

Tsunami disaster strips away Blair's humanitarian pretence

Julie Hyland
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Prime Minister Tony Blair finally returned from his family vacation in Egypt on Monday January 3, more than a week after the Asian tsunami first struck, leaving a catastrophic trail of death and destruction in its wake.

Blair's cavalier indifference to the terrible events in the Indian Ocean has been even more apparent than that of President George W. Bush. Whilst the latter was finally forced out of his Texas ranch some three days after the tsunami hit to make a perfunctory statement on the disaster, Blair resisted any demands that he should cut short his holiday in order to lead the UK's emergency aid effort.

The prime minister's contempt for the plight of tens of millions of people is all the more striking when one considers his record.

Foremost amongst world leaders, Blair has sought to portray his every action as being shaped by humanitarian impulses and concern for what he terms "global interdependence." From Kosovo to Iraq, the prime minister has insisted that "ethics" and "morality" must be at the heart of British foreign policy.

Moreover, Blair has never missed an opportunity to raise his political profile. On hearing the first accounts of the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, for example, he immediately cancelled all his engagements to play a leading role in co-coordinating the international response to the terrorist assaults.

Yet on this occasion, with some 15 countries on two continents severely affected by the worst natural disaster in living memory, the prime minister did not appear in public for a week.

Neither the numbers of Briton's killed—41 confirmed dead and a further 158 missing, presumed dead—nor the fact that two of the countries worst hit, India and Sri Lanka, are former British colonies and that thousands of their nationals living and working in Britain have

lost friends and loved ones, was apparently sufficient to make the prime minister interrupt his break.

According to reports, Blair was given news about the tsunami just before he took his flight to the Sharm el-Sheik resort on December 26, but decided to continue with his vacation regardless.

As the prime minister was settling down in his luxury accommodation, millions of working people across the globe were responding spontaneously to the unfolding tragedy, their unprecedented generosity shaming numerous governments into increasing the paltry amounts they had initially pledged.

In Britain alone, the public donated a record one million pounds every hour, forcing the government to up its donation from £15 million to £50 million. But even that was quickly outstripped. A week after the tragedy, some £76 million has been collected from the public. Charity organisations report overwhelming numbers of people, including nurses, doctors, plumbers and engineers, volunteering to help any way they could.

Yet, as the scale of the catastrophe became apparent, government ministers denied there was any need for Blair to cut short his holiday. Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott and International Development Secretary Hilary Benn were dispatched to defend the prime minister, cynically claiming that Blair was not interested in "gesture" politics, and that he was directing operations from Egypt.

Even five days after the giant waves had swept away entire villages and towns, the disaster received only a cursory mention in the prime minister's New Year message. Ten brief lines were inserted at the start of the message to address the event that had held the attention of the world for a week. The remainder of the message was as surreal as it was grotesque, with Blair forecasting the New Year "would bring a rising tide

[sic] of prosperity and economic strength”, pledging “a new emphasis on discipline and order in the classroom”, and a clamp down against asylum seekers.

Only on January 1 did the prime minister make a televised response to the tragedy, in an interview recorded in Egypt. Intended purely as a damage limitation exercise, it failed miserably. Despite being confronted by just one interviewer from Channel 4 news, the prime minister appeared increasingly uncomfortable as it became apparent that he was unable to make any serious defence of his actions.

Even after returning to Britain, Blair maintained his silence. Instead the floor was given to Foreign Secretary Jack Straw to warn that the final death toll of Briton’s could be several hundred.

How does one account for this state of affairs? In Britain as elsewhere, the tsunami disaster has thrown into stark relief the gulf between the concerns of millions of working people and those of the ruling elite.

Blair’s response is symptomatic of the venal, self-absorbed financial oligarchy whose political spokesman he is. “Humanitarianism” is of practical significance for this layer only in so far as it provides a vehicle for advancing the predatory interests of British imperialism. To this end, billions can be expended in waging war against Iraq, flattening its cities and terrorising its people. But as regards the tsunami crisis, the countries and peoples whose lives and livelihoods have been devastated over the last week are simply too poor, and therefore too inconsequential, for them to be concerned with.

The prime minister’s indifference is the sharpest expression of the reactionary character of big business politics the world over. Only as such callousness has become more and more politically embarrassing and potentially destabilising, have governments been forced to up their efforts. In the last days, the White House has strained every sinew trying to cover up the political debacle caused by Bush’s initial dismissive response to the disaster, drafting in former presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton to spearhead a nationwide appeal for funds.

But the US administration’s own damage limitation exercise seems only to have compounded Blair’s difficulties.

Clearly angered by United Nations emergency relief coordinator Jan Egeland’s criticisms of western

countries for their “stinginess”, the US had announced it would coordinate a relief effort for Asia alongside three “core” countries—Japan, Australia and India.

In Britain, the move was widely interpreted as part of continuing US efforts to marginalise the UN, and at odds with the calls by Blair and others for the UN to “take the lead” in organising emergency aid.

The *Sunday Times* January 2 noted approvingly that some US Republicans were describing the “core countries” initiative as a “second coalition of the willing”. Nile Gardiner, from the right-wing Heritage Institute in Washington, said that its formation was a “demonstration of American global power and an indication that faith in institutions such as the UN is declining. It’s an extension of the Bush principle that coalitions can act far more swiftly and effectively in dealing with global emergencies or major threats to international security.”

Alienated from the mass of the British people, and apparently “off-message” as regards his more powerful US ally, Blair’s arrogant disdain has quickly given way to political paralysis.



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