

# The Tsunami was natural, but its effects were not

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Natural disasters, such as violent storms, earthquakes and tsunamis may have natural causes, but the effects are never just the results of natural accidents. The effects of nature on human society are determined by class society and the priorities given to ordinary peoples lives, both in the short term and long term. In the case of the recent Asian Tsunami there are at least half a dozen human-made factors which have helped to determine the impact of this tragedy.

Firstly, and most importantly, the tsunami would have killed far less people if a proper early-warning system had been put in place like in the Pacific. On one Indonesian island off Sumatra local people remembered tales told to them by their ancestors of the effects of earthquakes on the sea. On feeling the tremors they ran to the hills and many survived the tsunami. But most other people in the region did not have this information. Unlike the in the Pacific, which has regular tsunamis, the last one in the Indian Ocean around Sumatra was over a hundred years ago. However, only last year Asian leaders collectively rejected a proposal from meteorologists and geologists to set up a tsunami warning system due to the "high cost". A leading meteorologist in Thailand has been warning for years that the island of Phuket faced the danger of a tsunami. No one listened to him until now.

Even without a modern warning system, the authorities in all countries were in a position to send out calls for evacuation. The Tsunami centre in Hawaii knew about the danger but claimed it "did not know whom to contact". Lists of international government telephone numbers cannot be hard to find on the Internet. Sri Lanka and India would have had 3 hours notice to evacuate. Worst still, the Thai meteorological office also had about 1 hours notice of a tsunami threat, but after an emergency meeting, they decided to down play the danger and failed to inform the authorities. Upper-most in their minds was "the risk" of a negative impact of a "false alarm" on the lucrative tourist industry.

The second factor determining the impact of such a disaster is the development of global capitalism. This has both positive and negative impacts. Part of the reason why Thailand suffered less than Aceh or Sri Lanka, despite the appalling losses in Thailand, was the fact that the Thai economy is more developed. The damage to infrastructure was less. People can withstand the impact of disasters better if they live in stronger houses and do not need to scrape for a living in small boats on the coast. Nearby towns can come to the rescue much faster. However, despite capitalism's potential to help humans withstand disasters, the problem is that globalisation does not bring development to all parts of society. Much inequality remains and the poor suffer most. Not only this, the rapid development of tourism meant that many more tourists and workers in the tourist industry were placed in the path of danger. Does this mean, as some Greens argue, that we shouldn't develop the economy and shouldn't develop tourism? The answer isn't that simple. Aceh on the northern tip of Sumatra was the worst hit. It has no developed tourist industry. Yes, Global Warming and the rise in the level of the sea could be critical in some instances. That is why the actions of Western governments in rejecting measures to curb global warming are criminal. But Global Warming was not the main issue in the recent Asian Tsunami. Yes, building standards have to be improved for both local housing and tourist resorts, but early-warning systems and proper evacuation and emergency procedures are much more important.

Global capitalism has given us the means to reduce the impact of natural disasters, but left to itself, left to the free market and left to the priorities of capitalist governments, the huge potential of capitalism will never be used for the benefit of the majority of humans. Therefore, our struggles from below matter.

The third factor which determines the impact of disasters is class struggle, or the level of resistance by ordinary people. Many of the countries affected by the tsunami are not poor. India is a nuclear super-power. Thailand is a rapidly developing nation. The Thai Prime Minister and his political cronies are multi-millionaires. The problem is the distribution of wealth and power in class society. Where class struggle has been more successful we have managed to force the bosses to allocate more resources for human development. Decent emergency services and welfare states are in place because ordinary working people have demanded and fought for a better quality of life. This is not yet the case in Asia. No country in the area has a welfare state or a properly organised emergency service. There are almost no public ambulances. The Thai government spends millions on the military, yet this huge military is there to guard the interests of the ruling class, not to protect the ordinary population. In the past it has gunned-down pro-democracy protesters. The military was fully mobilised to deal with this disaster. For example, three navy ships remain guarding the King's summer palace at Hua Hin, rather than urgently steaming round to the West coast to help with the disaster. The massive number of Thai troops stationed in the three far south provinces, "to fight terrorism", have not been moved. The government is not properly coordinating relief for villagers which survived the Tsunami. There are tales of Muslim communities receiving pork rations. Huge piles of unsorted donated second hand clothes lie in tents un-touched.

Indonesia has one of the largest armies in the world, yet it has not been urgently and fully mobilised to help those in Sumatra. Instead of heavy machinery people are using elephants to clear wreckage. The government is now planning to increase the tax burden on the poor in order to pay for reconstruction. It has proposed scrapping government subsidies on fuel and petrol. The I.M.F. has long been demanding this. In fact, attempts to scrap fuel subsidies was a factor which led to the overthrow of the Suharto dictatorship. In Burma, the repressive military dictatorship claims that only a "handful" of people have died. The defeat of the pro-democracy movement in 1988 means that the Burmese government not only does nothing to help the majority of the population, but it can seal off the country behind a wall of silence. Racism in Thailand means that many of the hundreds of Burmese fishermen, working on Thai boats and killed in the tsunami, will never be identified. Their families back home will never receive news of their loved ones.

Imperialism is a fourth factor affecting the impact of the tsunami. Imperialism has many levels. Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand are "mini-imperialists". The central governments in these countries must "prove" to the world that they can "control and govern" all areas within their borders. This is vital to the interests of their small local capitals on a world stage and vital in attracting foreign investment in an era of globalisation. No other capitalists will take a small state seriously if they can't control their own borders. This is why the Indonesia state cannot allow independence for Aceh, the Sri Lankan state cannot allow independence for the Tamils and the Thai state cannot allow autonomy for the 3 southern Muslim provinces. Civil wars in these regions waste important resources, just like the U.S. and British imperialist war in Iraq. The local conditions become an excuse for government inaction in Aceh and Sri Lanka.

This brings us to consider what our attitude should be to the U.S. military's humanitarian efforts after the tsunami. Not surprisingly, many socialists and anti-imperialists see this as "hypocrisy" and want their governments not to cooperate with such efforts. But just stop to think for one second what we would feel if U.S. military shipments of clean water, medicines and food made the difference between life and death for our children and loved ones. Naturally, we should not go

overboard and heap praise on U.S. imperialism for this action, as some in the anti-war movement might be tempted to do. We have to point out that more should be done and that the U.S., as the richest and most powerful nation on earth must contribute the most. We should not call for a rejection of such urgently needed aid.

The same attitude goes for the big corporations, many of which try to show their generosity in public relations exercises. When death and destruction come, the corporations are quick to take advantage. In Thailand, TV news about the disaster carried advertisements for products in the corner of the screen. Private airlines rushed to advertise themselves by announcing that they were offering free flights for the victims or doctors. Big companies were quick to advertise their unusual generosity, not normally shown when it comes to paying wages or destroying local peoples lives in the pursuit of profit. Political parties and local bosses are fighting over the use of aid as a methods of increasing their influence. The dead are not yet in the ground, but the business news reports discuss the ups and downs of stock-exchanges and the effects on "the tourist industry". We must demand that the corporations give more in the long term. They must pay higher wages, improve conditions and be taxed at a higher rate.

We can't wait for the dismantling of global corporations or military bases before aid from the U.S. government becomes acceptable. But we can demand that the war in Iraq be ended now and that the billions wasted on the military should be put to productive use, especially in the process of reconstruction which must take place after the immediate crisis is over. We must also make sure that U.S. military aid is not an excuse for expansion of long term military bases. War, imperialism and capitalism are all linked together and we in the anti-war, anti-capitalist global movement must redouble our efforts to fight capitalism. This is not a time for a cease-fire in our struggle against capitalism.

We can take heart in looking at the true spirit of humanity. At the moment, millions of ordinary people around the world are overwhelmed with grief and sympathy for fellow human beings of all races, nationalities and religions. The British R.A.F. crew, which flew relief supplies into Aceh, felt that their missions was "one of the most worthwhile things that they had ever done". I do not recall any military personnel saying this about a war. People from the town of Beslan, who recently lost their children, have donated all they can. Millions of ordinary people rush to help their fellow humans when disaster strikes. Donations of blood, food, medicines pour in. So do offers of help. All this flies in the face of those who mock us when we talk about a new world of human solidarity. Yes, ordinary people together can build a better world. But first we have to get rid of the blood-suckers who rule us and force us to fight wars and occasionally behave in a selfish and hateful manner to our fellow human beings.

But confronting our ruling classes and changing the system means challenging the ruling ideology and the power of the ruling class. Without challenging ruling class ideas, the anger of those who suffer will be turned in on ourselves. Local Thai villagers will say that the government helped foreign tourists more than local Thais and will start to hate all foreigners. Racists and nationalists will attempt to divert anger from the real target; class society. Others will be impressed by the apparent generosity of people at the top, and that will reinforce the idea that "we are all in this together". Some may be tricked into thinking that U.S. imperialism "isn't all that bad". Yet others will sink into despair and unnecessary guilt, often seeking supernatural solutions to their sorrow. That is why we must continue political debate and discussion and strengthen our determination to struggle for a better world.

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