

Australia's tsunami aid package: neo-colonialism laced with hypocrisy

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The \$A1 billion “Australia-Indonesia Partnership for Reconstruction and Development” pact that Prime Minister John Howard announced with Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in Jakarta in early January was motivated by considerations that have nothing to do with humanitarianism. On the contrary, the Australian government has seized on the terrible impact of the Asian tsunami as the pretext for furthering its economic and strategic interests in Indonesia and throughout South East Asia.

Under the auspices of delivering “aid” to hundreds of thousands of tsunami victims, Canberra now has its military on the ground in Indonesia—something that would have been unthinkable just months ago. Some 500 Australian troops are stationed in Aceh, together with a naval vessel, eight aircraft and four helicopters, working alongside the Indonesian military (TNI) for the first time since 1999, when TNI sponsored thugs rampaged through East Timor, killing thousands of civilians and laying waste to towns and villages.

The deployment is aimed at cementing ties between the Australian government, the Indonesian military and the ruling regime, now headed by Yudhoyono, a former senior general under the bloody Suharto dictatorship.

It beggars belief that Howard and his ministers have suddenly developed concern for the well-being of the Acehnese people. According to the Asian Development Bank, almost 30 percent of Aceh's population of four million—that is, more than one million people—were living below the poverty line before the tsunami. Unemployment was estimated at 40 percent and less than half the province had access to safe drinking water and electricity.

There is no doubt that these impoverished people have suffered the worst losses as a result of the tsunami. More than 228,000 Acehnese have been officially confirmed dead, while hundreds of thousands have been made homeless and entire communities wiped out.

But Howard's concern is to secure a foothold in a country that remains one of the most resource-rich and strategically-located in the world. Aceh, in particular, possesses huge oil and natural gas reserves and is located at the top of the Strait of Malacca, one of the world's busiest and most strategically vital commercial and naval sea lanes.

Howard himself described the package as an “historic step in Indonesian-Australian relations”. For the first half of the twentieth century, the Australian ruling elite backed the continuation of Dutch colonial rule over the archipelago, known then as the Dutch East Indies. After independence in 1949, it worked closely with Washington to destabilise the nationalist government under Sukarno, culminating in the 1965-66 CIA-backed military coup and anti-communist massacres carried out by General Suharto.

Less than 10 years ago, Howard's predecessor, Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating signed a strategic pact with Suharto, hailing his military junta as the best guarantor of Australian strategic interests in the Asian-Pacific region. While Suharto's dictatorship collapsed in 1998, little

changed as far as the people of Aceh were concerned. The Indonesian military continued its brutal repression of the secessionist movement, as well as the local population, with Canberra's complicity.

Since taking office in 1996, the Howard government has consistently turned a blind eye to Jakarta's atrocities in Aceh. Over the past 20 months, since May 2003, Canberra has made no criticism of the imposition of martial law, the exclusion of all foreign journalists and aid workers, and the intensification of military violence.

When asked at a media conference whether Australia's new commitment to Indonesia was dependent upon any moderation of the war against the separatists, Howard ruled out placing any conditions on the TNI. To the extent that pressure is now being brought to bear on Yudhoyono to end the conflict and enter negotiations—in particular, by Washington—this is solely to create a more stable environment for foreign investment.

Strategic shift

Howard has cynically attempted to align himself with the spontaneous outpouring of sympathy and generosity towards the tsunami victims on the part of millions of ordinary Australians, which has resulted in more than \$180 million donated to relief funds. A “spirit of common humanity” had moved his government, he declared. “The response of the world community—and not least Australia—to this heartbreaking tragedy has been swift and generous.”

In reality, Canberra's response was neither swift nor generous. Expressing the same indifference and contempt as its counterparts in Britain and the US, the Howard government's initial contribution, announced on December 27, was just \$10 million. By that time, it was already clear that tens of thousands of people had been swept to their deaths in at least six countries.

Two days later, with the official death toll nearing 100,000 and amid mounting international criticism of the callous reaction of the major powers, the package was expanded to \$35 million. On December 31, five days after the tragedy began, and under mounting popular pressure, the total was begrudgingly increased to \$60 million.

Not coincidentally, Howard announced his Indonesian package on January 5, just after the Bush administration, in an effort to appease growing condemnation, belatedly boosted its contribution tenfold to \$350 million. Behind both aid packages lie similar calculations: to use the “opportunity”—as Bush's Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice put it—afforded by the tsunami to try to lift the thoroughly discredited profile of the US government, its military forces and its allies in the eyes of the world's oppressed masses. At the same time, both governments are using the disaster to dispatch military forces to strategically vital areas.

Almost certainly, Howard discussed his initiative with the White House before making it public. Since September 11, the Australian government has aligned itself unconditionally with Washington's "war on terror" and Bush's doctrine of preemptive war, participating in the military invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq. Using the same rhetoric about the threat of "terror", Howard has also embarked on his own neo-colonial campaign—dispatching troops to the Solomon Islands, police to Papua New Guinea and installing officials in the administrations of Fiji, Vanuatu and Nauru.

Howard specifically opposed directing Australia's "aid" to Indonesia through the United Nations or other multilateral institutions or agencies. Instead, it will be organised under a bilateral "partnership" with Yudhoyono. Over the next five years Canberra has promised to provide \$500 million in grants and \$500 million in concessional loans to finance reconstruction work conducted under the joint supervision of the two governments. In return, the lion's share of the contracts will go to Australian-based companies and Australian officials will vet and control all construction and infrastructure projects. With blunt disregard for Indonesian sovereignty, Canberra will retain a veto over all spending.

No details have been offered as to how the funding will be allocated. But there is no doubt that, as with the other major Australian operations in the region—notably in East Timor, the Solomon Islands and PNG—the "aid" will be tied to the use of Australian-based contractors and materials, and adherence to so-called "open market" guidelines.

The *Australian Financial Review* reported on January 17: "Officials confirmed that all contracts associated with the five-year program to help rebuild Aceh province will be awarded exclusively to Australian and New Zealand companies, though some companies will then subcontract to local or Indonesian companies."

In corporate circles, token involvement in humanitarian relief is regarded as the necessary downpayment on lucrative contracts. Among those named by the newspaper as joining the scramble are Clough Engineering, BlueScope Steel (formerly BHP Steel), Leighton Holdings, Coffey MPW and Veolia Water. "We are providing aid, a combination of money donations and in-kind assistance, but there will be opportunity to do more major projects down the track," Clough spokesman Robert Ash commented.

Significantly, while anxious to grandstand on the aid issue, Howard has resisted all international calls for debt relief to be extended to Indonesia and the other affected countries. While insisting that he wishes to ensure that financial assistance is targeted to those most in need, his position will only intensify the pressure being placed on these countries for drastic economic restructuring and the further opening up of their economies to the demands of global capital.

Media and political complicity

Not one journalist has seriously probed, let alone questioned, the Howard government's response to the tsunami disaster. Instead, the entire official establishment has participated in what can only be described as an orgy of praise. Even commentators who have, in the past, criticised aspects of the government's policies have joined in the adulation. Australian Greens leader Bob Brown, for example, rushed to congratulate the government "for the size of this aid announcement".

The reaction is revealing. Whatever tactical differences have existed over the Iraq war and the extent of Australia's involvement in Bush's "war on terror", there is unanimity on the question of Australia's commercial and strategic agenda in the Asia-Pacific.

One only needs recall the support of the media, the Labor Party, the

Greens and the entire middle class radical milieu for the Howard government's military intervention in East Timor, which was also hailed, at the time, as a mission to help the poor and oppressed.

The reality was that, after the fall of Suharto, Canberra was determined to maintain its influence in East Timor, especially its control over the Timor Sea oil and gas fields. The military violence, which was orchestrated by the TNI against supporters of East Timor's independence from Indonesia, was used as the pretext for deploying Australian troops. More than five years later, the vast majority of Timorese are still living in dire poverty, Australian troops remain in the country, Australian companies rule the roost in the Timor Sea, and the tiny statelet is economically and militarily completely beholden to the major powers.

Once its objectives were achieved, the Howard government ditched all criticism of the TNI and worked to resume relations. Throughout the entire sordid saga, Howard has received unfailing support from the "opposition" Labor Party.

The bipartisanship between Labor and the coalition government, which has characterised Labor's approach to virtually every major policy issue since Howard took office in 1996, has now risen to a new level. Labor has left all reaction to the tsunami disaster—one of the most significant events in the Asian region in decades—entirely in the hands of the government. The party has issued no statements, expressed no sympathy, and made no demands. Its only comments were two cursory press releases praising Howard's initiatives and "sentiments". After two weeks of silence, Labor leader Mark Latham emerged from his alleged illness to state his full agreement with Howard's measures.

Likewise, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and its affiliates have kept their mouths completely shut. No calls have been made to their members for teams of nurses, teachers, skilled trades people or construction workers, to travel to the affected countries to assist the victims to rebuild their lives. The indifference is not accidental. The Labor Party and the union movement have no reason to oppose Howard's agenda or the ravages carried out every day on the lives and conditions of ordinary people—in Australia and around the world—at the behest of global capitalism. Their response to the collapse of national regulation and the old perspective of national reformism has been to align themselves with the interests of corporate Australia. That is why, as far as the vast majority of working people are concerned, they have become a complete irrelevancy.

But the heartfelt response of ordinary people throughout Australia and around the world is another expression of the elemental understanding of the global nature of the economic, political and social issues raised by the tsunami disaster. Providing genuine support for the victims of the Indian Ocean tsunami is inseparable from building an international political movement grounded on the perspective of socialist internationalism and committed to overturning the system responsible for the scale of the social catastrophe left behind by the tidal waves.



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