A socialist and internationalist perspective to confront the Asian tsunami disaster

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The following speech was delivered by Wije Dias, the general secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka and a member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site*, at a public meeting in Sydney on February 4 on the consequences of the Asian tsunami.*

Today is a national holiday in Sri Lanka to commemorate the 57th anniversary of so-called independence from British colonial rule. The government will hold pageants and military parades to celebrate this event—although it will be low-key due to the tsunami disaster. But the question remains: is there any reason for working people in Sri Lanka—the poor peasants, fisherman and unemployed youth—to participate in such a celebration?

About 1.2 million people—that is one in every twenty of the island's total population—now live in refugee camps. About 450,000 of them were displaced due to the civil war that successive bourgeois governments have waged over the past 20 years. The rest are forced to live in wretched conditions due to the tsunami. The number killed by the tsunami is approaching 40,000 men, women and children. Another 4,000 have disappeared and are listed as missing. This compares to an estimated 65,000 people who have been killed during the war.

Although the tsunami resulted from an earthquake near Sumatra, its devastating consequences in southern Asia, as well as parts of Africa, was not just a natural disaster. The toll was due mainly to poverty, which is rampant in all the semi-colonial countries.

An article by Praful Bidwai published recently in the magazine *Frontline* explained: "The effects of disasters are dissimilar and socially determined. The average natural disaster kills 63 people in Japan. But in Peru the average toll is 2,900—46 times higher. When Hurricane Elena hit the US in 1985 only five people died. But when a cyclone slammed Bangladesh in 1991, half a million perished. Earthquakes killing more than 10,000 people have only occurred in the Third World."

Although I will refer mainly to Sri Lanka, it is not solely because I am more familiar with conditions there, but because it expresses the general situation that prevails in all the backward countries, whether in Asia, Africa or Latin America. The poverty of the majority of the population in these countries is man-made. Its roots are not to be found in the realm of divine power or in the forces of nature. Nature endowed these countries with valuable natural resources and favourable climatic conditions. It is the social order that has kept the majority of people in abject poverty.

The transfer of political power from the imperialists to the local capitalist class—in the name of independence—has not brought any relief to workers or poor peasants over during the past half century. On the contrary, the social conditions and the democratic rights of the masses have been under continuous attack, particularly during the past two decades. This was expressed in the devastation facing ordinary people as a result of the tsunami, as well as in the response of the political establishment and the ruling elite.

The homes that were destroyed and the lives lost were mainly those of the poor people who live close to the sea. Many were fishermen as well as people without regular jobs. Their dwellings were fragile structures that could only be described as shanties. These houses could not withstand a flood or a storm on a smaller scale, let alone a tsunami. In some of the pictures taken after the tsunami, one could sometimes find a solitary house still standing among a vast expanse of debris. Such houses survived because they are structurally solid, as the owner was capable of bearing the expense. That was the house of the local capitalist.

While the fishermen lived near the sea because of their work, many people were forced to live on the coastline because they couldn't afford a piece of land. The coastal railway line runs parallel to the sea and a large area near the track is railway reservation land. It was on those lands that people put up their huts. Now they have lost literally everything. They are not people who maintained bank accounts or insurance policies. Once their house was destroyed they were left with nothing. They are even deprived of compensation because many are regarded as "illegal encroachers" on Crown Land.

These people did not receive any prior warning. Even if a message had been broadcast after the tsunami hit the east coast of Sri Lanka, many lives could have been saved. The waves took more than 30 minutes to reach the southwestern and southern coasts. Even if people had walked just 15 minutes inland, their lives would have been saved. But there was no warning. Many rationalisations are now put forward to justify or evade responsibility for this criminal lapse on the government's part. These include the protest that December 26 was a holiday and so government offices were closed.

What emerges is a total lack of concern for the lives of the ordinary people on the part of the political establishment and the elite. The wealthy countries treat people in the poor countries as material for exploitation—cheap labour for foreign and local investors. It must be added, particularly in relation to Sri Lanka, that human life has been greatly devalued by the country's barbarous civil war.

Response of working people

The government's lack of concern for the plight of the ordinary people was also revealed in its handling of relief measures. For two days after the disaster, the government, the bureaucracy and the armed forces were in a state of paralysis. If it were not for the local people in neighbouring areas, who spontaneously rose to the occasion and helped the victims, many thousands more would have perished. Our WSWS reporting teams came across hundreds of displaced persons who poured scorn on the government's failure to provide proper shelter and relief.

It must be emphasised that this response by ordinary people cut across racial and religious divisions created, maintained and exploited for

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decades by the ruling bourgeois parties to keep the working class and oppressed masses divided. Completely subservient to their imperialist masters, the local bourgeoisie has been incapable of providing any solution to the social and democratic demands of the masses. Therefore, from the very beginning, capitalist rule has depended on reactionary Sinhala chauvinism—a policy of divide and rule.

Beginning with the disenfranchisement of Tamil-speaking plantation workers in 1948-49, on the grounds that they were immigrants from India, the policy of discrimination was extended to the native Tamil population in 1956 by making Sinhala the only official language. Tamil workers were forced to learn Sinhala to keep their jobs. With the launching of the civil war in 1983, the appeals to chauvinism intensified along with the attacks on the working class through the adoption of open market policies.

The irrationality and artificiality of these communal divisions was demonstrated when people spontaneously provided help to the tsunami survivors. They were not interested in whether it was a Sinhala, Tamil or a Muslim in need of help. They did not consider whether it was a Buddhist temple, a Christian church or a Muslim mosque where the victims from different communities were to be sheltered.

In these relief efforts, class relations came to the fore. It was working people—the most socially organised section of the population—who took the initiative. Hospital workers played a significant role, treating the injured and calling on others to provide assistance. The same hospital workers—from doctors down to the lowest-ranking employees—have been subjected to a barrage of vilification in the recent past for their militant struggles in defence of free health services. In the capitalist media, they were portrayed as the enemies of the sick.

The independent intervention of working people to help the tsunami victims immediately instilled fear in the ruling class, the state apparatus and the armed forces. It was as if ordinary people had trespassed on forbidden territory. The government swiftly moved to place all relief work under the control of the military. To justify this decision, the media was mobilised to publish exaggerated reports about a handful of cases involving the abduction of children and rape.

Confronted with public anger—from the victims as well as the volunteers—the government took a step back, saying the army would only provide security at refugee camps. But a few days later on January 6, President Kumaratunga authorised a draconian set of emergency regulations covering 14 of the 25 districts on the island. It was not even discussed in cabinet, let alone in parliament. The regulations were kept secret until the Human Rights Commission pointed out that the public had a right to know under what laws they were governed.

In the name of preserving public order and maintaining essential services, the emergency regulations give wide powers to the military and police. Area military commanders, or the competent authority appointed by the president, have the power to requisition buildings, land and vehicles for relief work. Furthermore, they can order any person to do any work or provide any service, not only in connection with tsunami relief but also related to national security. This regulation could well mean forcible conscription into the armed forces. These are grave infringements on democratic rights. When one considers the brutal and murderous acts of the army over the past 20 years, the grave dangers posed to the masses by these regulations are clear.

That is not all, however. Addressing a public rally in the southern city of Hambantota, President Kumaratunga expressed the view that elections should be cancelled for the next five years. There has been no protest against these attacks on democratic rights by any of the opposition parties—either from the right or the left—or from the trade union bureaucracy. This lack of opposition is not the result of "tsunami shock". Nor is it motivated by concern to ensure that humanitarian efforts proceed unhindered. Rather, it is because the democratic rights of workers and the poor have become incompatible with capitalist rule under conditions where deepening social inequality is making life for the vast majority intolerable.

As a rough estimate, 20 percent of the total population receives more than half of the national income, while the poorest 20 percent receives only 10 percent. More than 40 percent of people live below the poverty line, on incomes of $1 a day. Free Trade Zone workers receive just $45 a month, barely enough to survive on. Under these conditions, democratic rights and parliamentary forms of rule are increasingly considered an unnecessary burden on the ruling class. The attempts to subvert the constitution and establish an autocratic form of rule have been on the agenda for quite some time. In November 2003, Kumaratunga resorted to a virtual constitutional coup to seize three ministries from the United National Front government. Three months later, she arbitrarily sacked the whole government.

None of the parties that claim to speak in the name of the working class opposed any of these measures. The Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna is now aligned with Kumaratunga and has shed all its socialist rhetoric. It campaigns for a "stable national government"—in other words, a government that will wage war against the Tamil minority. Once the largest working class party in Sri Lanka, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, along with the Stalinist Communist Party, has also joined with the president and supported her anti-democratic program.

In its trampling on democratic rights, the ruling elite has been encouraged by its developing relations with the imperialist countries, particularly with the Bush administration. After the tsunami, the US deployed 13,000 military personnel, 21 naval ships and 75 aircraft in the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka is a key focus in the geopolitical strategic designs of the Bush administration in the South Asian region.

As Yale historian John Lewis Gaddis told the *New York Times*, the tsunami disaster "represents an opportunity to try to move beyond the frustration of Iraq and preemption and his [Bush's] tensions with the Islamic world. It is an example of an area where the US can work in a cause that no one can argue with." However, despite the media campaign to portray the US marines as humanitarian relief workers, the working class and the poor of this region, who have been oppressed and exploited by imperialism for decades, do not welcome their presence. People have bitter memories of Vietnam, and the barbaric role of the US military in present-day Iraq has revived their hostility toward US imperialism and imperialism in general.

These sentiments, as well as the spontaneous expressions of support for tsunami victims, have not yet been articulated into a conscious political program. But the objective conditions are rapidly maturing where our party's fight for socialism will be able to educate and mobilise broad layers of the working class and the oppressed masses.

The tasks of the Marxist party

Here we come to the most crucial question of all—the tasks of the Marxist party. We cannot simply mourn for the tsunami victims, nor substitute ourselves for the lack of relief aid. We are not opposed to the relief work carried out by voluntary organisations and we appreciate their efforts and endeavours. However, our main task as socialist revolutionaries is to provide the perspective and program needed to overcome the oppressive social and political conditions that keep the masses enslaved under the moribund capitalist system. We must develop the awareness among working people that it is the responsibility of the state and the government to provide for the needs of those affected by the tsunami. If the government fails to address these basic needs, we will pose the necessity for an alternative in the form of a workers' and peasants'

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government.

I would like to quote from a book by Leon Trotsky entitled *The Young Lenin*. It deals with the experience of Marxists during the 1891-92 famine in Russia. There were liberals and radicals who jumped in to provide relief, in the hope that they could prove their indispensability to the tsarist autocracy. Lenin stood against that and Trotsky explains in this passage the perspective that Marxists should adopt.

"The accusation commonly leveled in those days against the Marxists, to the effect that they viewed the national calamity through the spectacles of their doctrine, was indicative only of the low theoretical level of the debates. In point of fact, all forces and groupings took political positions: the government, which in the interests of its prestige, denied or underestimated the famine; the liberals, who while disclosing the existence of the famine, were at the same time eager to prove by their 'positive work' that they would be the best of the collaborators for the tsar if he would only give them a crumb of power; the Populists, who by rushing to the canteens and typhoid wards, hoped to find a peaceful and legal way of enlisting the sympathies of the people. The Marxists, opposed not aid to the starving, but the illusion that a sea of need could be emptied with the teaspoon of philanthropy. If, in a lawful committee or canteen, a revolutionary takes up a place that rightfully belongs to the zemstvo member or an official, then who will take the revolutionary's place in the movement? It is clear beyond dispute from ministry memoranda and directives made public later that the government was increasing allocations for the starving only because it feared revolutionary agitation, so that from the point of view of actual aid the revolutionary policy proved to be far more effective than neutral philanthropy" (Leon Trotsky, *The Young Lenin*, Wren Publishing, p.173).

We must derive important lessons from those experiences. We should mobilise the working people to place demands on the government and the state to provide immediate relief to victims of the tsunami disaster. Through this work we will educate the masses, by explaining the political significance of their experiences and by making them aware of their own power when they act together across communal divisions and rely on their own strength to solve problems.

We must demand the immediate allocation of land and houses to all those displaced. The government is now trying to enforce, using the military and police, a ban on building any dwelling within 100 metres of the sea. That is in the south where the Sinhala people live. When it comes to the northern and eastern areas, the limit is 200 metres, which is in itself racial discrimination. In opposition to this, we have to insist that the victims themselves decide where to live to sustain their livelihoods.

The equipment needed by fishermen to resume work must be provided without further delay. The government has only offered 5,000 rupees—that is just $US50—to people who have lost all their fishing gear. That is all the compensation the government is prepared to give. The emergency regulations and military control over relief work have to be immediately ended. A public works program must be implemented to rebuild all hospitals, schools, roads and communications systems.

The funds must be made available by transferring money from the war effort and by taxing the rich in proportion to their wealth. To date only 262 million rupees or just $US2.6 million has been donated by the wealthy to the president's relief fund. Yet their companies have made, by Sri Lankan standards, huge profits in the past year alone. Lakdhanavi Ltd, for example, posted an after-tax profit, for the year ending March 31, 2004, of 333.5 million rupees. The Commercial Bank of Ceylon had an after tax-profit, for the first nine months of 2004, of 1,310 million rupees. The Development Finance Corporation Bank, for the first half of the year 2004, had profits of 539 million. A blue chip company—the Richard Peiris Group—made 433 million rupees in pre-tax profits for the first half of 2004. With this sort of profit-making, their contributions to the tsunami relief fund are, to put it mildly, really shameful.

We raise these demands on the government in order to educate working people on the necessity for an alternative program to meet their needs. The oppressed masses, under the leadership of the working class, must be mobilised to establish their own committees to carry out relief activities—independent of the state and independent of all the bourgeois parties. The government and the ruling elites will of course say that these demands are "impractical" or impossible to implement. The only political response to this is that they should be ousted from power. A workers' and peasants' government for a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam must be brought to power. This is the perspective for which we are fighting.

The tsunami did not respect the nation-state borders. Our reporting teams came across many people who said—in some cases to their surprise and astonishment—that the tsunami took no account of the racial and communal divisions in Sri Lanka. These are powerful demonstrations of our internationalist program to unite working people across national borders and across communal divisions. In the coming period, the international socialist perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International, being developed on a daily basis through the work of the *World Socialist Web Site*, will be a powerful weapon in the hands of working people, not only in this region, but internationally.

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