Transport and Tourism. The rights of the poor are definitely under threat.

Though it is claimed that the NOC will collaborate with Provincial Councils, so far no significant role has been given to the PCs. Under the 13th amendment to the constitution Provincial Councils are given power over Health, Education, Land and Social Services with Probation. Hence PC should be playing the major role in Relief and Rescue operations, Health and Welfare.

But no national consultation was made with the councilors and they were not mobilized for these operations. The government Medical Officers Association has repeatedly stated that provincial hospitals should become relief centers for the affected, in particular for the children. They also pointed out proper work allocation should be made to mobilize the doctors allocated to the provinces. On the other hand provincial probation and welfare departments are not given priority in the welfare of children and the weak.

Clearly disaster management is not based on the principal of autonomy and devolution. There is fear and it is growing. People are concerned about the presence of foreign military forces both American and Indian. The ruling Directorate has invited them to protect the state not from any foreign power nor from the dead bodies but from the power of the people.

Those who are oppressed by the many-sided poverty in this island, has to ponder over several important problems. Firstly there should be early warning system of disaster. At least the SARC countries bounded by the India sub-continent should invest in such a system with the intention of helping everybody around. There were pledges to help from Australia, Japan and UN.

But the Left should campaign for early setting up of such a system.

Secondly, the disaster management should not be a capitalist plot against the poor masses. The first priority of such disaster management should be to rehabilitate the poor fishermen and the craftsmen in the coastal belt including the NE. On the other hand the NE should participate in reconstruction and rehabilitation through an interim civil administration that should come up immediately. Then disaster management could be implemented through people's participation. In the South, Provincial Councils and local government authorities should be in the forefront of this process.

Thirdly, American soldiers have raised the suspicion not only among the working masses but also among the Tamil radicals. It is claimed foreign forces are here only for rescue operations. Then why are they coming now when rescue is no longer an important issue? Or do we need American GIs to rescue dead bodies?

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The left and the mass organizations should get together to campaign for a concrete programme. It is necessary take the issue of cancellation of debt to all sectors of the society. We must make the people aware of mega projects, which bring no benefits to the poor except the increase burden of debt repayment. The tsunami disaster has no doubt opened the eyes of people through out the world. There is mass sympathy and rethinking on our common human future. But behind this wave of sympathy there are vultures circulating, waiting for an opportunity to grab the flesh of the poor.