
CHURNING OF THE OCEAN: THE TSUNAMI AND THE THIRD WORLD

Vijay Prashad

The January 17, 2005 issue of the European edition of *Time* and of the International edition of *Newsweek* had the same photograph. It showed a burly US naval officer from the USS Abraham Lincoln holding a badly injured child in the Indonesian port city of Banda Aceh. The pathos on the face of the officer is not propaganda, nor is the grief and fear on the face of the gravely affected child staged. The tragedy is real, as is the immense human effort of reconstruction and healing.

What is almost offensive is the tenor of the media coverage in the US, and of its main periodicals. In the aftermath of the death of the quarter million and the devastation in the lives of the survivors, the emphasis of this media has been on the role of the US government and of US nationals in the clean up. The cover picture in these flagship magazines, as well as the tenor of the coverage within the US, displays a classic colonial device: to show the white nations as the protector, and the darker nations as the helpless lot thankful for the temperament and technology of the overlords.

The photo-shoot is everything: Senator Bill Frist during a photo opportunity on his disaster tour in Sri Lanka asked his aides to "Get some devastation in the back."

The autonomous effort of people along the Indian Ocean rim and of their sacrifice has not graced our press. Terri Gross of *Fresh Air* (1/19/05) noted that the US government's aid package of \$350 million is larger than that of Saudi Arabia, which is all very well. Bear in mind that the US contribution is only 0.003% of our GDP. But why is the US always the main story, even when the devastation is in Asia, and even when the main effort of recovery will be made by Asians and not by the few US marine and medics who are in the area?

I was in Chennai last week, one of the worst hit parts of India. During a visit to the offices of the largest newspaper in the city, and in Southern India, *The Hindu*, I learnt of the open hearts of ordinary people toward those so tragically affected. The newspaper had started a fund drive, and within a few weeks had collected over Rs. 10 crore, which is Rs. 100 million or else \$2.25 million. The amount is not large in itself, but consider this: most of the money has come in from individual donations or else from schoolteachers, bank clerks and other salaried employees as well as hourly workers in factories and shops who have donated a day's salary. Those who can least afford to put money in the can have been the most enthusiastic.

In Kolkata, even street beggars decided to donate a day's earnings toward the Prime Minister's Relief Fund, whose coffers will swell to around \$100 million. The Communist members of parliament pledged a month of their salaries. Political parties from across the spectrum held drives to raise money and to send people for relief work. All this money is going toward state and extra-state agencies who are in the thick of reconstruction. More Indians died in the Gujarat earthquake of 2001 (30,000), and yet the Indian population has easily raised more in two weeks for this tragedy than they did in twelve months after the 2001 quake.

Talking to Indians of all political denominations and from different social locations, it became clear that the money came in for two reasons. First, we remain baffled by the scale of the disaster in the region, not just in the nation. Conversations on the lack of an effective early warning did not detract from our awe at Nature's power over human endeavors. Attempts to connect the scale of the devastation to global warming and other such human disasters will need to be studied, although some of this ecological analysis seemed politically opportunistic. Clearly the attrition of mangrove forests along part of the coastline, and other such issues affected the scale of the death, but we don't know that it produced the shift in the tectonic plates.

Money poured in because it was the very least one could do in the face of what is without mercy.

Second, when the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced that his government would not require foreign aid, and when the Indian media reported on the efforts of the Indian navy and others in the region (including in Sri Lanka and the Maldives), it showed that one had to do one's part in the region and not rely upon any external uncles for help. Singh's words stirred up an almost anachronistic Third World anti-colonial nationalism, even as Singh himself leads a government otherwise prone toward concessions to the world's bankers. Before the US government pledged \$2.6 million to Sri Lanka in the days after the Tsunami, the Indian government already offered \$26 million.

The ethos that motivates this effort comes from regionalism, from the fifty-year tradition of Third World solidarity, as well as from the two-decade attempt by the Indian state to be the major power in the neighborhood. These complex motivations drive the agenda. What is remarkable is not what motivates the government, but how the demonstration of sovereignty provokes this large-scale voluntary contribution toward reconstruction not just within the

nation, but also within the region. Our reporters miss such an effort perhaps because it is so alien to US nationalism.

Time carried a sidebar story that questioned the mechanism of relief delivery ("How Much Will Really Go to the Victims?"). Despite our best good intentions, the article argues, "Donor countries do not want their aid to overwhelm a country's bureaucracy or feed corruption, so in the name of accountability, they give very carefully." The idea of "donor nations" comes from institutions like the Paris Club (created in 1956 to coordinate the relationship of advanced capitalist states and "Third World debt") and the G-7 (formed in 1975 to coordinate macroeconomic policy among the advanced capitalist states).

These institutions promote the view that they "give" and the darker nations "take." The Third World is the "recipient" of First World largess, which entirely covers up the sacrifice and effort of two thirds of the world's people. Those who live outside the G-7 too demonstrate their capability to be donors, even if they make demands upon the imperial powers to redress historical theft, to compensate for a lack of technical and capital resources.

To invoke corruption is a necessity, because any relief effort is suffused with mendacity and greed. However, corruption in the Third World should not be an excuse not to provide monies for reconstruction. Within Indian society, for instance, corruption is both endemic and condemned. It is a political issue that inflames discussion and organization - countries such as India welcomed the UN Convention Against Corruption (2003). Neither corruption nor bureaucratic unaccountability stops global corporations and G-7 nations from doing business with the darker nations.

Corruption is a problem, but the work that the discourse of corruption does is almost as insidious as the ailment itself. To harp on about corruption allows the media to paper over the fundamental lack of generosity of our governments, but also to occlude a much greater problem - that the national liberation and Third World bourgeois state has been cannibalized, that it cannot provide many basic services, and that it has few resources to command for social development.

For days in much of South and South-East Asia, the state did not act. This had little to do with corruption or bureaucratic unaccountability alone, but it had lots to do with the fact that under IMF direction and with the enthusiasm of the domestic elite, the

state's capacity to provide services had been slashed. The shell of the state, now increasingly privatized, had to rely upon the immense sacrifice of its officials, of organized political outfits and of ordinary citizens to conduct the normal operations of modern relief.

The military in much of the region took the lead because of all state institutions it has been least cannibalized - a sad commentary on modern civilization. On January 12, the Paris Club declared that it would suspend collection of debt payments from Tsunami affected countries "until the World Bank and the IMF have made a full assessment of their reconstruction and financing needs." This was by far the most important gesture from the G-7, greater than all the money that its independent nations pledged. What it recognized is that the debt service payments are so vast that they cripple the ability of the darker nations to conduct social development, and relief. That recognition needs to be built upon.

Despite the cannibalization of the state form and the endemic corruption and bureaucratic unaccountability, people still turn over their money to the state for reconstruction. The horizon of the state as the dispenser of justice lives on as a legacy of Third World anti-colonial nationalism. If the state has withered, the belief in the state has not altogether gone. And indeed, how would it go.

What are the alternatives: private capital, which is motivated by its profits alone, and which is also unaccountable and also corrupt (viz. Enron)? Non-governmental organizations, whose scale is so miniscule that despite whatever good work they do, they cannot provide the sort of services (insurance, naval assistance) provided by the state or global corporations? The only institution that seems viable is the national state, and this is perhaps the reason why individual Indians, for example, raised money and turned them toward the state for rehabilitation.

Short of a month after the Tsunami, the US military decided to pull out of the effort. At a dramatic press conference on January 19, US Pacific Command's chief Admiral Thomas Fargo announced that the US military "will start right now transferring functions to the appropriate host nations and international organizations." Transferring? As if the US had been the dominant power in this effort. The soldier on the cover of Time and Newsweek will deploy, if Seymour Hersh is right, somewhere near Iran, keener to create tragedy than to mollify it. The darker nations, meanwhile, will persist in recovery long after the television cameras and print journalists have gone on to the next misfortune. ■

Vijay Prashad has just finished writing *Darker Nations: the Rise and Fall of the Third World* which will be published later this year by the New Press.