

The Indian Ocean tsunami: 20 years on

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December 26 marked 20 years since a massive tsunami swept across the Indian Ocean, leaving death and destruction in its wake on a vast scale in country after country. Officially, an estimated 227,000 people were killed. Whole villages and towns were literally wiped off the face of the map. Several million more people lost everything and were left homeless. Many were injured and traumatised by the loss of family members and their communities.

The Indian Ocean tsunami was one of the greatest disasters of the past 100 years. The worst hit was Indonesia where more than 165,000 people died. Aceh on the northern tip of Sumatra was closest to the epicentre of the huge 9.2 magnitude earthquake that triggered the tsunami. The death toll in Sri Lanka was 35,262 and 16,389 in India. Another 8,240 people were killed in Thailand, 108 in the Maldives and another 227 in other countries.

The majority of the victims were those least able to cope with the disaster—the poor and marginalised, including fishermen and women—forced to live near the coastlines in makeshift accommodation that offered no protection from the towering wall of water. More than half a million people were officially “displaced” in each of Indonesia, Sri Lanka and India, as well as tens of thousands more in the Maldives, Thailand and other countries.

The 20-year anniversary of the catastrophe has been marked by limited coverage in the establishment media internationally. In the main it has focussed on the immediate impact, interviews with survivors still scarred by the events, paeans to the “resilience” of communities, praise for the international aid effort and soporific claims that “lessons have been learnt.”

In other words, a continuing cover-up! The 2004 tsunami was not simply a natural disaster but a graphic exposure of the failure of capitalist system, the ruling classes and their governments to take the necessary steps to protect populations and assist the victims to recover and rebuild their lives.

The initial response of “world leaders” was one of utter indifference. It was epitomised by US President George W. Bush, author of the criminal invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, who remained holidaying on his ranch and only made a token statement of sympathy days later. The first US offer of financial assistance was a pitiful \$15 million.

By contrast, ordinary working people in the countries affected and around the world recognised the enormity of the tragedy

and provided physical and financial aid. In many countries, donations from private sources outstripped government aid. On the ground in Sri Lanka, for instance, workers, youth and other volunteers cleared debris, attended the injured, aided the homeless and rescued hundreds who would otherwise have perished.

When the major powers finally got together to provide relief and assistance, it was always bound up with national economic and strategic interests. The US exploited the opportunity to land American troops in Sri Lanka for the first time under the guise of helping the tsunami victims.

The Australian government aimed not only to strengthen its strategic ties with Indonesia. It sent troops as “aid workers” to Aceh and ensured that its reconstruction aid was tied to contracts for Australian corporations.

According to the UN, some \$13.4 billion was pledged in aid for relief and long-term reconstruction—less than half of which came from governments. A year after the disaster, however, most survivors were still living in tents or other forms of temporary accommodation. Several thousand permanent houses had been repaired or built compared to the hundreds of thousands that were destroyed.

In a WSWs comment one year after the disaster, Wije Dias, the then general secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka, passionately expressed the contempt and anger felt by many toward the woeful inadequacy of the international aid effort and the media praise heaped on it.

It may well be true that the effort to assist the tsunami victims has outshone the response of the major powers to other disasters. But if that is the case, the comments are a devastating indictment of the entire capitalist order. The millions of victims throughout Asia are also entitled to pronounce judgement: if this is the best you can do, you have failed and the social system you represent deserves to be abolished!

The scale of the human tragedy was greatly magnified by the lack of any warning or planned responses. Earthquakes are unpredictable but if they do occur undersea then a system of ocean sensors can detect tsunamis and warnings can be issued

based on sophisticated modelling. Such a tsunami warning system existed for the Pacific Ocean, but not for the Indian Ocean.

The Pacific Tsunami Warning Center, based in Hawaii, was only established by the UN in 1965, five years after a magnitude 9.5 earthquake off the coast of Chile generated a tsunami that killed thousands in the Philippines and Japan.

At least one seismologist, Phil Cummins, warned in October 2003 and again in August 2004 of the danger of a giant earthquake and tsunami centred on Sumatra and urged an extension of the tsunami warning system to the Indian Ocean. Nothing was done.

Cummins told Al Jazeera last week of his reaction to the Indian Ocean tsunami: “I was shocked. I guess there were feelings of vindication, but also feelings of guilt, because I hadn’t been standing on the ramparts and screaming up and down. In retrospect, I should have done that, but I didn’t know it would happen so quickly.”

The reality is that no amount of screaming by Cummins or other scientists would have prompted governments to make the necessary investment. An Indian Ocean tsunami warning system, which was riven by national rivalries from the outset, was only built after the December 2004 catastrophe and suffers from a lack of investment in the necessary social and physical infrastructure.

Time is of the essence not only in interpreting data and issuing tsunami warnings but ensuring that the information reaches threatened communities and that people there know where to go and what to do. The 2004 tsunami travelled at around 500 km/hr and took just 10 minutes to hit Aceh. If a warning system had been in place, it is likely that the deaths would have been far fewer.

The deficiencies of the Indian Ocean warning system were exposed in 2018 when a 7.5 magnitude earthquake and tsunami killed 1,200 people on the island of Sulawesi. None of the tsunami buoys that measure sea level changes were operational. The only tidal gauge was not near enough to the city of Palu to warn that a seven-metre wall of water was about to engulf parts of the city. Moreover, the quake destroyed many cell phone towers, so text alerts were not received.

Cummins told Al Jazeera that, based on his study of geological faults around Sumatra and historical records, a new mega-tsunami could hit at any time, without warning. “A lot of people are going to die no matter what,” he said, but added that the “losses will be much greater” if communities are not well drilled in how to respond.

The terrible impact of any tsunami will be magnified by the fact that the Indian Ocean coastlines now have greater populations, dwellings are no more substantial than 20 years ago and few resources have been devoted to building sea defences and protected shelters, ensuring warning systems are working, and educating exposed populations. Moreover, the rising sea levels caused by climate change mean that low-level

coastal areas are even more vulnerable to giant tsunamis.

The lack of necessary investment to ensure the protection of coastal communities is not due to a lack of concern among working people but the fact that under capitalism corporate profits and the national interests of ruling classes always take priority over the basic human needs of the overwhelming majority. Two decades later, that is even more evident in the response of the ruling class globally to the COVID-19 pandemic—elementary public health measures were abandoned to ensure business profits at the cost of millions of lives.

Wije Dias concluded his WSWS article, “One year after the Asian tsunami: an indictment of the profit system,” by pointing to the political significance of the response of the working class—words that hold true today:

Those millions of ordinary working people throughout the world who selflessly donated aid, and the locals who did everything humanly possible to rescue and support the victims, gave no thought to national or communal divisions. The humanitarian instincts of ordinary people stood in marked contrast to the reaction of the political establishment. They provide a small glimpse of what would be possible if the vast resources created by the international working class were utilised to meet the social needs of the world’s population.

One year after the tsunami, the failure of the international aid operation and the desperate conditions facing the majority of survivors demonstrate that the spontaneous sentiments of ordinary people must be given conscious expression in a political movement that sets out to replace the outmoded system of capitalist nation states with one based on international socialism. That is the perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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