

The other tsunami

The west's crusaders, the United States and Britain, are giving less to help the tsunami victims than the cost of a Stealth bomber or a week's bloody occupation of Iraq. The bill for George Bush's coming inauguration party would rebuild much of the coastline of Sri Lanka. Bush and Blair increased their first dribbles of "aid" only when it became clear that people all over the world were spontaneously giving millions and that a public relations problem beckoned. The Blair government's current "generous" contribution is one-sixteenth of the £800m it spent on bombing Iraq before the invasion and barely one-twentieth of a £1bn gift, known as a soft loan, to the Indonesian military so that it could acquire Hawk fighter-bombers.

On 24 November, one month before the tsunami struck, the Blair government gave its backing to an arms fair in Jakarta, "designed to meet an urgent need for the [Indonesian] armed forces to review its defence capabilities", reported the Jakarta Post. The Indonesian military, responsible for genocide in East Timor, has killed more than 20,000 civilians and "insurgents" in Aceh. Among the exhibitors at the arms fair was Rolls-Royce, manufacturer of engines for the Hawks, which, along with British-supplied Scorpion armoured vehicles, machine-guns and ammunition, were terrorising and killing people in Aceh up to the day the tsunami devastated the province.

The Australian government, currently covering itself in glory for its modest response to the historic disaster befallen its Asian neighbours, has secretly trained Indonesia's Kopassus special forces, whose atrocities in Aceh are well documented. This is in keeping with Australia's 40-year support for oppression in Indonesia, notably its devotion to the dictator Suharto while his troops slaughtered a third of the population of East Timor. The government of John Howard – notorious for its imprisonment of child asylum-seekers – is at present defying international maritime law by denying East Timor its due of oil and gas

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royalties worth some \$8bn. Without this revenue, East Timor, the world's poorest country, cannot build schools, hospitals and roads or provide work for its young people, 90 per cent of whom are unemployed.

The hypocrisy, narcissism and dissembling propaganda of the rulers of the world and their sidekicks are in full cry. Superlatives abound as to their humanitarian intent while the division of humanity into worthy and unworthy victims dominates the news. The victims of a great natural disaster are worthy (though for how long is uncertain) while the victims of man-made imperial disasters are unworthy and very often unmentionable. Somehow, reporters cannot bring themselves to report what has been going on in Aceh, supported by "our" government. This one-way moral mirror allows us to ignore a trail of destruction and carnage that is another tsunami.

Consider the plight of Afghanistan, where clean water is unknown and death in childbirth common. At the Labour Party conference in 2001, Tony Blair announced his famous crusade to "reorder the world" with the pledge: "To the Afghan people, we make this commitment . . . We will not walk away . . . we will work with you to make sure [a way is found] out of the miserable poverty that is your present existence." The Blair government was on the verge of taking part in the conquest of Afghanistan, in which as many as 25,000 civilians died. In all the great humanitarian crises in living memory, no country suffered more and none has been helped less. Just 3 per cent of all international aid spent in Afghanistan has been for reconstruction, 84 per cent is for the US-led military "coalition" and the rest is crumbs for emergency aid. What is often presented as reconstruction revenue is private investment, such as the \$35m that will finance a proposed five-star hotel, mostly for foreigners. An adviser to the minister of rural affairs in Kabul told me his government had received less than 20 per cent of the aid promised to Afghanistan. "We don't even have enough money to pay wages, let alone plan reconstruction," he said.

The reason, unspoken of course, is that Afghans are the unworthiest of victims. When US helicopter gunships repeatedly machine-gunned a remote farming village, killing as many as 93 civilians, a Pentagon official was moved to say, "The people there are dead because we wanted them dead."

I became acutely aware of this other tsunami when I reported from Cambodia in 1979. Following a decade of American bombing and Pol Pot's barbarities, Cambodia lay as stricken as Aceh is today. Disease beckoned famine and people suffered a collective trauma few could explain. Yet for nine months after the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime, no effective aid arrived from western

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governments. Instead, a western- and Chinese-backed UN embargo was imposed on Cambodia, denying virtually the entire machinery of recovery and assistance. The problem for the Cambodians was that their liberators, the Vietnamese, had come from the wrong side of the cold war, having recently expelled the Americans from their homeland. That made them unworthy victims, and expendable.

A similar, largely unreported siege was forced on Iraq during the 1990s and intensified during the Anglo-American “liberation”. Last September, Unicef reported that malnutrition among Iraqi children had doubled under the occupation. Infant mortality is now at the level of Burundi, higher than in Haiti and Uganda. There is crippling poverty and a chronic shortage of medicines. Cases of cancer are rising rapidly, especially breast cancer; radioactive pollution is widespread. More than 700 schools are bomb-damaged. Of the billions said to have been allocated for reconstruction in Iraq, just \$29m has been spent, most of it on mercenaries guarding foreigners. Little of this is news in the west.

This other tsunami is worldwide, causing 24,000 deaths every day from poverty and debt and division that are the products of a supercult called neoliberalism. This was acknowledged by the United Nations in 1990 when it called a conference in Paris of the richest states with the aim of implementing a “programme of action” to rescue the world’s poorest nations. A decade later, virtually every commitment made by western governments had been broken, making Gordon Brown’s waffle about the G8 “sharing Britain’s dream” of ending poverty as just that: waffle. Very few western governments have honoured the United Nations “baseline” and allotted a miserable 0.7 per cent or more of their national income to overseas aid. Britain gives just 0.34 per cent, making its “Department for International Development” a black joke. The US gives 0.14 per cent, the lowest of any industrial state.

Largely unseen and unimagined by westerners, millions of people know their lives have been declared expendable. When tariffs and food and fuel subsidies are eliminated under an IMF diktat, small farmers and the landless know they face disaster, which is why suicides among farmers are an epidemic. Only the rich, says the World Trade Organisation, are allowed to protect their home industries and agriculture; only they have the right to subsidise exports of meat, grain and sugar and dump them in poor countries at artificially low prices, thereby destroying livelihoods and lives.

Indonesia, once described by the World Bank as “a model pupil of the global economy”, is a case in point. Many of those washed to their deaths in Sumatra on

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Boxing Day were dispossessed by IMF policies. Indonesia owes an unrepayable debt of \$110bn. The World Resources Institute says the toll of this man-made tsunami reaches 13-18 million child deaths worldwide every year; or 12 million children under the age of five, according to a UN Human Development Report. "If 100 million have been killed in the formal wars of the 20th century," wrote the Australian social scientist Michael McKinley, "why are they to be privileged in comprehension over the annual [death] toll of children from structural adjustment programmes since 1982?"

That the system causing this has democracy as its war cry is a mockery which people all over the world increasingly understand. It is this rising awareness, consciousness even, that offers more than hope. Since the crusaders in Washington and London squandered world sympathy for the victims of 11 September 2001 in order to accelerate their campaign of domination, a critical public intelligence has stirred and regards the likes of Blair and Bush as liars and their culpable actions as crimes. The current outpouring of help for the tsunami victims among ordinary people in the west is a spectacular reclaiming of the politics of community, morality and internationalism denied them by governments and corporate propaganda. Listening to tourists returning from stricken countries, consumed with gratitude for the gracious, expansive way some of the poorest of the poor gave them shelter and cared for them, one hears the antithesis of "policies" that care only for the avaricious.

"The most spectacular display of public morality the world has ever seen", was how the writer Arundhati Roy described the anti-war anger that swept across the world almost two years ago. A French study now estimates that 35 million people demonstrated on that February day and says there has never been anything like it; and it was just a beginning.

This is not rhetorical; human renewal is not a phenomenon, rather the continuation of a struggle that may appear at times to have frozen but is a seed beneath the snow. Take Latin America, long declared invisible and expendable in the west. "Latin Americans have been trained in impotence," wrote Eduardo Galeano the other day. "A pedagogy passed down from colonial times, taught by violent soldiers, timorous teachers and frail fatalists, has rooted in our souls the belief that reality is untouchable and that all we can do is swallow in silence the woes each day brings." Galeano was celebrating the rebirth of real democracy in his homeland, Uruguay, where people have voted "against fear", against privatisation and its attendant indecencies. In Venezuela, municipal and state elections in October notched up the ninth democratic victory for the only

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government in the world sharing its oil wealth with its poorest people. In Chile, the last of the military fascists supported by western governments, notably Thatcher, are being pursued by revitalised democratic forces.

These forces are part of a movement against inequality and poverty and war that has arisen in the past six years and is more diverse, more enterprising, more internationalist and more tolerant of difference than anything in my lifetime. It is a movement unburdened by a western liberalism that believes it represents a superior form of life; the wisest know this is colonialism by another name. The wisest also know that just as the conquest of Iraq is unravelling, so a whole system of domination and impoverishment can unravel, too.