

The social roots of the tsunami disaster

The Editorial Board
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The devastation caused by the Asian tsunami was not inevitable. On the contrary, it constitutes a powerful demonstration of the irrational and inhuman nature of the profit system. It is true that the immediate causes lay in forces of nature currently beyond the power of mankind to control. But it was entirely within the bounds of modern technology to prevent the vast majority of the suffering, death and damage that has occurred.

If the earthquake and tsunami had erupted in the Pacific Ocean, there would have been very different consequences. A hi-tech early warning system, developed to protect the shorelines of North America and Japan in particular, has been in place for decades. The first warnings would have been issued within minutes of an initial tremor. While numbers of people would inevitably have been affected—most likely the poor, living in the least protected circumstances—the majority, as well as vital infrastructure, would have escaped largely unscathed.

But no such warning system existed in the countries bordering the Indian Ocean. The tsunami therefore struck populations that were totally unprepared. The most vulnerable were villagers forced by poverty to live right on the coast in flimsy shacks and huts which offered no protection whatsoever. Not only did they receive no warnings, but the authorities had never informed them how to identify the tell-tale signs of approaching danger. Entire villages and towns were levelled and their inhabitants swept away, before anyone knew what was even happening.

The terrible suffering of millions of people throughout Asia and parts of Africa has been compounded by the paucity of basic infrastructure. Even at the best of times, fundamental services throughout the affected countries—such as transport, communications, electricity and water—are grossly inadequate. In the wake of the disaster, emergency and medical services have been completely overwhelmed. Hundreds of thousands of people are without the basic necessities of life. Nearly four weeks after the event, relief workers have yet to reach some of the more remote areas.

Initial government responses in the world's major capitals demonstrated the contempt and indifference of the ruling elites towards the plight of the masses in the so-called Third

World. In stark contrast to the outpourings of sympathy and generosity expressed by ordinary people, neither Bush nor Blair thought it necessary to even alter their holiday plans. Their belated statements were only issued after their lack of concern threatened to cause serious political embarrassment.

There was nothing accidental about this reaction. It reflected, in fact, the fundamental economic relations that exist, and that are carried out every day, between oppressed and oppressor nations. The vast wealth accumulated by a tiny privileged elite in the major imperialist centres is a direct product of the profits extracted through the exploitation of cheap labour in Asia, Africa and elsewhere. In other words, the extravagant lifestyles of the political, financial and industrial elite in the advanced countries are entirely dependent upon the ongoing impoverishment of millions in the poorest countries.

There are many statistics that highlight this relationship. *Forbes* magazine's annual listing of the world's billionaires reached a record 587 last year, nearly half of whom live in the United States. Their collective wealth totalled \$1.9 trillion—more than the combined gross domestic product of the world's 170 poorest countries. By contrast, a UN report in 2003 found that at least one billion people live in "extreme poverty" without the most basic essentials of life, and that their conditions were worsening.

As far as the US, Britain and other imperialist centres are concerned, the villagers and fishermen in Sri Lanka and Indonesia who have lost everything—family members, homes and their livelihoods—are marginal to the operations of global capital. That is why their fate is regarded as irrelevant. Everyone knows that natural disasters regularly wreak havoc in Asia. Not a year goes by without major floods and typhoons ravaging homes and lives, but nothing is ever done to make the victims less vulnerable.

The world's financial press summed up the attitude when they heaved a collective sigh of relief over the impact of the tsunami. Major investments, like the oil and gas fields of Aceh, were untouched, and insurance exposure was minimal—since few of the victims could afford to be covered. Tourism was damaged—but that could be quickly restored. Stockmarkets around the globe—including in the Asian

region—barely registered the event.

In the countries affected by the tsunami, only a narrow social stratum—those assisting in the exploitation of the local populations by the major transnational corporations—has benefitted from the increase in foreign investment. As far as the majority is concerned, the various economic restructuring, privatisation and structural adjustment programs imposed by the World Bank and IMF on behalf of global capital have only led to a deterioration in living standards.

Economic exploitation goes hand in hand with political repression. Throughout Asia, the national bourgeoisie has only been able to sustain these relations and maintain itself in power through military dictatorships or by dividing the populations through communalism and civil war.

After virtually ignoring the catastrophe for a week, the major powers made a sudden about-turn. An international summit in Jakarta pledged around \$5 billion in aid and assistance—still a tiny amount compared to the budgets of the donor countries and a fraction of what is needed for the millions of tsunami victims. But even more significantly the US and Australia, along with other countries dispatched military forces to take part in “relief” operations in two of the worst hit countries—Sri Lanka and Indonesia.

This apparent change of heart was guided by definite class interests. As well as being a gigantic PR exercise to paper over their initial, highly conspicuous indifference, Bush, Blair, Howard and others concluded that the catastrophe could be exploited to serve their own economic and strategic ends. For the White House, it presented the chance to put a “humanitarian face” on the US military, which has been engaged in the illegal neo-colonial occupation of Iraq.

At a recent Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on her appointment by Bush to the post of Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice declared that the tsunami constituted “a wonderful opportunity to show not just the US government, but the heart of the American people.” “And I think it has paid great dividends for us,” she added.

The disaster provided an excuse for the largest US military presence in south Asia since the Vietnam War—something the Bush administration has wanted since assuming office in 2001. Up until now, it has been largely unable to use the “war on terrorism” to achieve its objective because of nervousness among regional governments about a public backlash. Now, however, US troops are on the ground in Sri Lanka and Indonesia. Both countries lie astride key shipping routes between the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific region, long considered vital by US military strategists.

In Indonesia, the tsunami has allowed Washington to reestablish close ties to the Indonesian armed forces (TNI). Following the fall of Suharto, the US was compelled to

distance itself from the TNI and its brutal record of repression. Now US soldiers are working hand in hand with TNI forces in Aceh, even as the latter continue their war of attrition aimed at crushing separatist rebels and terrorising the Acehnese population.

As for the financial assistance, every dollar comes with strings attached. Major construction companies are already queuing up for the lucrative contracts due to be handed out for reconstruction projects. The Australian government has insisted that its \$1 billion in aid will be controlled and disbursed by its own officials stationed in Jakarta, working with their Indonesian counterparts, not via the United Nations. Among other things, this will ensure that Australian companies are the primary beneficiaries.

Concern for the tsunami victims is the last consideration. The unstated assumption behind the entire relief operation is that the survivors should be grateful for anything. Conditions not fit for animals in the advanced countries—overcrowded and filthy refugee camps, without proper sanitation or water supplies—are regarded as appropriate accommodation for victims for two years or more. After that, they should consider themselves lucky if they can return to their former lives—a hand-to-mouth existence, living in the same impoverished conditions—and very likely, the same exposed coastal locations—as before.

An Indian Ocean warning system may now be established. But nothing will be done to change the circumstances leading to the annual death toll caused by floods, cyclones and other natural disasters.

The December 26 tragedy has once again underscored the disparity between the enormous scientific advances of the last century and the backwardness in which millions of people are condemned to live. Over the past two decades, the globalisation of production has vastly expanded mankind’s economic capacity, establishing the conditions for the rational planning and deployment of resources on a world scale, and enabling people in every part of the world to enjoy a decent standard of living.

As long as the profit system continues, however, this is impossible. The immense social chasm between rich and poor is the outcome of relations inherent to capitalism. To end social inequality requires the revolutionary restructuring of society along socialist lines, where the pressing social needs of the overwhelming majority take precedence over the profit requirements of the few.



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