

Some reflections on the tsunami in the Indian Ocean: a discussion piece

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1. *My personal reflections*

a) *as an anthropologist who has worked in two Indian Ocean coastal communities in India and Tanzania*

- Fishing villages on the coast in Tamilnadu, half a mile from our house in Chennai (Madras), small thatched huts, catamarans, nets. I am told by friends who have phoned and emailed that none of these now survive. Such villages exist or existed all over the Indian Ocean.
- Reports from friends on the East Africa that the tides are very strange, that the price of fish (the main protein in the diet of very poor people) has trebled – fishermen are afraid to go to sea.
- In both areas, as elsewhere in the Indian Ocean, tourist resorts located right on beaches and encouraged by governments as a form of revenue

b) *as a citizen of a multicultural society living in a globalised world:*

- Today I commiserated with the receptionist at my swimming pool in London – she has lost her sister and brother in law in Sri Lanka.
- Last week I went to meet my daughter at Heathrow airport and was caught in a press melee when one of the returning tourists from Indonesia arrived.
- The woman who sold me a coffee at the airport was from Andhra Pradesh and had received news of much damage to her coastal community there.
- The man who came behind me in the queue at the coffee shop, wearing a holiday shirt and carrying a small bag, said he had just got back from Sri Lanka – he complained because he had lost his possessions!

2. *Why was there no warning? If the Pacific area can have an early warning system, why not the Indian Ocean?*

- a) Only last year the governments of the region decided that it would cost too much and the risk was small. What happened to the precautionary principle?
- b) The authorities in Thailand decided not to issue a warning of a tsunami 'because it would be bad for the tourist industry' (sic). When they had done so in the past (for a much smaller earthquake which did not result in a tsunami), the tour operators complained.
- c) An early warning system is useless without a disaster management plan which involves command and control centres, a clear chain of command, training of personnel involved, liaison between many different institutions, regular exercises for hypothetical disasters.

3. *Who were the people most affected?*

- a) Obviously those living on the coasts who in many cases are extremely poor, especially artisanal fisherfolk, often living as well as working on beaches, with only small houses or huts. Many who survived have lost not only family members and housing, but also their means of making a living e.g. boats, nets and other gear. Those catering for the tourists who come to use the beaches as their playground, such as owners of small hotels and cafes. Most were not insured. Those working in big hotels.
- b) Tourists who got caught up in the disaster, and whose fate, sad as it is, has received media attention in the West totally disproportionate to their numbers

4. *What has been the response of the international community?*

- In some respects it has been heartening: in the UK for example, a week after the disaster, £76million (nearly US\$150) has been raised by donations from citizens – this is the largest

amount ever raised from private donations. The UK government was shamed into raising its own original paltry sum.

- The government of Japan offered a generous sum for aid, but that of the US initially only suggested a sum which was derisory in its meanness. Although the US has now offered more, it is still peanuts by comparison with what it is spending in Iraq (see George Monbiot's article in Guardian newspaper of 4/11/04 at www.guardian.co.uk)

5. *What kind of aid is needed?*

- a) A major problem is that westerners' perception of aid is often misplaced.
 - They want to see mercy flights dropping aid to victims – yet this is the most expensive way of getting aid to people. It may sometimes be necessary, but the best way is to source locally wherever possible.
 - They want to see big international organisations sending 'experts' to distribute the aid, yet most organisations like Oxfam and the Red Cross work primarily with and through local partners, as is appropriate
 - Some westerners assume that their cast-off clothes are good enough for the victims. Currently Oxfam shops are inundated with such clothes, few if any of which will be sent out to Asia, both because they are of an inappropriate kind, and because aid agencies can source better clothing more cheaply locally, thus supporting local economies and getting value for money. The same is often true of food.
- b) Emergency aid is good, but aid which enables the rebuilding of communities and livelihoods over the longer term is also necessary. This is harder to raise because the media will forget about the tsunami very soon.
- c) Some areas received aid very late because they are subject to military restrictions e.g. Aceh in Indonesia, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands off India, and Burma. These are prime examples of politics getting in the way of humanitarian responses

6. *Some tentative conclusions*

- The tsunami may have been a 'natural' and unavoidable disaster, but its effects are determined largely by human actions and institutions
- On the whole, it is the poorest people who suffer most
- The scale of destruction in the Indian Ocean gives us warning of what might happen in many such areas if sea levels rise because of global warming.

Finally, a poem by John Donne from *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions no. 17, 1624*

No man [or woman] is an island,
Entire of itself.
Each is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe [the world] is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manner of thine own
Or of thine friend's were.
Each man's death diminishes me,
For I am involved in mankind.
Therefore, send not to know
For whom the bell tolls,
It tolls for thee.

Pat Caplan, 3rd Jan. 2005