

Tsunami death toll rises to 60,000 amid warnings of epidemics

Peter Symonds
29 December 2004

A terrible tragedy is unfolding around the rim of the Bay of Bengal. The lives of millions of people, most of them very poor, have been torn apart by the huge tidal wave that hit the coastal areas on Sunday morning. The estimated death toll has reached 60,000 and is expected to rise further as rescue and relief workers comb the wreckage and debris left behind in villages, towns and cities throughout the region.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) warned yesterday that the figure could double unless emergency supplies of food, water and medicines reach the devastated areas. David Nabarro, head of the WHO's crisis operations, stated: "The immediate terror associated with the tsunami and the earthquake itself may be dwarfed by the longer-term suffering of the affected communities." The WHO was most concerned about diarrhoeal diseases, vector-borne diseases such as malaria, and respiratory infections.

Photographs and interviews from the worst affected areas provide glimpses of the scale of the destruction and extent of the suffering. Whole communities have been upended: houses and huts destroyed; cars and vehicles tossed aside; infrastructure smashed; corpses on the streets; mass burials taking place; chaotic scenes in hospitals; anxious relatives looking for their loved ones; and others grieving over the dead.

In the four countries that were hardest hit—Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and Thailand—corpses are still being found in large numbers. Transport and communications have been severely disrupted. Four days after the tsunami struck, emergency teams have yet to reach more remote villages and areas. Throughout the region, relief workers and aid agencies are warning that severe shortages of food, medicine and clean water could lead to a wave of further deaths.

Alongside the death and destruction, there are also stories of courage and generosity. Ordinary people—locals and tourists, professionals as well as workers and villagers, those in the affected countries and those watching aghast from afar—have responded to the tragedy by giving their time and money to help the victims, in some cases at considerable personal sacrifice.

In marked contrast, the response of governments in Asia and internationally has been slow and inadequate. None of the countries in the region issued urgent warnings even though the size, location and time of the massive earthquake that triggered the tsunami was known within a matter of 15 to 30 minutes. No action was taken. Unlike the Pacific Ocean, there is no comprehensive

tsunami warning system in place for the Indian Ocean.

In the wake of the tidal wave, the limited official relief and rescue efforts have been overwhelmed by the scale of the disaster. Governments were simply not prepared for such a catastrophe and the lack of personnel, planning and resources has been all too evident. While the emergency workers are frequently exerting themselves to the limit, they are hampered by shortages of equipment and supplies, as well as difficulties reaching the worst affected areas.

The US, European Union, Australia and Japan, which have the necessary money, personnel and technical equipment and expertise, have reacted with callous indifference. Washington, Tokyo, London and Canberra have spent tens, if not hundreds, of billions of dollars on the illegal invasion and subjugation of Iraq. But in response to a catastrophe afflicting millions in Asia, their combined aid comes to less than \$US100 million—a sum that will not meet immediate basic needs, let alone assist in the immense task of reconstruction.

So obvious is the gulf between the paltry size of the donations and the needs of the victims that Jan Egeland, the UN's emergency relief coordinator, felt compelled to issue a cautious rebuke. "It is beyond me why we are so stingy. Really. Christmas time should remind many Western countries at least, how rich we have become," he said yesterday. "There are several donors who are less generous than before in a growing world economy." He estimated that at least \$15 billion was needed to deal with what he described as "the worst natural disaster in recent history."

The fact that aid is provided at all has more to do with the political consequences of the tragedy than any genuine sympathy for the victims. Like the massive Tokyo earthquake in 1923, catastrophes on this scale have the potential to unleash political instability and opposition. Even before the events of this week, the governments in the region confronted widespread hostility and anger over their economic restructuring policies and deteriorating living standards. The impact of the tsunami has only accentuated the chasm between rich and poor and exposed the inadequacies of an economic order based on profit, not social need.

The official death toll in Sri Lanka stood at more than 18,700 as of last night, but officials are predicting that the toll will rise to 25,000. Areas in the north, east and south of the island bore the full brunt of the tidal wave but the west coast, including the capital Colombo, was also hard hit. Whole villages were flattened. Towns and cities like Galle, Matara and Hambantota in the south, and

Batticaloa and Trincomalee in the east, were severely lashed.

First-hand reporting has been limited by the lack of access to many areas. In Galle, a BBC article described the devastation and the shortages of basic supplies. “Impromptu lines of people gather as a small truck pulls up and coconuts, bananas and bottled water are handed out. This is not a government vehicle or an international aid agency initiative, but the private effort of a local businessman. Local organisations and community centres are doing their best to cope, but it simply isn’t enough.”

An entire train carrying an estimated 1,000 people between Colombo and Galle was swept away on Sunday. Many of the dead were locals who clambered onto the carriage roofs in order to escape the wave. A report in the British-based *Telegraph* described the scene: “On Tuesday, the eight rusting train carriages lay in deep pools of water amid debris and fallen palm trees. The waves had torn the wheels off some and twisted the tracks. Most bodies had been removed, but about 15 decomposing corpses were visible. Baggage was strewn along the tracks... A school nearby had been badly damaged.”

In the north and east of the country, the situation is unclear, particularly in areas controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In Trincomalee, an estimated 30,000 people are homeless and, according to the *Telegraph*, “there was little sign of the promised refugee shelters.” In Batticaloa, local MP S. Jeyanandomoorthy told the *Tamilnet* website: “The newly-built hospital, public buildings, schools, political offices, homes, churches and temples have been completely destroyed by the sea.”

President Chandrika Kumaratunga has declared Friday to be an official day of mourning and her government has promised to provide those displaced by the tsunami with one cooked meal and dry rations for a week. Even this elementary assistance is completely lacking in many areas. According to the LTTE, no aid at all has reached areas under their control, where an estimated 8,000 people have died and up to half a million have been displaced.

(See Also: Sri Lankan tsunami victims speak to the WWSWS)

As of last night, the official death toll in the province of Aceh on the northern tip of Sumatra was more than 7,000. Vice-President Joseph Kalla, however, warned yesterday that the figure would rise to more than 25,000. Even though the entire province has been under military rule since May last year, it was only yesterday that a military aircraft began to survey the worst affected areas on the west coast.

News reports have been largely confined to the provincial capital of Banda Aceh which was hit by the massive earthquake and subsequent tidal wave. The *Australian* newspaper described the situation yesterday: “[D]ecomposing corpses litter the street and the stink of rotting flesh is everywhere. Few buildings in the centre remain intact. Small dead fish are scattered across the pavements, dumped by the sea that devastated so much of the city... With dwindling supplies of food and water in the city, barely any electricity or fuel, desperation is rising.”

After the province was placed under emergency rule last year, the military imposed severe restrictions on the media and foreign aid workers in order to black out news of widespread repression against separatist guerillas and the local population. Despite grave

conditions in many areas of the province, the army only lifted the ban on aid workers yesterday. Media reports from Banda Aceh describe the military’s response to the catastrophe as limited, unplanned and, in some cases, disinterested.

In India, the official tally of dead increased to 11,500 yesterday, more than half of them on the low-lying Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which were also hit by aftershocks from the earthquake. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, “At least 7,000 people have died on those islands. But contact was still to be made with two islands with 6,000 people on them. Up to 30,000 people on the islands were said to be unaccounted for.”

A first-hand report in the *Australian* described the devastation: “On the Nicobar island of Chowdra, 1,000 of the 1,500 inhabitants were killed. A coastguard official said that the death toll on Car Nicobar—a 24 sq km atoll which is home to about 45,000—could be up to 10,000. ‘Eighty percent of the buildings were flattened on Car Nicobar,’ he said. ‘It is flat and people had no place to run. There are a large number of survivors who are injured so the exact toll cannot be calculated just now, but it is... much higher than reported’.”

On the Indian mainland, the southern state of Tamil Nadu was the hardest hit. As of Monday night, 3,720 bodies had been recovered. As elsewhere, poor fishing villages were the worst affected. At a village near the state capital of Madras, a fisherman told the press: “I was with my wife, my daughter, my father, my sister picking the small fish from my nets. Then the waters came. Now my family is gone.”

The official death toll in Thailand stands at 1,520 but at least another 1,400 are missing. The hardest hit areas were the resorts of Phuket and Phang Nga where many of the victims were foreign tourists. Media reports have shown chaotic scenes as thousands of foreigners sought to get to safety and to leave the country. Many were in shock. Some had lost loved ones. Others were frantically looking for missing family members.

As in the case of Sri Lanka, the disaster will have an immediate impact on the Thai economy, which is heavily dependent on the tourist industry. Tourism accounts for 6 percent of the country’s GDP. Despite the outbreak of bird flu and SARS, the number of tourists rose this year to nearly 12 million. Many of the hotels have now been devastated.

Villagers in coastal areas have been left without basic necessities such as power, water and shelter. Senior health official Vichai Tian Thavorn warned: “The main problems are the spread of disease, sanitation, respiratory and skin diseases, hygiene for people dealing with the bodies.”

Reports from other countries are more limited. At least 65 people are dead in Malaysia and another 90 in neighbouring Burma. In the tiny island nation of the Maldives, the death toll has risen to 55. Across the Indian Ocean, at least 122 died in Somalia, Tanzania and the Seychelles as the tsunami lashed the African east coast.



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsws.org/contact