

Bush's response to South Asia disaster: indifference compounded by political incompetence

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President Bush briefly interrupted his vacation on Wednesday to issue a public statement, after three days of silence as the greatest natural disaster of the last half-century unfolded on the television screens of the world. He made a perfunctory and semi-coherent statement to the press corps assembled at his Crawford, Texas ranch, shortly after the administration had announced a doubling of the US government's contribution to disaster relief efforts in South Asia.

The initial US pledge of \$15 million was widely derided in the international media—one commentary noted that this was less than the cost of a single F-16 fighter jet. It brought a pointed response by the emergency relief director for the United Nations, Jan Egeland, who criticized the “stingy” response of unnamed Western countries. The Scandinavian diplomat later denied he was referring to the United States, after the US Agency for International Development added another \$20 million to the aid package.

Outgoing Secretary of State Colin Powell was trundled out to rebut the charge that the US was ignoring the disaster. “The US is not stingy,” Powell declared. “We are the greatest contributor to international relief efforts in the world.” (He was silent on the fact that the two largest US-financed “relief” efforts, in Iraq and Afghanistan, are in support of stooge regimes established through the US conquest of sovereign countries).

Even the increased \$35 million contribution represents a minimal gesture, given the monumental scale of the tragedy and the enormous resources of the United States. The donation amounts to half a day's spending on the war in Iraq. It is less money than will

be expended on the parties and official festivities surrounding Bush's January 20 inauguration.

The US government relief effort can be measured by another yardstick—its response to the hurricanes that hit Florida this year. The Federal Emergency Management Agency alone has pumped \$3.17 billion into the state, nearly 100 times more than the proposed US contribution for the South Asian tsunami. The four Florida hurricanes combined killed 116 people, compared to over 100,000 dead in the South Asian disaster. According to the brutal calculus of American imperialism, a human life in the United States—especially in a battleground state in the months before a presidential election—is worth infinitely more than a human life in Sri Lanka or Indonesia.

Media criticism of the White House reached its peak in a front-page article published by the *Washington Post* December 29, only a few hours before Bush made his appearance in Crawford. The *Post* commented: “Skeptics said the initial aid sums—as well as Bush's decision at first to remain cloistered on his Texas ranch for the Christmas holiday rather than speak in person about the tragedy—showed scant appreciation for the magnitude of suffering and for the rescue and rebuilding work facing such nations as Sri Lanka, India, Thailand and Indonesia.”

Noting the “international outpouring of support after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon,” the *Post* reported that “even some administration officials familiar with relief efforts said they were surprised that Bush had not appeared personally to comment on the tsunami tragedy. ‘It's kind of freaky,’ a senior career official said.”

Here the *Post* gave expression to concerns within the

state apparatus itself, not so much with Bush's indifference to the loss of life, but with his inability to conceal this attitude behind the humanitarian posturing typical of more skilled spokesmen for imperialism, like British Prime Minister Blair or former President Bill Clinton.

Bush hardly dispelled this concern with his comments to the press corps. His remarks were delivered in a fashion that suggested the president could hardly wait to get back to more pressing tasks—such as bicycling and “clearing brush,” two of his major activities at the Crawford ranch.

Bush declared his support for the construction of a worldwide warning system against natural disasters like the earthquake and tsunami, modeled on the one already built by the United States, Japan and other wealthy countries to cover the Pacific basin. He was not asked why no such network yet exists, although the total cost of a worldwide alert system is estimated at only \$150 million—a comparative pittance, less than the cost of four days of war in Iraq.

There is already evidence that the US government had ample warning of the earthquake-driven tsunami, but did not communicate the information to the countries involved. US press reports indicate that the Pacific Warning Center in Hawaii, a facility of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, detected the earthquake when it occurred and immediately warned of the likelihood of tidal waves generated by one of largest temblors ever recorded.

Charles McCreery, director of the center, confirmed that his team had transmitted warnings to the US Navy, the US State Department and the government of Australia. The State Department claimed to have notified India, but the Indian government said it received no such warning in the two hours that elapsed between the quake off Sumatra and the tidal wave that hit the Indian coastline in the southern province of Tamil Nadu. Nor did the Sri Lankan government receive a warning.

But one Indian Ocean island was promptly warned—the US military base on the British-controlled island of Diego Garcia, the site from which US bombing raids have been staged on both Afghanistan and Iraq. The US base, about 1,000 miles south of India, directly in the path of the tsunami, reportedly suffered no damage.

Bush's press statement in Crawford did contain one indisputable truth. “This has been a terrible disaster,” Bush said. “It is beyond our comprehension.”

The speechwriter who crafted those words revealed more about Bush than he perhaps intended. This failure to grasp the dimensions of the south Asian disaster—and anticipate the public reaction to a display of indifference—is a measure of the moral and intellectual cretinism of Bush and his cohorts.

The administration's callous and barely concealed indifference to the suffering of millions of people says a great deal about the corrupt oligarchy whose interests it serves. The Bush administration, and the occupant of the White House himself, are body and soul the creatures of a ruling elite that has descended into criminality and unbridled greed.

The *New York Times*, for example, found nothing untoward in publishing on the front page of its December 28 edition articles and photographs on the death and devastation in South Asia alongside a lighthearted report on the multi-million-dollar Christmas bonuses awarded by Wall Street firms to their top executives (“That Line at the Ferrari Dealer? It's Bonus Season on Wall Street”).

If great events take the true measure of men, the enormous tragedy on the shores of the Indian Ocean has provided another yardstick of the vicious and small-minded man who occupies the White House. Bush personifies the ignorant and reactionary character of American imperialism.



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