

Victims of tsunami pay price of war on Iraq

US and British aid is dwarfed by
the billions both spend on slaughter

There has never been a moment like it on British television. The Vicar of Dibley, one of our gentler sitcoms, was bouncing along with its usual bonhomie on New Year's Day when it suddenly hit us with a scene from another world. Two young African children were sobbing and trying to comfort each other after their mother had died of Aids. How on earth, I wondered, would the show make us laugh after that? It made no attempt to do so. One by one the characters, famous for their parochial boorishness, stood in front of the camera wearing the white armbands which signalled their support for the Make Poverty History campaign. You would have to have been hewn from stone not to cry.

The timing was perfect. In my local Oxfam shop last week, people were queueing to the door to pledge money for the tsunami fund. A pub on the other side of town raised £1,000 on Saturday night. In the pot on the counter of the local newsagent's there must be nearly £100. The woman who runs the bakery told me about the homeless man she had seen, who emptied his pockets in the bank, saying "I just want to do my bit", while the whole queue tried not to cry.

Over the past few months, reviewing the complete lack of public interest in what is happening in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the failure, in the west, to mobilise effective protests against the continuing atrocities in Iraq, I had begun to wonder whether we had lost our ability to stand in other people's shoes. I have now stopped wondering. The response to the tsunami shows that, however we might seek to

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suppress it, we cannot destroy our capacity for empathy.

But one obvious question recurs. Why must the relief of suffering, in this unprecedentedly prosperous world, rely on the whims of citizens and the appeals of pop stars and comedians? Why, when extreme poverty could be made history with a minor redeployment of public finances, must the poor world still wait for homeless people in the rich world to empty their pockets?

The obvious answer is that governments have other priorities. And the one that leaps to mind is war. If the money they have promised to the victims of the tsunami still falls far short of the amounts required, it is partly because the contingency fund upon which they draw in times of crisis has been spent on blowing people to bits in Iraq.

The US government has so far pledged \$350m to the victims of the tsunami, and the UK government £50m (\$96m). The US has spent \$148 billion on the Iraq war and the UK £6bn (\$11.5bn). The war has been running for 656 days. This means that the money pledged for the tsunami disaster by the United States is the equivalent of one and a half day's spending in Iraq. The money the UK has given equates to five and a half days of our involvement in the war.

It looks still worse when you compare the cost of the war to the total foreign aid budget. The UK has spent almost twice as much on creating suffering in Iraq as it spends annually on relieving it elsewhere. The United States gives just over \$16bn in foreign aid: less than one ninth of the money it has burnt so far in Iraq.

The figures for war and aid are worth comparing because, when all the other excuses for the invasion of Iraq were stripped away, both governments explained that it was being waged for the good of the Iraqis. Let us, for a moment, take this claim at face value. Let us suppose that the invasion and occupation of Iraq had nothing to do with power, domestic politics or oil, but were, in fact, components of a monumental aid programme. And let us, with reckless generosity, assume that more people in Iraq have gained as a result of this aid programme than lost.

To justify the war, even under these wildly unsafe assumptions, George Bush and Tony Blair would have to show that the money they spent was a cost-efficient means of relieving human suffering. As it was sufficient to have made a measurable improvement in the lives of all the 2.8 billion people living in absolute poverty, and as there are only 25 million people in Iraq, this is simply not possible. Even if you ignore every other issue - such as the trifling matter of mass killing - the opportunity costs of the Iraq war categorise it as a humanitarian disaster. Indeed, such calculations suggest that, on cost grounds alone, a humanitarian war is a contradiction in terms.

But our leaders appear to have lost the ability to distinguish between helping people and killing them. The tone of Blair's New Year message was almost identical to that of

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his tear-jerking insistence that we understand the Iraqi people must be bombed for their own good. The US marines who have now been dispatched to Sri Lanka to help the rescue operation were, just a few weeks ago, murdering the civilians (for this, remember, is an illegal war), smashing the homes and evicting the entire population of the Iraqi city of Falluja.

Even within the official aid budgets the two aims are confused: \$8.9bn of the aid money the US spends is used for military assistance, anti-drugs operations, counter-terrorism and the Iraq relief and reconstruction fund (otherwise known as the Halliburton benevolent trust). For Bush and Blair, the tsunami relief operation and the Iraq war are both episodes in the same narrative of salvation. The civilised world rides out to rescue foreigners from their darkness.

While they spend the money we gave them to relieve suffering on slaughtering the poor, the world must rely for disaster relief on the homeless man emptying his pockets. If our leaders were as generous in helping people as they are in killing them, no one would ever go hungry.

You can join the campaign against global poverty at: www.makepovertyhistory.org