

Asian tsunami: the New Zealand government's pathetic record

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Following her meeting with Australian Prime Minister John Howard last month, New Zealand leader Helen Clark announced that her Labour government would scale back its aid commitment to the tsunami-hit region in the Indonesian province of Aceh. A 32-member Defence Force medical team and an Air Force Hercules transport aircraft will be withdrawn in line with a similar move by Australia.

Clark said that New Zealand was cutting back its aid because the “relief phrase” was ending and the Indonesian government wanted foreign troops out of the country. The announcement coincided with official warnings by both prime ministers of possible terrorist attacks against foreign aid workers in Indonesia. While Clark said the withdrawal was “completely unconnected”, she nevertheless gave credence to the threats despite the fact that the Indonesian and US governments dismissed the warnings.

Whatever the exact reason, the Labour government's decision to wind up its limited aid effort stands in sharp contrast to the needs of the tsunami victims. An estimated 400,000 have been left homeless and many of those are still living in desperate conditions without basic shelter, food, clean water or medical care. The lack of concern for the victims underscores the mixture of hypocrisy, self-interest and political calculation that has characterised the Clark government's response to the disaster right from the start.

Clark's main announcement of aid came on January 18, more than three weeks after the December 26 calamity. The government decided to boost its aid package to the tsunami reconstruction appeal to \$NZ68 million (about \$US50 million). Clark boasted at the time that the grant was the country's biggest-ever relief commitment and a sign that New Zealand was prepared to make a commitment to Asia in “bad times” as well

as the good.

According to Clark, New Zealand's small size meant that the country could not be a decisive factor in the international relief response. Nonetheless, she said, “we wanted to do our bit”. While the announcement was lauded in the press as putting New Zealand in the “top 10” donor countries relative to population, it was as cynical as, and even more belated than, the response of the US, Australia and other powers. It came two days after a national day of mourning, also designed to cover up Labour's pitiful earlier reaction.

In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, the government had offered a derisory package of less than \$NZ5 million. After waiting to see what other countries would do, it decided in early January to double the figure—to \$10 million, including \$5 million in dollar-for-dollar funding to match private fundraising. A significant factor in the niggardly response was undoubtedly the relatively low numbers of New Zealanders involved—just five are known to have died.

The government's miserliness was quickly exposed by donations from ordinary citizens. In the first fortnight alone, New Zealanders contributed \$8.5 million—the largest ever single international relief campaign. In the second week, the tally rose at a rate of \$1 million a day. The Catholic aid agency Caritas, which had raised \$317,000, said the speed and the size of the donations was “phenomenal”. The Red Cross, Oxfam, and Christian World Service all topped previous best collections, with \$4.5 million, \$750,000, and \$250,000 respectively.

The stark contrast between the government's indifference and the outpouring of sympathy of ordinary working people set off alarm bells in ruling circles. Opposition leader Don Brash, a former Reserve Bank governor notorious for advocating reduced public

spending, criticised the government for being “stingy” and its slow response as a “national embarrassment”. An editorial in the *New Zealand Herald* warned that the international reaction had been “unprecedented” and that “New Zealand must surely align itself fully with that response”.

When Clark attended the emergency tsunami summit in Jakarta, her government’s aid package still languished at \$10 million. Clark was more intent in calculating how the interests of New Zealand capitalism could best be served. She declared that “a greater sense of regional solidarity” with South East Asia could be a “positive aspect” to the disaster. “I think increasingly there is a willingness to see New Zealand and Australia as part of the broader region. I am honoured that we got the invitation [to the conference]. I think it is very significant,” she said.

Clark’s response is entirely in character with the history of New Zealand in the region—that of a second-rate imperialist power, acting in support of its principal allies and trading partners, Australia and the USA. While New Zealand’s interests have not always coincided with the two larger powers, it has, particularly in the recent period, invariably backed their imperialist ventures. Clark and her government vigorously supported the Australian-led interventions in East Timor and the Solomon Islands. Like Australia and the US, New Zealand, after its initial lack of interest, seized on the tsunami disaster to forge closer ties in the region, particularly with Indonesia.

Labour’s response reflected the attitude of layers of business who regarded the tsunami as a useful means for raising their corporate profile. In the course of a media discussion on “societal marketing”, one Victoria University lecturer declared that there was no longer any such thing as “philanthropy for the sake of it”. Corporate philosophy could best be described as “strategic giving to improve a firm’s strategic position,” he said.

After finally upping aid to \$68 million, Clark declared her government’s package to be “generous”. Opposition parties joined in saying it was now “credible”. In fact, it was neither. A week earlier, newspapers were confidently forecasting the government’s pledge would top \$100 million. The final figure included the initial \$10 million and \$20 million to be handed out over the next three years.

Had it chosen to do so, the government had the resources to increase the commitment many times over. During its five years in office, Labour has returned a series of record budget surpluses. Last year, for instance, the surplus was \$6.6 billion, and the forecast for the current year is running even higher at \$7.4 billion. There was no shortage of cash in its coffers.

Labour’s response to the plight of the impoverished tsunami victims in Asia is a mirror image of its attitude towards the New Zealand working class. The successive budget surpluses are a product of Labour’s cutbacks to essential social services such as education and health in order to create a favourable climate for business investors. Inevitably those who have been hardest hit have been the poorest and most vulnerable sections of society.

Having first ignored the disaster, Labour then sought to capitalise on the tragedy that claimed the lives of at least 300,000 people. Now that the subsequent humanitarian crisis is out of the headlines, Clark has effectively washed her hands of the issue, despite the continuing suffering of tens of thousands of victims. All of this speaks volumes for Labour’s contempt and indifference for the plight of the impoverished masses of Asia.



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