

The political tsunami

HUMANITY deserves a solid pat on the back as the global humanitarian outpouring of support for tsunami victims has surpassed all previous relief efforts in history. The American government may have been stingy, but the people certainly haven't, forking over checks to a host of relief agencies. We've also seen the tsunami bring out the worst in humanity – the bottom feeders who move in when their prey is injured or disabled. In this arena we're seeing parasitic entrepreneurs bearing their fangs and engaging in the purchase and sale of tsunami orphans. And in the Aceh region, where about a third of the tsunami victims lived, we're seeing the government of Indonesia attempting to finish off their brutal campaign against the Acehese people and their movement for self-determination.

Ache is what we call a "breakaway province." Officially part of Indonesia, for 28 years the Acehese have been fighting a military campaign for independence as a supposedly democratic republic. Using the Bush administration's "War on Terror" and the recent U.S. invasion of Iraq as justifications, the Indonesian military invaded Aceh in May of 2003. They termed this a "Shock and Awe" operation, complete with "embedded journalists" and the blasphemous "blessing of September 11th." Though the Indonesians claimed their military operation was a police action aimed at restoring order in Aceh, it quickly took on the brutal aura of an invasion, complete with F-16 bombing missions and strafing runs using low-flying American-built planes.

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The Indonesian military is employing the same tactics in Aceh as they did during their brutal quarter-century occupation of the now independent nation of East Timor, where their military operations killed one third of the Timorese population. In an October 2004 report, Amnesty International documents "a disturbing pattern of grave abuses of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights" in Aceh, including a wave of "unlawful killings, torture, ill-treatment and arbitrary detention" that encompass the entire province. Amnesty International also documents that under Indonesian military occupation, "women and girls have been subjected to rape and other forms of sexual violence," often doled out in retribution when family members are suspected of involvement in the independence fight led by the Free Aceh Movement, which the Indonesians have labeled as a "terrorist organization."

Shock and Exxon

Why is none of this in the news? First there's the "embedded reporter" factor. Indonesia banned all journalists not "embedded" (following the U.S. model) with the military. And then there's the economic disincentive. The official economy of Aceh is based on a massive Exxon/Mobil natural gas extraction project which, according to estimates on Pacifica Radio's Democracy Now, has netted \$40 billion worth of the resource. Very little of this money has flowed into the local Acehnese economy, where nearly a quarter of the children suffered from malnutrition before the Tsunami struck. This relationship explains both Indonesia's motivation to maintain tight control over the province, and the American corporate media's disincentive to cover this remote region of the world. And the neo-cons in the Bush administration will never have a bad word to say about Indonesia, a "partner" in their "War on Terror."

In this light, the Tsunami has provided a big boost to the Indonesian campaign against Aceh, killing more Acehnese than they could politically get away with while wreaking chaos upon the province. Not satisfied with this sudden strategic gift, the Indonesian military immediately set upon the survivors, exerting control of relief operations and using control over food and water as weapons against the independence movement.

Amnesty International has reported that it is difficult to document the extent of the abuses in Aceh since the Indonesians have banned most foreigners (with the notable exception of Exxon/Mobile workers) and all journalists from the province. With relief aid, however, came journalists, who reported on Indonesian troops beating Acehnese who came to relief centers looking for food. The Indonesians were also requiring identification cards from tsunami survivors, many of whose houses are washed away. Acehnese without ID may be interrogated as suspected rebels – an interrogation that in the past often

resulted in death. Journalists reporting this story have been ordered to leave Aceh, with one commander admonishing Australian journalists that "Your duty here is to observe the disaster, not the conflict."

Meanwhile in the Stone Age

On a more inspiring note, indigenous Great Andamanese, Jarawa, Onge, Shompen and Sentinelese people, survived the tsunami with very little loss of life. Much of the world originally feared that entire cultures living on remote islands in India's Andaman and Nicobar island chain were wiped out by the tidal waves. Hence, the global media celebrated the fact that not only did they seem very much alive, but that a naked Sentinelese man fired upon an Indian Air Force helicopter with a bow and arrow.

In covering the story, the BBC reported that the islanders have very little contact with, and by inference, understanding of the outside world – hence the arrows. In reality, the indigenous populations of the Andaman and Nicobar islands have had extensive contact with the outside world. These descendents of African peoples were first visited by Marco Polo who described them as "No better than wild beasts." European slave-traders later raided the islands for slaves. Starting in the 1800s, British troops visited wholesale massacres upon the islanders. An Indian land grab in the 20th century forced most of the remaining islanders from their ancestral lands. Anthropologists report that slavers continued to raid the islands well into the second half of the 20th Century, long after the international slave trade was thought dead. So it seems that the islanders have a much better understanding of the outside world than the BBC would suspect. And that quaint bow and arrow thing might be a bit more complex than a cutesy story about a naked savage.

The same BBC report (since pulled from their website) described the isolated islanders as still living in "the stone-age." On the very next line, the BBC reported how the islanders survived the tsunami that killed hundreds of thousands of other people living in similar low-lying environments across the Indian Ocean. According to the BBC, "they survived the devastation by using age-old early warning systems" and running "to high ground for safety after noticing changes in the behavior of birds and marine wildlife." Western tourists vacationing in the region, by contrast, stood still and videotaped each others' deaths as they watched in dumbfounded stupor as the sea rose. Other non "stone aged" people frolicked in the pre-surge tidal ebb or stood transfixed on beaches watching a wall of water approach.

Scientists, the BBC went on to report, are "examining the possibility to see whether it [the indigenous knowledge] can be used to predict earth tremors in the future." D'uh. I

guess we don't appreciate what's lost until it's almost gone. Anthropologists studying the Andaman and Nicobar islanders report that one reason they, like other indigenous peoples, shun contact with outsiders is that they fear losing their traditional knowledge which is essential in keeping them alive in harmony with their environment.

Mangroves and Coral

Where this environment has been destroyed over the years, the tsunami damage was much greater. The wholesale destruction of coral reefs and mangrove swamps across the Indian Ocean removed the only environmental barriers that have protected coastal environments from tidal waves for eternity. Coral reefs have fallen victim to pollution, dynamite used both in dredging channels and in fishing, and in quarrying operations where crushed coral is used in construction. Mangroves have been cut down to make beaches, towns, shrimp farms and resorts – with the farms and resorts primarily serving western consumers.

Some of the worst mangrove depletion has occurred over the years in Aceh, where satellite photos show seaside shrimp farms and towns on former mangrove swamps. Hence, it's no surprise that in Aceh, with the mangrove swamps that traditionally absorbed such waves and shored up coastal geology gone, the devastation was so severe. By contrast, areas that still had coral or mangrove in tact, suffered only minor losses of life. People seeing the turmoil of the waves crashing above offshore coral reefs ran for safety before the waters arrived. Likewise, while the waves uprooted millions of mangroves, they lost much of their destructive power in the process.

The point here is that no natural disaster is entirely natural. With mangrove swamps being uprooted for housing and tourist development across the tropics, we'll see more and more unnatural destruction from natural disasters. Likewise, as oppressive militaries look for advantage in whatever disaster comes their way, we'll also see unnatural death and destruction in the wake of supposedly natural death and destruction. This is not acceptable – no matter how much it benefits Exxon/Mobil.

The documentary film, "2004 – The Under-Reported Stories: Michael Niman" is available streamed or on DVD from www.snowshoefilms.com. For continuing developments concerning the 2004 election controversy, see www.mediastudy.com/election.html.

