

Why has India blocked foreign tsunami aid to the Nicobar and Andaman islands?

Parwini Zora, Daniel Woreck
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The remote Andaman and Nicobar group suffered a devastating blow from the December 26 tsunami. The low-lying and mostly uninhabited chain of 572 islands in the Bay of Bengal was the closest Indian territory to the epicentre of the massive earthquake. As well as being swamped by the sea, it was hit by a series of substantial aftershocks.

The official death toll is now more than 1,800 but over 5,500 people are still missing, presumed dead. While the southern state of Tamil Nadu had the largest number of Indian deaths in absolute terms, the population of the Andaman and Nicobar islands is just 356,000 and is proportionately the hardest hit. An estimated 288,000 people, or 80 percent of the total population, have been affected.

Nearly 12,000 survivors from the 38 inhabited islands were evacuated to the Andaman capital of Port Blair. By January 4, however, the exodus had to be halted as relief camps in the town had filled to overflowing. Most of Port Blair's schools were overcrowded with refugees while others were forced to live under plastic sheeting.

An estimated 40,000 people are taking shelter in relief camps scattered across the archipelago. The camps are under the supervision of local authorities who are installed directly by the central government in New Delhi and come under the supervision of the Indian military.

The Indian government claims to have organised adequate emergency relief for the stricken islands. The survivors, however, complain of delays and a lack of medical care, and have criticised the manner in which the Indian military has conducted relief operations. The government has not only ignored the grievances, but refused all offers of assistance from foreign aid groups.

The only international organisation allowed to operate across the archipelago is UNICEF. Foreign journalists and aid workers have been confined to Port Blair and not permitted to travel to any of the outlying islands.

International aid groups have been permitted to provide assistance to local organisations, but even these activities have been restricted.

Just over a week ago, International Red Cross officials accused authorities of hijacking aid being sent to survivors. The Red Cross alleged that supplies being shipped to Port Blair were being seized at the docks, apparently for distribution by government agencies.

According to a BBC report, "The Andaman-Nicobar administration is determined to prevent foreign voluntary groups from joining the relief effort, even if it is by proxy."

The obvious question arises: why such sensitivity to a foreign aid presence in the Andamans?

From the outset, New Delhi has insisted that India did not require international aid. Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Suran told the press: "In terms of not accepting foreign assistance, we feel we have all the resources to cope... our response to this disaster was very prompt and effective."

In fact, the government went further. In line with its ambitions to become a major regional power, New Delhi rushed medical and technical aid to Sri Lanka, the Maldives and the Indonesian province of Aceh. In its largest ever peacetime operation—"Operation Sea Wave"—the Indian navy dispatched 32 ships to the stricken countries in the space of just one week.

During a visit to Calcutta, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh commented: "Our response [to the tsunami] was not shaped by false pride or by chauvinism. We are happy to be part of the global community and to work with it." He nevertheless boasted that "India could demonstrate to the world its ability and capability to stand on its own feet".

But as the inadequacy of relief efforts in southern India surfaced in the media, New Delhi was compelled to modify its stance. While still rejecting direct aid from

foreign countries, the Singh government declared that it was willing to accept financial aid from the UN, the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Various aid groups and non-government organisations, foreign and India, were already providing some assistance.

Sensitive military bases

In the Nicobar and Andaman group, however, the tight restrictions remain in force. While the Indian government has pointed to the need to protect the aboriginal tribes, its overriding concern is to preserve the secrecy surrounding Indian military bases on the islands. As Suba Chandran, an analyst at the Delhi-based Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, told the BBC: “It is a Cold War mentality. India is sensitive about its military installations in the Andamans.”

At its southernmost point, the archipelago is just 150km from Indonesia’s Sumatra. The northernmost point is less than 50km from the Coco Islands which belong to Burma. The islands are in an ideal position to monitor shipping through the Malacca Strait, which is a key route from the Middle East to North East Asia and the broader Asian Pacific region. A substantial proportion of world trade, including vital oil supplies to Japan and China, passes through the strait. US military strategists have long regarded the sea-lane as a crucial “choke point” that could be used to cut off vital supplies in the event of a conflict, with China in particular.

The area is the focus for growing rivalry. In an effort to protect its supply routes, China has strengthened ties with Burma and is reportedly developing naval bases and electronic surveillance facilities in the country. India, which has been developing a close strategic alliance with the US, has used the Nicobar and Andaman islands to “counter” the Chinese presence in Burma and other Asian countries.

In 2001, India spent an estimated \$US2 billion to establish the Andaman Nicobar Command, jointly run by the army, navy, air force and the coast guard, to preside over its military operations in the archipelago. The Indian airforce has a substantial presence, including a fighter squadron and a unit of helicopters. The army was to station a full division or 8,000 soldiers in the islands. Surveillance and monitoring stations have been

established along the entire archipelago.

Since winning last year’s elections, Congress has continued the overall military expansion set in train by the previous Bharatya Janatha Party (BJP)-led coalition. In last year’s budget, defence spending was boosted by another 27 percent to a total of \$US17.63 billion or 2.5 percent of the country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The hardware to be purchased includes three French Scorpion submarines, 115 multi-purpose fighters, three Phalcon airborne warning radar systems and a Russian aircraft carrier.

The Congress-led government did not hesitate in maintaining the close military relations with Washington established by its predecessors. Last July-August, the Indian Airforce took part in a US exercise in Alaska codenamed Exercise Cooperative Thunder. In October, the Indian navy engaged in manoeuvres with the US navy in the Arabian Sea near Goa.

An article on the *Asia Times* website last November entitled “Navy reflects India’s strategic ambitions” pointed to the expansion of Indian naval operations. “Most striking of all, the Indian navy is in the midst of a deployment to the South China Sea and beyond that is bringing Indian warships to ports in Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, South Korea and Japan. This is the first time that the Indian navy will have such an extensive agenda in the South China Sea.”

The author—US strategic analyst Dr Donald Berlin—noted that India had held discussions with Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore about naval collaboration in the Malacca Strait. The Indian and Indonesian navies are already engaged in joint patrols in what is known as the Six Degree Channel separating Nicobar from the Indonesian island of Sabang. The channel is normally used by all international shipping entering or leaving the Malacca Strait.

India’s strategically-located bases in the Andaman and Nicobar islands are crucial to its ambitions for a naval presence in the Malacca Strait and beyond. In preserving a cloak of secrecy over its military operations in the archipelago, the fate of tsunami victims is clearly the last consideration.



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