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The Spectre of a ‘Second Tsunami’ in Sri Lanka: What can we do to prevent a human-made disaster

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We live in a world in which disasters are not uncommon. Let us not forget for a moment that millions of people have died and are dying of aids, malaria and starvation. The war in Iraq and the numerous intrastate wars in various parts of the world are so destructive of assets and livelihoods while taking a heavy toll of human life. However, no disaster in our time has shocked the world, impacted on the human psyche and evoked sympathy for the victims on such a scale as the Asian tsunami. The explanation for this lies in the suddenness and the enormity of the havoc wreaked by the tsunami. Over 200,000 lives were lost and millions have been rendered homeless and displaced in a matter of seconds and minutes. The tsunami was a disastrous natural event from a human point of view. However, it is well known that the devastation would have been much less had we been forewarned and better prepared. That there is a human-made dimension to the catastrophic socio-economic effects of the tsunami is conveniently forgotten by the ruling elites, who keep calling the disaster a purely natural one. Blaming nature alone (and in this instance it sounds credible) helps the local rulers to cover up their failures. It has also helped those who failed to share the meteorological information they had about the advancing tsunami with the countries on its way.

The suddenness or the speed and the scale of the disaster have made it a humanitarian emergency of unprecedented proportions. They have also thrown up unprecedented challenges for reconstruction and development. Valuable human capital has been washed out. Millions of people had become pauperised in a moment. Local and regional economies have been destroyed. In the two worst affected countries, Indonesia and Sri Lanka these challenges have acquired greater complexity because of their internal politico-military situations. In these countries, post-tsunami reconstruction cannot be separated from post-war reconstruction and development. The challenge is to turn the tsunami tragedy into an opportunity for conflict resolution

and link reconstruction and development to peace building. Are these countries ready to face the challenge?

Let us take the case of Sri Lanka, where over 30,000 people were killed.

- The tsunami has devastated around 70% of the coast and the interior up to more than 2 km, from the northernmost tip in the Jaffna peninsula through the entire north-east and the south and a part of the west coast up to the suburbs of Colombo.
- A million people have been displaced.
- Livelihoods of over 250,000 households ruined (fishers, farmers, shop owners and employees in tourism and other sectors)
- Destruction of infrastructure, Businesses, other private assets
- Loss of vital documents including documents regarding property rights
- Unknown numbers of orphans, widows, disabled persons and victims of post-disaster trauma

We need to place this tragedy in the larger context of our unresolved national question and the consequences of two decades of war in which over 65,000 lives were lost.

- Around two thirds of the tsunami-affected coastline is in the war zone of the North-East
- 7-800,000 people were internally displaced due to war
- Extensive destruction and damage to infrastructure, regional economy and the environment
- Loss of livelihoods due to militarisation, displacement, wartime restrictions and death and incapacitation of breadwinners
- Resettlement of the war-displaced has been extremely slow even three years after the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) of February 2002
- New grievances and conflicts regarding livelihoods and access to land and water resources have emerged in the war-torn NEP as a result of the protracted war
- Communalisation i.e. the division of the Lankan polity along ethnic lines runs deep

- The peace process has been stalled for a long time and the political tensions between the UPFA government and the LTTE had reached a serious level just before the tsunami.

The question is: Can post-tsunami reconstruction be separated from post-war reconstruction & development? The challenge, if I may repeat, is to link reconstruction and development to conflict resolution and peace building. This involves:

- An early revival of the peace process and reaching an agreement on an interim/transitional arrangement for the NorthEast Province (NEP) while jointly working on a long-term political settlement
- Rebuilding the war-torn and tsunami-torn communities and their livelihoods
- Rehabilitation and sustainable development of coastal zone resource systems: human settlements, fisheries, coastal agriculture and forestry, recreation and tourism
- Overall socio-economic revival
- National reconciliation & reunification

Today, there is an opportunity but there are some disturbing developments too.

Positive:

- **Unity and Solidarity across ethnic and religious divides:** The tsunami has united people across ethnic and religious divides: People-People mutual help and harmony are at their best in decades in Sri Lanka
- **Social movements support political settlement:** Some social movements in the South are strongly supportive of a political settlement
- **The CFA has survived:** The CFA of February 2002 continues to hold though with violations and amid uncertainty
- **Majority reject war and are for peace:** Majority of the peoples of Sri Lanka (Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and others) reject war and favour a political settlement.
- **High potential for development:** Development of the war and tsunami affected economy has high potential for employment generation, equitability and national

reconciliation if the right policies are chosen and if development can be governed by appropriate institutional arrangements.

- **International support for peace:** The international actors involved in Sri Lankan affairs seem to favour a political settlement.

Negative:

- **Politicisation of official relief and reconstruction:** Official tsunami relief and post-tsunami reconstruction have become divisively politicised along party and ethnic lines. Indeed, the tsunami became politicised from the moment it hit the coasts of Sri Lanka.
- **Centralisation and exclusion:** There is an ongoing centralisation of the entire official relief and reconstruction operations under the direct control of the President. This is not likely to counter the divisive politicisation but will bureaucratise relief and reconstruction with adverse effects on the victims, while widening the communication gap between the government and the LTTE. Along with this is the trend of corporatisation of reconstruction, with the co-optation of business leaders into Task Forces and committees dealing with the planning and utilisation of foreign aid. The government has taken major decisions regarding coastal human settlements and establishment of new urban centres and towns in a totally top-down and authoritarian fashion under conditions of Emergency. There has not been any consultation whatsoever with the affected communities, local organisations and other stakeholders. People's organisations and social movements have objected to the government's failure to provide for representation of the affected communities in decision making. This centralist trend is conflict-insensitive and likely to have adverse effects on the peace process and the search for a solution to the national question based on autonomy and power sharing.
- **Militarisation:** The rescue and relief operations have become militarised. Many stakeholders view this with grave concern. The government has ordered the state's armed forces to take over relief distribution in affected areas including the NEP. This has created new tensions between the government and LTTE. Even more disturbing is the arrival of troops from India, USA, Pakistan, UK and Canada for rescue and relief operations.

- **Fear of a ‘second tsunami’:** Reconstruction and development policy: There are concerns about the new regulations regarding resettlement of the displaced in coastal areas and about **the high probability of a new wave of social exclusion and disenfranchisement in the name of reconstruction and development.** **There is fear of a ‘second tsunami’ – a metaphor coined by some Lankan activists to refer to a possible human-made disaster. This fear is not unfounded given the past experience of spatially and socially uneven development. Post-tsunami reconstruction has become almost entirely donor driven, like the neoliberal development of the past 27 years. One of the effects of the tsunami has been a further widening of the disparities in households’ income and other entitlements between the western urban areas and the affected coastal areas. The government’s approach has not shown sufficient sensitivity to this and other problems.**
- **Ultranationalist opposition:** There is opposition from ultranationalist groups to a peaceful resolution of the national question

What can we do to prevent a ‘second tsunami’?

The short answer is: oppose the negative and support the positive tendencies. But this is more easily said than done. The tasks ahead are daunting. However, it is heartening to note that several organisations have already found common grounds to defend the rights of the tsunami victims and to expose the flawed policy and practices of the government. In a bizarre sense, the tsunami was a blessing to the government, which was on the verge of bankruptcy due to the lack of much wanted foreign aid that was held up due to the ‘peace conditionality’. The tragedy opened another door of foreign aid to the government. Today, the government has been promised tsunami aid to the tune of USD 1.8 bn. The government is obviously happy about this and the debt freeze, which has provided a temporary relief from repayment of debt. This means the government does not have any major financial constraints for the time being. On the other hand, how the money is going to be spent will decide the socio-economic and environmental outcome of the external aid received.

We need to recognise and face the challenge of linking post-tsunami reconstruction to peace and post-war reconstruction and development. This is the time to do it and we cannot afford to miss this historic opportunity. I submit the following ideas for discussion at the PPD sessions.

- Work towards creating a broad and principled alliance to resist the ongoing politicisation, centralisation, militarisation and corporatisation of relief and reconstruction; This involves the formulation of an alternative policy and an agenda for action.

- Demand a quick withdrawal of the foreign troops from Sri Lanka, and a non-military arrangement for relief and debris clearing operations;
- Mobilise the victims of the tsunami and discuss the proposed regulations on coastal settlement and land rights with a view to formulate the people's demands and develop an agenda for action;
- Defend the fishing rights of the small fishers and resist any attempt by government to weaken or deny their customary rights to fishing grounds;
- Organise a campaign for the immediate revival of the peace process
- Expand the PPD process to include dialogues between tsunami victims from the South and war and tsunami victims from the NE (Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese) with a view to strengthen solidarity and to learn new ideas regarding reconciliation, reconstruction and development.
- Mobilise international support for durable peace and inclusive and equitable development in Sri Lanka