

One year after the Asian tsunami: an indictment of the profit system

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A year has gone by since the December 26 tsunami devastated the coastal belts of 12 countries from north Sumatra in South East Asia to Somalia and Kenya on the west coast of Africa. But a man-made disaster of massive proportions continues to blight the lives of the millions of survivors who still languish in appalling conditions without proper shelter, jobs, health care or education facilities for their children.

The initial destruction was a consequence of natural forces beyond mankind's control, although magnified and exacerbated by the lack of a tsunami warning system, of adequate planning or of a co-ordinated emergency response. There can be no justification, however, for the social catastrophe that continues to exist twelve months later. The callous treatment of the tsunami victims expresses the indifference and contempt of the profit system for the plight of the world's impoverished masses.

The Asian tsunami was one of the worst disasters of the past 100 years. Officially, the overall death toll is estimated at 226,000. The majority occurred in Indonesia where 165,708 people died, followed by 35,262 deaths in Sri Lanka and 16,389 in India. Another 8,240 people were killed in Thailand, 108 in the Maldives and another 227 in other countries.

The statistics for the number of people left homeless are even more staggering. The official number of "displaced persons" was 532,898 in Indonesia, 519,063 in Sri Lanka and 647,599 in India. Another 21,663 lost their homes in the low-lying Maldivian Islands, 6,000 in Thailand and 13,000 in other countries.

Millions more people were affected in other ways through the loss of their livelihoods, damage to their homes, loss of personal effects, injury and psychological trauma. Overwhelmingly the victims were poor—those least able to recover from the calamity. Many were fishermen or day labourers who had no choice but to settle near the sea, usually in makeshift accommodation that offered no protection from the huge waves.

It should be recalled that the initial response of "world leaders" to the tragedy was an undisguised lack of interest or concern. President Bush remained at his ranch, only issuing a perfunctory statement of sympathy some days later. The first US offer of financial assistance—\$15 million—was derisory, about \$1 for each of those affected. Only after an outpouring of public support, sympathy and donations from ordinary people around the world threatened to expose the official disdain did the tune change.

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga was enjoying a holiday in Britain and failed to return to the island for three days after the disaster, let alone oversee the immediate relief work, which was ill-organised and inadequate. In many cases, it was the bare hands of workers, young people and other volunteers who cleared the debris, attended to the injured and homeless and rescued hundreds who would otherwise have perished. The political establishment regarded this spontaneous response not simply as an embarrassment, but as a threat to its authority. Kumaratunga imposed a state of emergency and placed the entire relief effort, including volunteers, under military supervision.

Nearly two weeks after the tsunami, various political leaders gathered in

Jakarta to stage a show of concern and to hypocritically offer sympathy and aid. The representatives of the world's wealthiest countries paraded as great benefactors of the oppressed Asian masses, while the governments of Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Thailand expressed gratitude for the pitiful amounts on offer. Behind the façade, each of the major powers was calculating how best it could exploit the tragedy for its own purposes.

One year later, the world's politicians and media have been at pains to paint the international aid effort in the brightest of colours. One of the more shameless attempts was an article in the *Foreign Policy* magazine entitled "The Tsunami Report Card". Its three authors, including former assistant secretary of state for South Asia Karl F. Inderfurth, declared that "full reconstruction may take five years or longer" but then hailed the operation in glowing terms:

"[I]f the level of commitment demonstrated by the international community is maintained, the tsunami will be remembered as a model for effective global disaster response, not just as a disaster. Because of the speed and generosity of the response, its effectiveness compared to previous (and even subsequent) disasters, and its sustained focus on reconstruction and prevention, we give the overall aid effort a grade of 'A'."

It may well be true that the effort to assist the tsunami victims has outshone the response of the major powers to other disasters. But if that is the case, the comments are a devastating indictment of the entire capitalist order. The millions of victims throughout Asia are also entitled to pronounce judgement: if this is the best you can do, you have failed and the social system you represent deserves to be abolished!

According to UN data, a total of \$13.4 billion was pledged in relief and long-term reconstruction aid for the tsunami-affected countries. Government promises accounted for less than half—\$6 billion—while nearly as much, \$5.1 billion, came from private individuals and companies. In the US, donations from private sources—\$1,480 million—were nearly double the official government pledges of just \$857 million.

Much of the government money has yet to be realised. The US has paid only 38 percent of the aid that it promised. The EU pledged 1.3 billion euros for reconstruction, and has disbursed only 367 million. Likewise individual European countries, including Britain, France and Italy, have failed to honour their pledges.

Reviewing the conditions of the survivors, a UNDP report stated: "Tens of thousands have found temporary accommodation with friends or relatives, but many thousands of people remain in tent camps and shelters. Living conditions in those centres deteriorated during the year, and tens of thousands more durable temporary housing units will be needed until permanent housing is built."

According to an estimate by the Australian SBS documentary program "Dateline," more than two million Asians are still living in tents or temporary accommodation despite the presence of hundreds of aid agencies and promises of billions of dollars. Much of the "temporary

housing” is nothing more than a small one room wooden box, without any basic amenities such as clean water and electricity.

The housing figures indicate the magnitude of the social problems. In Indonesia, out of 141,000 houses destroyed, only 5,000 permanent houses have been rebuilt or repaired in the last year. In Sri Lanka, 6,179 houses have been completed to replace the 103,836 homes destroyed. In the Maldives, where 7,223 homes were washed away, only 836 have been rebuilt. The number of new houses would be far less but for the work of a multitude of local and international aid organisations.

The survivors, many of whom lost everything, need more than a temporary roof over their heads. Fishermen lost their boats, small traders and hawkers lost their stalls and transport, and farmers lost their crops and equipment. Many were heavily indebted even before the disaster and have no money to reestablish themselves. Most have received scant assistance, with many families completely dependent on small, sporadic handouts from the government or aid agencies. In most areas, work is yet to begin on restoring health, education and other services even to the inadequate pre-tsunami levels.

No one should be surprised by this state of affairs. Having decided it was impossible to simply ignore the tragedy, the major powers made commitments of money and personnel, not to help the victims, but to advance their own political and strategic agendas in the region.

Eben Kaplan, writing in the *Foreign Policy* magazine, explained that the US had already begun reaping the dividends. “US aid has fostered very positive sentiments towards the United States in tsunami-affected areas, reports show. One survey found as many as 65 percent of Indonesians now hold a more favorable view of the United States.”

But the US aid operation was more than just a PR exercise. Washington used the opportunity to put US troops on the ground for the first time in Sri Lanka and Indonesia, setting an important precedent for future operations. The US military presence in Aceh brought the Bush administration one step closer to its ambition of reestablishing links with the Indonesian armed forces. US aid also helped forge closer ties with the ruling elites throughout a region that has become an important focus for American foreign investment and geo-political interests.

Not to be outdone, America’s imperialist rivals in Europe and Asia have also exploited the disaster. According to the UN “report card,” Japan was the only country to meet and surpass its official pledge of \$500 million. Germany, in collaboration with the Indonesian government, pledged to finance the installation of a regional tsunami early warning system but, while it has yet to meet even half of its promised aid, the major German aid agencies, organised under the banner “Germany Helps”, are busy pressing German national interests in the region.

All of the major powers have come together, however, to push for an end to two longrunning civil wars—in Sri Lanka and Indonesia. For both countries, the granting of aid was made contingent on progress in the so-called “peace process”. The push for peace was motivated, not by concerns for the suffering these bloody conflicts have inflicted on ordinary people, but because of their destabilising impact throughout Asia. Both war zones lie adjacent to key naval routes and both have the potential to become lucrative new cheap labour platforms. Aceh also has significant reserves of oil and gas.

In the case of the Sri Lankan conflict, the international arm-twisting has proven a dismal failure. The ruling elites are so mired in communalism that even the effort to get the Colombo government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to agree to a limited, temporary arrangement for the distribution of tsunami aid collapsed. No sooner had President Kumaratunga signed the Post Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS) in June than her Sinhala chauvinist allies pulled out of the minority government. The Supreme Court put the final nail in the coffin by declaring the central features of P-TOMS unconstitutional. Far from bringing the government and the LTTE together, the disaster has

heightened the danger of war. In response to growing social unrest, including protests over the lack of tsunami aid, both sides have stirred up communal hatred to divert attention and to shore up their own bases of support.

The one apparent bright spot was Aceh. Prior to the tsunami, the Indonesian military had been engaged in a brutal secret war involving 50,000 heavily armed troops and paramilitary police units. A state of emergency had been declared and, despite a media blackout, numerous stories emerged of torture, rape and extra-judicial killings. In the wake of the disaster, the Indonesian military continued its operations and turned the refugee centres into concentration camps to choke off support for the Free Aceh Movement (GAM).

Hit by military setbacks as well as the devastation of vast areas of coastal Aceh, GAM leaders dropped their demand for an independent Aceh and agreed to disarm. Although the peace deal has been hailed as a great breakthrough, there is no guarantee it will hold. With the Indonesian military already pressing to put more troops in the province under the pretext of providing humanitarian aid, the agreement is just as shaky and uncertain as the present ceasefire in Sri Lanka.

Perhaps the most graphic exposure of the irrational character of the profit system is the fact that the whole terrible tragedy could happen again tomorrow. A year after the disaster there is still no tsunami warning system for the Indian Ocean, even though the technology involved is neither complex nor expensive. What is required is a coordinated international system of pressure sensors and water level gauges linked by reliable communications to a centre for the rapid processing, analysis and release of alerts.

International co-ordination, however, is precisely the problem. From the outset, the project has been plagued by national rivalries, with Indonesia, Thailand and India insisting on developing their own systems. “It is a sensitive issue”, said Ulrich Wolf, program specialist at the UN’s Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission, on December 16. He added: “There is no total trust for others to analyse data.”

The mutual suspicion arises out of national interests and prestige, not technical issues. India plans to spend \$28 million on its own early warning network, scheduled to be ready by September 2007. Indonesia is investing \$125 million on its own project, while Thailand plans to have a system ready by the end of 2006. Three badly coordinated national systems will inevitably be less effective and more costly than a single international warning system.

The tsunami itself respected no national boundaries. Moreover, those millions of ordinary working people throughout the world who selflessly donated aid, and the locals who did everything humanly possible to rescue and support the victims, gave no thought to national or communal divisions. The humanitarian instincts of ordinary people stood in marked contrast to the reaction of the political establishment. They provide a small glimpse of what would be possible if the vast resources created by the international working class were utilised to meet the social needs of the world’s population.

One year after the tsunami, the failure of the international aid operation and the desperate conditions facing the majority of survivors demonstrate that the spontaneous sentiments of ordinary people must be given conscious expression in a political movement that sets out to replace the outmoded system of capitalist nation states with one based on international socialism. That is the perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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