

The Asian tsunami, Hurricane Katrina and the Kashmiri earthquake: lessons for the working class

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Around the world people are witnessing a great horror unfolding in northern Pakistan and India. Just 10 months after a tsunami devastated South Asia and two months after Hurricane Katrina swept across the southern states of the US, more than 70,000 people have been killed by a massive earthquake in Kashmir and neighbouring areas.

Uncontrollable natural forces produced the earthquake on October 8. But, as with the Asian tsunami and the US hurricane, the terrible and mounting toll of human misery is the product of an outmoded economic system that subordinates social need to the anarchy of the capitalist market. The huge tremor has exposed the pitiful state of emergency services in India and Pakistan, the lack of properly-constructed housing, roads and other infrastructure, and the inadequacy of medical services, communications and essential services.

Once again the working people of South Asia have been given an object lesson not only in the criminal negligence of the local regimes in Islamabad and New Delhi, but in the cant and hypocrisy of “world leaders” in Washington, London, Tokyo and other capitals. For all the cynical expressions of concern, the international aid and assistance—totalling some \$300 million—is completely inadequate to meet immediate pressing needs, let alone to help the survivors reconstruct their lives.

Estimates put the number of homeless at more than 3 million. Many have not been reached by emergency workers as roads in the mountainous region have not been cleared and there is a serious shortage of helicopter transport. A statement by the UN World Food Program on Tuesday estimated that half a million people have still received no relief supplies. Doctors and surgeons are working around the clock as the injured continue to arrive from outlying areas. The victims are overwhelmingly the poor, whose makeshift dwellings crumbled immediately and who lost everything.

Yesterday UN Secretary General Kofi Annan timidly criticised the lack of international aid and warned that a second disaster is looming. As the Himalayan winter sets in, hundreds of thousands of people are without proper shelter, clothing and supplies in what are already subzero temperatures. Annan predicted that thousands would die of cold and preventable disease unless more assistance was forthcoming.

The source of the poverty that plagues the Indian subcontinent is no mystery. It is the outcome of the daily operation of economic relations between oppressed and oppressor countries. The huge profits of transnational corporations are directly dependent on access to inexhaustible supplies of cheap labour in countries like India and Pakistan. The existence of hundreds of millions of people living in

absolute poverty across South Asia is the essential precondition for the extravagant lifestyles of the super rich in New York, Tokyo and London.

The responses of US President George Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair to the earthquake reflect the contempt and indifference of the ruling circles they represent toward the impoverished masses of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Washington’s promise of \$50 million and the use of a handful of military helicopters pales into insignificance compared to the huge US resources devoted to the subjugation of Iraq and its vast oil reserves.

World stockmarkets did not even register the quake because it did not affect any major investment or vital resource. As far as the global corporate elites are concerned, the earthquake victims are entirely expendable. Their only function within the world capitalist system is to serve as part of the massive reserve army of labour that can be called on to depress the wages and conditions of workers in other parts of the world.

Insofar as Bush, Blair and other leaders have offered aid and expressions of concern, it has been to prop up their local allies and advance their own economic and strategic agendas. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf was already under siege over his support for Bush’s “war on terrorism” and the US invasion of Afghanistan. He now confronts a wave of angry criticism over the failure of his government to provide adequate aid to the quake victims, further undermining his shaky grip on power.

Washington is also hoping to exploit the tragedy to further the so-called peace process between India and Pakistan. Kashmir has been at the centre of the rivalry between the two countries for more than half a century, resulting in three wars and as recently as 2002 the threat of another. The Bush administration’s push for “peace” on the subcontinent is part of broader US ambitions for global economic and strategic dominance. India is a key element in these plans as a major source of cheap labour and potential ally against China.

The reaction of world leaders to the Asian tsunami that killed more than 300,000 people in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and India was the same. Bush and Blair refused to even alter their vacation plans until the overwhelming outpouring of sympathy and concern by ordinary working people around the world threatened to expose their indifference. As the enormity of the tragedy became apparent, the White House then used it for its own purposes, including to press for the “peace processes” in Sri Lanka and the Indonesian province of Aceh. In line with longstanding US ambitions to reestablish a military presence in South Asia, US troops took part in aid operations in

Indonesia and Sri Lanka.

Ten months after the disaster, hundreds of thousands of survivors are still living in squalid, makeshift accommodation with no immediate prospects. Most of the \$4 billion in international aid that was pledged with great fanfare at the summit in Jakarta in January has never materialised. In Sri Lanka, where at least 80,000 houses were destroyed, a mere 1,126 new homes have been completed and another 15,619 are in various stages of construction. Much of the limited international aid that did reach Colombo has simply vanished.

Hurricane Katrina holds even bigger lessons for the working class. This terrible tragedy laid bare the real state of class relations at the centre of world imperialism in the United States.

Firstly, it dealt a blow to the fairy tale that there are no class divisions in the US and that no one is left in poverty and want. Just as in Kashmir or Sri Lanka, the victims in New Orleans were the poor. Those who had cars left the city, while those who could not were left to their own devices in the Superdome and the Convention Centre. The scenes of devastation in the poor neighbourhoods, as commentators were forced to acknowledge, could have been filmed in Galle or Banda Aceh. For decades, various radical nationalists in Asia have written off the American working class or denied it even existed. Yet here for all to see was the elementary class truth that workers on the Indian subcontinent are in the same boat as their class brothers and sisters in the United States.

Secondly, the attitude of the American ruling class to the working people of New Orleans was exactly the same as toward the victims of the Asian tsunami and the Kashmiri earthquake. Bush was no more prepared to change his vacation plans for American workers in August than he was for the impoverished villagers of South Asia last December. Before, during and after Hurricane Katrina hit, the guiding principle behind the Bush administration's response was to protect the interests of the corporate elite.

Despite days of warning, the government made no effort to help its most vulnerable citizens. In the wake of the hurricane, it has exploited the disaster to hand over reconstruction to private corporations and to advance its plans for the militarisation of civil society. It is striking that the knee jerk reaction of the ruling classes, whether in Sri Lanka, Pakistan or the US, was to flood the streets with heavily-armed soldiers, not to provide assistance, but to protect private property and to quell any hint of protest or opposition.

Thirdly, Hurricane Katrina has exposed the myth of the market. For decades, the propagandists of "economic reform" have held up the US as proof that their program will work. To silence the critics, they have urged patience, arguing that "immediate pain" would eventually lead to "future gain". After all, look at the great example of fabulous wealth in America! Now it is plain to see that decades of economic restructuring in the US have not only produced a deepening divide between rich and poor, but a thoroughly decayed infrastructure that resembles Third World conditions. Even though a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico is a textbook scenario studied in colleges and universities, government agencies proved utterly incapable of evacuating the population prior to the event, or providing basic emergency services afterwards.

In a highly significant outburst in front of the TV cameras last week, President Musharraf blurted out the conclusion that the Pakistani ruling elite has drawn from Hurricane Katrina. Defending himself from mounting criticism, the general declared, in a fit of exasperation, that it had only been 24 hours—even President Bush had taken longer to start helping hurricane victims. In other words, Musharraf seized on

the Bush administration's criminal negligence and contempt for the working people of New Orleans to justify the failure of his own government to provide aid and assistance to the quake victims.

The international working class has to draw entirely different conclusions. An economic and social order that cannot provide elementary protection against natural disasters, let alone guarantee a decent living standard for all, does not deserve to exist. Whether in New Orleans, Colombo or Islamabad, workers share a common interest in abolishing the profit system and its outmoded division of the world into nation states.

Nowhere is the reactionary character of the capitalist state system so apparent as on the Indian subcontinent. The 1947 communal partition that created Pakistan and India, which was the outcome of a sordid deal between the British colonial rulers and the local bourgeoisie, has produced a half century of war and pogroms. The absurdity of these divisions is highlighted by the fact that Pakistan's president was born in present day India, and the Indian prime minister in present day Pakistan—yet both would launch a nuclear war on the subcontinent rather than surrender an inch of territory.

The October 8 earthquake no more respected the Line of Control in Kashmir than the December 26 tsunami took notice of the national borders between India, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. Yet the immediate response of the Indian and Pakistani armies on either side of the ceasefire line was not to assist the victims, but to ensure that their rival gained no advantage. While media commentators are speculating about the prospects for peace, any US-sponsored settlement in Kashmir would be no more than a temporary respite. The ruling classes in India and Pakistan have repeatedly stirred up communal and nationalist politics as the means for shoring up their rule by dividing the impoverished masses, and they will do so again.

I am standing as the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for the Sri Lankan presidential election in order to advance a socialist alternative to the bankrupt capitalist system for workers throughout the Indian subcontinent. The allies of working people are not to be found in the corridors of power in Colombo, New Delhi or Islamabad, but among their class brothers and sisters throughout the region, in the US and internationally. We are fighting for a United Socialist States of South Asia as the means for unifying and mobilising the working class of the subcontinent as part of the global struggle to replace capitalism with a social system based on satisfying the pressing needs of the majority, rather than the profits of a tiny few.



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