

Hypocrisy and self interest at tsunami summit in Jakarta

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From beginning to end, the one-day summit on the Asian tsunami disaster held in Jakarta yesterday reeked of hypocrisy. Representatives of the world's richest nations, who only a week ago announced derisory amounts of aid, paraded as benefactors of the downtrodden of Asia. The leaders of Indonesia, Sri Lanka and other affected countries expressed their immense gratitude for the pittance that was pledged. UN General Secretary Kofi Annan presided over the wretched affair, supplying predictable benedictions and empty phrases of concern about the plight of the victims.

The international media reported in effusive terms the amounts of aid donated by the world's major powers, now approaching just \$US4 billion. Even taken at face value, the figure is grossly inadequate to deal with the immediate humanitarian crisis confronting an estimated 3 to 5 million people, let alone the longer-term reconstruction needed to provide a decent standard of living for the tens of millions whose lives have been torn apart by the tragedy.

Many of the pledges of assistance made with great fanfare at the Jakarta summit will never be realised. Just over a year ago, a similar outpouring of promises occurred in response to the earthquake that levelled the Iranian city of Bam and killed nearly 30,000 people. More than \$1 billion in aid was promised but, according to Iranian officials, only \$17.5 million arrived. Likewise, in comments to the press this week, UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Jan Egeland pointed out that billions of dollars were pledged after Cyclone Mitch devastated Central America in 1998, but just \$682 million was actually realised.

In his report to the summit, Kofi Annan cautiously hinted that immediate cash, not future promises, was needed. He announced a UN appeal for nearly \$1 billion in the next six months to provide emergency relief for the millions of people in Asia and Africa who lack shelter, food, water or medical care. Despite the public promises of billions, the UN relief operation still does not have the money in hand to provide basic essentials in the immediate period ahead.

World Health Organisation (WHO) director-general Dr Lee Jong-wook warned on Wednesday that the tsunami

death toll could double if aid does not reach the survivors quickly. "We are extremely concerned about the ongoing lack of access to basic needs. Five million people have been severely affected by the tsunami. We now estimate that as many as 150,000 people are at extreme risk, if a major disease outbreak in the affected areas occurs. The most urgent need now is to make sure everyone has access to safe drinking water," he said.

Concerns have also been raised that money pledged for the victims of the Asian tsunami will simply be pilfered from funds previously allocated to other disasters. In his most pointed remarks, Annan urged governments to donate new money to the tsunami appeal and not "rob Peter to pay Paul". UN relief coordinator Egeland told reporters this week that "we have 20 parallel catastrophes unfolding" around the world. Pointing to the ongoing disasters in the eastern Congo and the Darfur region of western Sudan, he declared, "[H]ere is my criticism of the rich world: Could we wake up please to those 20 forgotten emergencies".

There is no doubt that these appeals have fallen on deaf ears. The contempt of the major powers towards the oppressed masses of the world, whether in Asia, Africa or Latin America, was all too evident in the immediate aftermath of the December 26 disaster. Figures such as US President Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Australian Prime Minister John Howard waited for days before making any statement, then announced pitiful donations. Only as the scale of the tragedy became apparent and evoked an international outpouring of sympathy did these leaders backtrack and increase their offers.

The Jakarta summit was part of a PR campaign designed to deflect criticism of the callous indifference of the major powers. In his speech to the gathering, Annan sanctimoniously declared: "The past 11 days have been among the darkest in our lifetime. But they have also allowed us to see a new kind of light. We have seen the world coming together. We have seen a response based not on our differences, but on what unites us."

While evoking the sentiment of millions of ordinary

people around the world, Annan's remarks had nothing to do with the real interests of those assembled at the summit. For all their declarations of concern and sympathy, the representatives of imperialism were gathered in Jakarta to prosecute their economic and strategic agendas and to tighten their grip over the oppressed countries of the region. Any relief aid will come with economic and political strings attached. In the name of "accountability" and "good governance", reconstruction will benefit companies in the donor countries and be used to push for further economic restructuring in southern Asia.

An article in the *Los Angeles Times* on January 3 openly spelled this out. "The rebuilding effort after this tragedy could also advance the changes in international aid that Bush and other Western leaders are promoting. In a constructive global bargain, the rich nations are promising poor nations more aid, and more favorable trade and debt policies, in return for political and economic change and more rigorous proof that the countries are using their international money effectively," the commentator declared. "In responding to a crisis this vast, good intentions aren't enough. Using our head will be as important as opening our heart."

One of the more naked examples of predatory self-interest was provided by Australian Prime Minister John Howard who stole the media limelight in Jakarta with an offer of \$A1 billion in aid to Indonesia. Howard was unapologetic about the fact that the money would not be channelled through the UN and that it would only go to Indonesia, not to any of the other affected countries. As far as Canberra is concerned, the tsunami disaster constitutes an ideal opportunity to press ahead with Australian ambitions for a more interventionist economic and strategic role within the region, especially Indonesia.

In comments yesterday, Howard declared that the aid program was "a historic step in relations between Australia and Indonesia". The package—\$A500 million in direct aid and \$A500 in loans over five years—will involve the dispatch of Australian officials to Jakarta to supervise operations. Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer told the media that "ultimately" reconstruction would be an Indonesian responsibility, leaving no doubt that Canberra would hold the whip hand in the management of funds.

The last time Howard trumpeted his "concern" for the welfare of the Asian masses was in East Timor in 1999. Canberra seized upon the militia violence instigated by the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) to justify an Australian-led military intervention to secure its interests in the region—above all, control over the Timor Sea oil and gas reserves. Five years after the Australian operation, the tiny "independent" statelet remains completely dependent economically and militarily on the major powers and the

majority of East Timorese are still living in abject poverty.

Like other leaders at the Jakarta summit, Howard warmly embraced Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono—a retired general prominent in the former Suharto dictatorship. Having secured Australian interests in East Timor, Howard has long since dropped any criticism of the role of the Indonesian military. No mention was made, by the Australian prime minister or any other leader, of the TNI's brutal war of repression in Aceh—the Indonesian province devastated by earthquake and tsunami. As part of relief operations, Australian and US troops are now in Aceh—a key strategic area adjacent to the Straits of Malacca—collaborating closely with the Indonesian military, even though the latter is continuing its offensive against local separatist rebels.

Desperate for economic assistance, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and other devastated countries have dropped all objections as the major powers trample on their national sovereignty. All of the governments are sitting on a potential political timebomb as the shock and horror of the tsunami and earthquake give way to anger and outrage over the lack of any warning and the inadequate and disorganised response to the disaster. Apart from India and Burma, the affected countries have expressed their readiness to accept aid at any price.

Taken as a whole, the Jakarta gathering was a deeply cynical event. If the death toll from the tsunami and earthquake had been 1,500 or even 15,000, rather than 150,000, and the media had buried the story with the perfunctory coverage normally devoted to floods and other disasters in Asia, there would have been few expressions of concern, token aid and no summit at all.



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