

# The tsunami in Sri Lanka: A case study in US humanitarian missions

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Since the cyclone engulfed Burma on May 3, there has been an incessant campaign in the international media to push for foreign militaries, along with aid officials, to be allowed into the country. Article after article contrasts the paranoia, incompetence and callousness of the Burmese junta with the supposed willingness of the US and other major powers to generously provide humanitarian assistance.

The Burmese junta has clearly demonstrated once again its repressive methods and callous disregard for human life. But the claim that Washington and its allies are acting purely out of concern for the Burmese people is simply a lie. As in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Bush administration is pursuing its strategic and economic interests—in the case of Burma to undermine a regime that is allied to China, which the US regards as a potentially dangerous rising rival.

In making the case for an intervention in Burma, the media commentary frequently raises the 2004 tsunami, claiming that the international response, including the deployment of foreign militaries, was a model of efficiency and benevolence. Completely ignored is what actually took place in 2004, its political implications and the fate of the tens of thousands of survivors who are still struggling to survive in countries around the Bay of Bengal.

The case of Sri Lanka contains important lessons. After Indonesia, Sri Lanka was the country hardest hit by tsunami. According to official figures, at least 30,920 people died, 519,063 were displaced and 103,836 houses destroyed. The devastation was horrendous. Homes, schools, hospitals, road, rail lines, communications were all swept away. Whole villages disappeared. The survivors were left without shelter, food, clean water and medicine. Many, particularly fishermen, lost their livelihoods.

Burma is not alone in having an incompetent, repressive administration. For days the government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga did nothing, particularly in the East and North where a tense ceasefire was holding with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). It was above all ordinary working people, including those with skills such as doctors and nurses, who streamed out of Colombo and provided the first assistance to desperate survivors.

The reaction of the government was to deploy soldiers and troops and place the entire aid operation under military control, including the teams of volunteers. Their prime concern was not to help the survivors, who faced appalling conditions in squalid improvised refugee camps, but to suppress any opposition or protests at the government's indifference and lack of aid. Above all, the way in which ordinary Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims had come together to assist each other, cut directly across the decades of anti-Tamil communalism on which the Colombo political establishment has

rested.

It was in this context that the Bush administration dispatched the US military to Sri Lanka. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell did not so much ask as demand that marines be allowed into the south of the island. Even in ruling circles, eyebrows were raised at allowing American troops into the country for the first time. An editorial in the *Daily Mirror* openly questioned whether the military intervention had ulterior motives—to further US interests in Central Asia and the Middle East.

Kumaratunga quickly acquiesced, however. Three hundred marines landed in the south of the island and were deployed there and at Arugam Bay in the East. The aid operation was very limited. The soldiers helped clear debris, handed out some relief supplies, posed for the media and then pulled out several months later. Undoubtedly some survivors received assistance, but the overriding purpose of the US military presence was political.

The operation had a number of motives: to overcome decades of deep hostility among the Sri Lankan masses towards US imperialism and to set a precedent that is now being invoked in the case of Burma. But as the Socialist Equality Party warned, above all Washington was seeking to forge closer military ties, including with Sri Lanka, to pursue its economic and strategic ambitions throughout the broader region.

That warning was confirmed. Sri Lanka's main strategic significance is its position astride the main sea-lanes of the Indian Ocean, including the main route from the Middle East through the Malacca Strait to the Pacific. In particular, the deep-water port of Trincomalee on the eastern coast has been long been regarded as an important prize. After the 2002 ceasefire was signed with the LTTE, a high-level team from the US Pacific Command visited Sri Lanka to make a detailed study of Trincomalee harbour and assess the potential LTTE threats.

At that point, the Bush administration was still publicly supporting the so-called international peace process as the means for ending the island's bitter 20-year civil war. Washington's concern was not, however, with the devastation that the war had brought to Sri Lanka's population, but rather that the conflict was a destabilising influence which threatened US interests in the region, particularly in India.

By December 2004, however, the peace process was already at the point of collapse. Peace negotiations had broken down in April 2003 and in early 2004 President Kumaratunga summarily dismissed the United National Front (UNF) government for "undermining national security". In the background, the military and Sinhala extremist parties, such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—a partner in Kumaratunga's new government, were already pressing for a renewed

war.

The US and other major powers used the catastrophe created by the tsunami to push for a joint mechanism between the government and the LTTE to distribute international aid. The proposal was regarded as the first step towards restarting peace negotiations. Kumaratunga tentatively embraced the suggestion, in part because of broad popular sentiment that the tsunami had demonstrated that all Sri Lankans were in the same boat and that the fratricidal war should be ended. However, the military high command and the JVP regarded the temporary aid body as an impermissible concession to the LTTE.

The tsunami was a convenient pretext for forging closer political and military ties with Washington. Powell visited Colombo in early January as part of his tour of affected countries. In April, Admiral William J. Fallon, then head of the US Pacific Command, visited Sri Lanka, met with government leaders and toured areas hit by the tsunami, including Trincomalee. In the same month, Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Christina Rocca arrived in Sri Lanka to discuss the joint aid mechanism.

The Bush administration was clearly pursuing a two-pronged strategy—publicly pushing for peace talks, while privately holding top level discussions with the Sri Lankan military over possible war plans. Discussions over a joint aid administration dragged on for months. A conference of major aid donors on May 16-17 issued an ultimatum to Colombo to establish the body as the condition for a \$US3 billion aid package.

Kumaratunga reluctantly established the Post-Tsunami Operations Management Structure (P-TOMS) with the LTTE, but it was a lame duck from the outset. The JVP withdrew from the government and successfully challenged the constitutionality of P-TOMS in the Supreme Court. At presidential elections in November 2005, the JVP backed the new candidate of Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party—Mahinda Rajapakse—on a platform that scrapped P-TOMS completely and set the course for a renewed war.

Having narrowly won office, Rajapakse with the tacit backing of Washington immediately adopted a highly provocative stance towards the LTTE. In January 2006, the US ambassador in Colombo Jeffrey Lunstead signalled Washington's support for a renewed war, demanding the LTTE accept the government's terms for talks. "If the LTTE chooses to abandon peace," Lunstead warned, "we want it to be clear, they will face a stronger, more capable and more determined Sri Lankan military. We want the cost of a return to war to be high."

A covert war of provocation and murders erupted into open conflict in July 2006 when Rajapakse ordered the army to seize the LTTE-held area of Mavilaru in open breach of the 2002 ceasefire. This open act of aggression brought not a murmur of criticism from the US or the other sponsors of the "peace process". Today the island is bogged down in a brutal civil war—with the US providing political and military support.

According to a report by the Federation of American Scientists (FAS), direct commercial sales of defence materials to Sri Lanka increased from \$US1.9 million in 2004, to \$3.1 million in 2005 and \$3.9 million in 2006. In return, the Rajapakse government quietly supports the Bush administration's occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan and last year signed an agreement to allow the US military to use the island for logistical support.

As for the victims of the tsunami, they have been completely forgotten. According to the government's Reconstruction and Development Agency (RADA), 6,718 families or more than 25,000 people were still living in appalling conditions in refugee camps in

March—that is, more than three years after the tsunami. Most of the families—5,820—are in the North and East where the renewed fighting is taking place. Even in the district surrounding the capital of Colombo, there are 803 families in camps.

These official figures are undoubtedly an underestimate. Moreover, many more of the survivors, including those who have been rehoused, still face enormous economic difficulties. Many fishermen lost their livelihoods and were resettled away from the coastline. On the pretext of protecting the population, the government exploited the opportunity to clear away fishing villages to pave the way for luxury hotels and resorts.

The plight of these refugees speaks volumes. Hakeem from the eastern rural town of Marathumunai told the WWS this week: "In our village 186 families were affected by tsunami. Hundreds were killed when the tsunami hit." He said that no one in his village had a house. Many had no full time work and earned a little money as casual labourers. The central school at Marathumunai has not been built.

The story is the same in the Western Province. An old abandoned government building in the Colombo suburb of Katubedda is where 56 families are currently living. The building is dilapidated. Each family has about 40 square metres partitioned off. Toilets overflow with effluent. Electricity has been cut off because the Disaster Management ministry has not paid the bill. None of the adults have a proper job.

A 19-year-old girl told the WWS: "You ask about the situation in Burma. As we can't watch television or have access to any other media we don't know what's going on there. I only know from you about the situation. It sounds somewhat similar. Throughout the world we see how ordinary people are hit by natural disasters and how the rulers treat them."

The US marines have long since moved on, international tsunami aid to Sri Lanka has dried up and the government is diverting money from basic services into its renewed war. The story will undoubtedly be similar in Burma. The push to intervene in Burma is motivated by the economic and strategic interests of the major powers which are diametrically opposed to those of the majority of Burmese and will inevitably produce to new tragedies.



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