

Niklas Reese

Breakwater? Tsunami-inspired Reflections on the  
Politics of Development

Asia House Germany, January 2005

# Breakwater?

## Tsunami-inspired reflections on the politics of development

By niklas reese

Once again alarming headlines emanate from Asia. First the 1997/1998 financial and economic crisis, then the terrorist attack on Bali, followed by SARS and the avian flue, and now the Tsunami commands our attention – manifestations of the “globalization of disaster”. More than 200 000 lives have probably been lost, and more than 2 million people are in need of emergency aid. Never before has a region of comparable size been affected by a natural disaster of this magnitude. Never before have hundreds of towns and cities in eight states, strung along a coastline of several thousand kilometers, been virtually wiped out. There is a real danger that the public – and especially viewers and readers with an interest in development politics, who usually focus on Latin America and Africa – “will begin to perceive Southeast Asia as the home of disasters”. Such is the fear of Moritz Kleine-Brockhoff, Southeast Asia correspondent of the influential German daily *Frankfurter Rundschau (FR)*. Never before have people all over the world shown such solidarity as with the tsunami victims. Emergency aid organizations describe the response of the German public as “overwhelming”. Private donations from Germany total 350 million Euro (460 million US \$) Within one week, welfare organizations received more donations than in the entire preceding year. The organization “*Medicins sans frontières*”, having collected the whopping amount of 20 million Euro in donations, temporarily suspended fund-raising efforts for tsunami victims on the grounds that the accumulated funds currently exceed needs.

Contributions from governments and public funds likewise rose week after week, and an amount of well over two billion dollar has already accumulated. With a pledge of 500 million Euro (650 million US \$), Germany occupies joint first place – with Japan – on the list of donor countries..The USA recently increased its pledge of US \$ 20 million to US \$ 350 million.

In mid-January the “Paris Club” of highly industrialized nations agreed to grant Indonesia, Sri Lanka and the Seychelles a moratorium on debt repayments.(India and Thailand refused to get any debt relief) However, a mere moratorium will hardly suffice. The joint foreign debt of the tsunami-affected countries amounts to US \$ 300 billion, of which US \$ 132 billion is owed by Indonesia.(Indonesia has to pay 3 million US \$ a year for interest alone – 1 million of it to the Paris club members) India’s foreign debt stands at \$ 83 billion, Thailand owes \$ 58 billion, and Sri Lanka \$ 9,6 billion, whereas Somalia and the Maldives are respectively \$ 2.5 billion and \$ 200 million in the red.

None of the countries asked for a cancellation of debts, as they fear that this would harm their standing on the international credit markets. The Indonesian vice-president said he would prefer grants instead of a mere postponement of debt repayments.

To what extent the massive emergency aid will benefit the tsunami victims and promote the long-term reconstruction of the affected areas, is a different matter. On the basis of past experience, UN General Secretary Kofi Annan has expressed doubts that all the money and material assistance pledged will in fact be delivered. As a rule, not more than 40 per cent of pledged emergency relief has materialized over the past few years – and much of that has been in the form of cheaper than market loans. (The Iranian town of Bam, ravaged on Christmas day 2003 by an earthquake, received pledges totaling \$ 1 billion, of which only \$ 17 million materialized.)

Most of the aid provided by official donors comes with restrictions on what is to be provided, where it is to be sourced, and when and where it can be used – partly motivated by domestic interests

.Some of the promised relief may also be at the expense of other poorly resourced regions, which may have their aid reduced in the near future (f.i. West and Central Africa). Besides, corruption is not exactly an unfamiliar phenomenon among governments and administrations in the region.

Of the utmost importance will be whether (and how) public and private emergency relief organizations find their way through the political scenario of the region: whether they will be able to establish favourable relationships with the government of the receiving country, as well as with the military (or the resistance movements), and whether they can escape becoming the instruments of local pressure groups; whether the aid will benefit the ongoing peace processes – all these factors will have a bearing on whether the stream of donations can be used to good effect.<sup>1</sup>

A further matter of vital importance is whether the aid organizations are already entrenched on the ground and whether they have established working relationships with local partner organisations, rather than to parachute into new areas of activity in order to disburse the generous resources at their disposal.

It is equally important that the relief efforts strengthen the local economy, rather than to lend covert support to the donor countries' export efforts. Wherever possible, emergency goods should be procured in the affected areas, in order to stimulate whatever economic activity is still intact.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Indian organization "Campaign to stop funding hate" warns that fundamentalist and ethno-chauvinistic organizations managed to turn recent disasters to their own advantage. Under the cover of "emergency aid", these organisations established footholds in disaster areas and distributed aid according to ethnic or religious affiliation, thereby frequently fomenting hatred among the Hindus, Muslims and Christians or among various castes.

As paradox as it may sound, if too much money earmarked for specific purposes is donated for – and must hence be spent on – emergency relief aid, “disbursement pressure” could, according to *Medico International*, create “an arbitrary aid flood ([that] may wipe out the remaining infrastructure and self-help”. More and more aid organisations therefore plead that donations not be tied to specific purposes, since human suffering does not only occur in Southeast Asia.

## WHITE BEACHES, WHITE IMAGES

For a long time, the TV images and print coverage focused predominantly on the fate of White holiday makers in southern Thailand and in Sri Lanka.

“At times”, the German weekly *Spiegel* mockingly noted in late December, “the media created the impression that a treacherous massacre had been perpetrated on German tourists in faraway Thailand – instead of an unprecedented natural disaster on the shores of the Indian ocean that has claimed 80 000 lives to date.”

Aid workers and emergency supplies were rushed to the luxury tourist resorts, but nothing was heard from the neighboring fishing villages. While foreign survivors in Thailand were accommodated in an international school – equipped with beds, TV sets and internet access -, the locals slept under the open sky. Injured Thais only received hospital treatment if they were about to die; in all other cases, victims from the West enjoyed preferential treatment.

Media reports were often on the “paradise and hell” pattern: a place that had presented itself as a paradise (because tourists paid no attention to harsh living conditions on the ground) was suddenly transformed into a hell, from which German victims were evacuated by German planes.<sup>2</sup>

Is it a matter of subliminal racism, if real shock and empathy are only triggered by losses of one’s “own”?<sup>3</sup> Widely ignored by the outside world, nearly 5.7 million people in India and Bangladesh became homeless after a flood in the summer of

---

<sup>2</sup> “Our prosperity has been disturbed” – writes Rupert Neudeck in the German weekly *Die Zeit* – “our presumed entitlement to luxury, insurance and predictability has suffered a painful blow. (...) It is easy to understand the tearful lament of the Berlin pensioner in Phuket, “nobody takes care of us”, as shown on TV. He had been promised a vacation in paradise, with comprehensive service, and instead he unsuspectingly found himself in a poor country, far from home.”

<sup>3</sup> How many Europeans need to lose their lives before the ravaged nations are provided with a warning system, and how many lost Asian lives are we prepared to tolerate before such a system is donated? According to experts, two tsunameter buoys of the kind spread all over the Pacific Ocean would have been sufficient to warn millions of people in Southeast Asia of the impending disaster. Scientists at the “Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory” in Seattle in Washington State recommended to the US government to extend the existing warning system by installing two tsunameters off the Sumatra shore. At the time, Washington lacked the money for the devices (\$ 250 000 each). There were also complaints that the USA alerted its military base Diego Garcia, situated 1 000 km south of the Indian coast, but failed to warn the Indian public.

2004, a few months after 80 000 people in China suffered the same fate. Neither of these disasters met the crucial requirement ensuring immediate emergency aid – the “German connection”.

## THE INDIGENT BEAR THE BRUNT

At the present stage, emergency aid must clearly be the priority. However, to what extent the economy has been affected and whether it can recover, will be just as important to the people on the ground in the long run. Experts agree that the after-effects will most severely affect the region’s tourism industry. However – with the exception of Sri Lanka – tourism plays a secondary role in the national economies of the ravaged countries,<sup>4</sup> though Thailand’s Phuket region admittedly depends on it.

Overall, industries and infrastructure in the region have hardly been affected by the tsunami, and even harbour facilities and oil refineries have withstood the tremendous onslaught of the tidal wave. Exxon Mobil’s plants on Aceh suffered only minor damage, and Indonesia is likely to remain one of the world’s major exporters of natural liquid gas. Although towns, roads, bridges, airstrips and telephone lines have been destroyed, notably in Aceh province, economists believe Indonesia to be relatively well placed to cushion the blow, not least because of its oil resources. Damage to the national economies of India and Thailand is also expected to be limited, thanks to India’s high-tech and agricultural capacities and to the industrial and agricultural output of Thailand, where the tourism infrastructure has only been partly destroyed. As for food production, areas producing the staple diet – rice – in the Indian Ocean region are for the greater part far enough inland to have escaped tidal wave damage.

It may therefore be assumed that, whereas Sri Lanka is likely to suffer detrimental economic consequences, the economic fallout for India, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia will be short-lived and hardly affect long-term economic growth.<sup>5</sup> It is expected that financial aid will soon neutralize the economic costs of the disaster.

---

<sup>4</sup> It is often not realized that only a small portion of tourism revenue finds its way to the host country. According to Rainer Schauer, writing in the German daily *taz*, research indicates that the major part of vacation expenditure – as much as 90%, in the case of some developing countries – remains in the hands of the foreign travel agencies and enterprises, or needs to be spent on imports: butter from Denmark, Whiskey from Scotland, cheese from France. In the case of Sri Lanka, this means that more than 60% of the travellers’ expenditure probably never reaches the island’s shores. Hotel staff, fishermen, peasants, hawkers and prostitutes only gather the crumbs of the multi-billion dollar tourism industry.

Besides, a long-term slump in the tourism business is hardly to be expected: Holidaymakers have a short memory. “We noticed that even terrorism does not make a lasting impression on our guests”, commented spokesperson Stefanie Rother of the tourism conglomerate TUI.

<sup>5</sup> To make things worse, 700 000 people in Sri Lanka are in need of help, a major part of the infrastructure has been damaged, and the civil war between the Sinhalese and the Tamils continues to simmer. Economists predict that economic growth will drop by one percentage point to four percent.

In keeping with these projections, reaction on the stock exchange was nonchalant. "The human loss is tragic and immense, but the dent in the countries' GNP figures will be offset by increased investment in the reconstruction effort and a revival of tourism in most areas", commented an analyst. Shares in the cement and construction industry even rose sharply.

Major reinsurance companies also sounded the all-clear. Estimates by the *Münchner Rück* (= "Munich Reinsurance Company") put the total damage at possibly more than 10 billion Euro, but as most of these losses are not covered by insurance, the world's greatest reinsurance enterprise expects liabilities of less than 100 million Euro. By contrast, this year's major tornados in the USA, the Caribbean and Japan caused damages totalling \$ 35 billion to insured property.

The brunt of the tsunami destruction has been borne by the indigent, the poorest of the poor, who struggle to make ends meet at the best of times, and by those who have with great difficulty built a modest economic existence for themselves. The disaster has robbed them of the basis of their subsistence, their homes, their families and their land. Fishermen have lost boats and nets. Small entrepreneurs, restaurant owners and souvenir vendors, who depend on tourism but – in contrast to multinational hotel chains – are seldom insured, day labourers and seasonal workers – none of these people have savings to fall back on as they wait for the local economy to come back on stream. Flooded by a mass of seawater, agricultural areas will take years to become fertile again. Many chickens, cattle and other livestock were killed, fruit trees were destroyed, and farmers lost their livelihood.

Nor are the after-effects of a purely economical nature – the psychological impact may be as devastating. Disaster research expert Wolfgang Dombrowsky wrote in the FR of 30 December 2004: "Major components of infrastructure such as roads, bridges and harbours have hardly been affected. It is the service sector that has been hit. It's a disaster of the small entrepreneur. The crucial result is that players in the small business sector have lost their modest incipient wealth and once again stare down the abyss. That is an enormous setback in the emergence of a first-generation petty bourgeoisie, and the psychological fallout will be severe. The devastation wreaked on the small business community will have a crucial impact on domestic politics. A mood of doom and gloom will descend: Prosperity is a myth, there is no such thing as progress, we will always be suckers for disaster. That is a massive mental setback. (...) Chances are that the collective shock will soon be forgotten. But the after-effects of the calamity for the petty bourgeoisie are likely to be felt for a long time to come. Just look at India, for instance. There, women and girls have little standing in society, and the death of male breadwinners is a tremendous setback, because the surviving female part of society falls victim to poverty."

In the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, the area worst affected by the tidal wave, an estimated 90 per cent of all local victims belonged to fishing

communities. "These people now hate the sea", commented an observer on the ground, and it will take some time for people to come to terms with this trauma. Money alone is not enough to address such consequences. The Global Development Report of 1998 noted that "the indigent are compelled to over-exploit resources in order to survive, and they are the ones to suffer most from the resulting ecological damage. They are often forced to relocate to infertile regions or to areas threatened by flooding or monsoons."<sup>6</sup>

Women and children have reportedly been worst affected by the disaster. According to UNICEF, one third of all casualties were children. Even now, evidence points to a marked increase in the region's child mortality rate, says UN emergency relief coordinator Jan Egeland. Besides, past disasters have shown women and girls to be particularly prone to diseases caused by polluted drinking water or by damage to the health infrastructure.

To make things worse it is feared that children orphaned by the tsunami or separated from their parents may fall victim to slave traffickers. UNICEF warned of indications that traffickers were combing the region for children to sell into slavery.

## A CHANCE FOR PEACE?

Most affected countries are racked by internal conflicts – Aceh by fighting between the liberation army GAM and the Indonesian military, Sri Lanka by conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils, and Burma by resistance to an oppressive dictatorship. Hopes that the disaster might act as a catalyst for peaceful forms of conflict resolution may well prove premature.

For instance, in Aceh foreigners were allowed into the region for the first time since the imposition of martial law in 2003. But one third of the military present in the province is still employed in fighting the rebels – and foreign troops were requested to leave Aceh within three months at the latest. NGO-staff may meanwhile only move when accompanied by the military.

On January 6, Australian reporters who observed Indonesian troops beating Acehnese civilians were told "Your duties here are to observe the disaster, not the conflict " and ordered to leave.

GAM's strongholds and bases are concentrated in the coastal region, and the likelihood that the tsunami inflicted serious damage on the movement must have

---

<sup>6</sup> It should also be pointed out that, while the tsunami was caused by geological factors, past human interventions in nature augmented its effects. For instance, the extensive destruction of coral reefs and mangrove forests caused the tidal waves to hit the coastline at full force. (When a tornado caused a huge tidal wave in the East Indian state Orissa in October 1999, killing 10 000 people, areas where the offshore mangrove forest was still intact suffered far less damage.) The high population density in the coastal areas further contributed to the high casualty rate. Environmentalists fear that rising sea levels resulting from global warming will make future tsunamis even more devastating.

been too tempting for the military. According to NGO reports from the region, the army insists that all relief material be delivered to the military in order to prevent supplies from falling into GAM hands. Relief material therefore stockpiles in the urban centers, and many needy in the countryside are short of supplies. Government circles also hinted they might consider relocating the province's population – a particularly nasty way of “solving” the conflict.

In Sri Lanka skirmishes between the (Singalehse) government and the (Tamil) rebels started anew. The Rebels accuse the government of sending too little relief material to the North, which the rebels control.

Meanwhile the ultranationalist singalhesse JVP, who considers the Tamils to be their arch enemy, is heavily involved in relief work – in the South. In this way they may be able to increase their influence and harm the peace process significantly.

On the geo-political front countries like the USA, India and Japan are bent on taking advantage of the situation in order to further their strategic aims.

The US- Army has sent several helicopters and massive relief material to Aceh - unleashing “the greatest military action by Americans in South Asia since the Vietnam war”, as an Indonesian paper put it. The US Army in the role of a peace force, set to dislodge the images of Iraq and the memory of Abu Ghraib from the global mind?

Even before deploying military forces for emergency relief work in the affected areas back home, India sent troops to Sri Lanka, apparently because it “did not want other powers to gain a foothold in its backyard”, as the Colombo paper “Sudar Oli” speculated. Once again the Indian government spoke of a “strategic partnership” between itself and the USA. Close cooperation with Washington is seen as beneficial to India's bid for a permanent seat in the Security Council of the United Nations. “India has for some time attempted to create the impression that it is a regional power, and a credible power at that, in the sense that it can successfully intervene in the case of need”, comments Udai Bashkar of the “Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses in Delhi. “Both these goals are served by the present course of action.”

Raja Mohan, an Indian political scientist, even speaks of a “possible transformation of geo-politics in the Indian Ocean”. For the first time, navy units of India and the USA are cooperating in these waters (US-Marines were sent to Sri Lanka, where the USA would like to establish a military base), an action which inevitably brings them closer together and helps India overcome its isolation.

In the meantime, Germany hopes to get a permanent seat in the UN security council by providing generous funds. (At the same time the German office for migrant and refugees declared that the flood won't serve as a reason to stop deportations of asylum seekers to Sri Lanka.)

Governments race to top one another by offering the biggest package – but in 2004 the aid community was barely willing to find half the funding needed for relief work in worlds crisis regions, mainly in Africa.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo "one thousand people die every day" and tens of thousands were displaced last year as the country struggled to emerge from five years of war, according to the UN's emergency relief co-ordinator Jan Egeland "It's a tsunami every five months year in, year out in the Congo and that can be prevented," Egeland pleaded. 150,000 died in the flooding in the Indian Ocean, but we must not forget that the same number of people die from Aids in Africa every year, he said. Not one government has honoured the United Nations "baseline" and allotted a miserable 0.7 of its national income to overseas aid.

Furthermore, the countries now posing as generous donors were the ones who provided the Indonesian government with military equipment and training – i.e. the means and skills to terrorise and kill people of Aceh, as was the case right up to the day the tsunami devastated the province.

“The hypocrisy, narcissism and dissembling propaganda of the rulers of the world and their sidekicks are in full cry”, writes John Pilger. The victims of a great natural disaster are worthy (though for how long is uncertain) while the victims of disasters due to the neoliberal structural adjustment policies are unworthy and very often unmentionable.”

## CONCLUSION

The real work only starts once the mopping-up operations have been completed. Emergency aid should always aim to merge with sustainable development projects, says B. Ekbal, a staff member of India's "People's Health Movement". The construction of paved roads, bridges that withstand flooding, and earthquake-proof housing are instances of such projects. In general, emergency aid should contribute towards providing a livelihood for survivors, a new basis for economic activity.

However, most of the Indian Ocean states are so debt-ridden that they simply don't have the money for rural development (or they pursue other priorities).

Globally, several billion people permanently face conditions similar to those left behind by the tsunami, for which relief aid is currently being sought: lack of potable water, homelessness, insufficient medical care, lack of food security. A total of 1.4 billion of the world's population have no clean water, 800 million suffer chronic hunger, 10 million starve every year, 3 million die from AIDS and every fortnight as many lives in Asia are lost to preventable diseases as to the recent tsunami. Will it be possible to transform the current concern for the plight of tsunami survivors into increased efforts to address the scandal of worldwide misery?

Poverty and misery should not only attract our attention when they are caused by spectacular catastrophes. Wherever intolerable living conditions become a permanent state of affairs, we turn our backs, become desensitised, or even justify structural poverty. And yet poverty and misery are closely linked to our privileged role and position on the globe, and we should not forget this connection. Empathy and charity - all good and well, but this cannot be a substitute for the necessity of social justice worldwide.

An US-think tank calculated that the four countries worst hit by the tsunamis -- Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand -- paid 1.8 billion dollars in tariffs to the United States a year -- or five times what Washington has pledged in tsunami relief.

The current world trade regime is to the disadvantage of countries in the southern hemisphere. A fundamental, comprehensive reform of this regime would benefit, among others, the tsunami-ravaged countries of Southeast Asia – and it would liberate them from dependence on our empathy in case of future disasters.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Niklas Reese (35) is a social scientist and staff member of *Asienhaus (Asia House)*, an information centre based in Germany and dedicated to the distribution of information on and mutual exchange and interaction with the countries of Southeast and South Asia. Reese spent part of his childhood in Hong Kong and the Philippines. – The accompanying translation by Richard Bertelsmann is an updated version of an article that first appeared on 6 January 2005 in the online “*Asienhaus-Rundbrief*” (*Asia House Newsletter*).