

The fault lines we choose to ignore

WORLD VIEW

By Mahir Ali

DO YOU ever get the feeling that happy new years are a thing of the past (and, hopefully, the future)? As if terrorism and short-sighted acts of vengeance — by misguided states and single-minded groups of individuals alike — were not enough, nature tends every now and then to reach into its arsenal and pull out a weapon of mass destruction.

Late last year it unleashed two in rapid succession: an earthquake followed within hours by a tidal wave. The quake accounted for a highly unusual reading of nine on the Richter scale. Aspects of the devastation wrought by the consequent tsunami continue to be documented 10 days later.

With entire communities wiped out by the lethal force of a 10-metre wall of water, a precise death toll may never be established, but the total cost in terms of lives lost is likely to be in the vicinity of 200,000. Among the survivors, nearly two million were deemed to be in dire need of clean water, food and medicine — essentials that have begun to reach them.

Longer-term assistance will be required to provide shelter, to guarantee means of survival for those who have been orphaned, to ward off epidemics and to re-establish means of earning a livelihood for those who have lost everything they had.

The United Nations and kindred organizations appear to be aware of the scale of the task that lies ahead, and funds for relief and rehabilitation are accumulating after a slow start. In most of the wealthier countries, the public has responded generously to appeals for cash. The governments, however, needed prodding in some cases.

The United States' initial response, in particular, was incredibly disproportionate to the scale of the calamity and the size of its economy. It raised its offer of \$15 million by \$20 million after it was pointed out that the first figure represented less than half of what will be spent

for 2008. It would certainly be interesting to know whether the advice to attach this particular travel companion to an increasingly prickly Powell came from Karl Rove.

It has been suggested, meanwhile, that the US ought to be contributing to the reconstruction of southern Asia at least the amount it expends on maintaining its occupation of Iraq — \$3.9 billion a month, according to an estimate provided by Donald Rumsfeld, but probably considerably higher.

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but try explaining that to Bechtel or Halliburton, whose projected profits for the next few years may well be partially based on the prospect of "earning" most of that money.

The western press has been accused in some quarters of paying disproportionate attention to the couple of thousand European tourists killed by the tsunami or adversely affected in its aftermath, at the expense of the primary victims, the tens of thousands of "natives".

The criticism isn't altogether groundless, but nor is it entirely fair. To a certain extent it is natural for any country's media to pay particular heed to the fate of compatriots, and I have not come across many instances of a striking — or obviously racist — imbalance in western coverage.

The greater pity is that in considering the disaster and its aftermath — at tomorrow's Asean-sponsored gathering in Indonesia, and elsewhere — little attention will be paid to fault lines. Not the sort that play a role in seismic disturbances, but the fault lines that split the world, and societies, between rich and poor.

Many of those swept away by the tidal wave lived in coastal communities of subsistence fishermen — a precarious enough basis for existence even without the vagaries of nature. Beyond these communities, too, the victims were predominantly poverty-stricken. The survivors who have lost everything didn't have a lot to start with, apart from their families.

What, if everything goes according to plan, can they look forward to once the dead have been buried or cremated and the ocean stops washing ashore a human harvest with every tide? A return to subsistence? Back to basics until nature comes culling again?

After all, the disparities that entail dispossession tend not to be seen as a problem by most of those who respond to tsunamis by reaching into their wallets. Or perhaps as a problem that's best ignored because they cannot conceive of a solution. A meaningful redistribution of wealth? Nah, that's so last century.

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It took an indirect jibe from the UN's Jan Egeland for the American commitment to be increased to a considerably more useful \$350 million — a tacit admission that the Bush administration on its first try got it completely wrong yet again. It erred once more in, out of the blue, claiming leadership of the relief effort.

The obvious alternative would have been, in addition to pledging resources, to offer the UN all the assistance it might need in terms of logistics and manpower. Instead, it was deemed necessary to announce the formation of a "coalition" with India, Japan and Australia. If that wasn't actually an attempt to undermine the UN's role as coordinator, it was a pretty good imitation of one.

This week US military personnel have been spotted saving lives in Aceh — a welcome role reversal — and Colin Powell is visiting Asia in the company of a chubby presidential look-alike.

The outgoing secretary of state has been afforded the pleasure of Jeb Bush's company ostensibly because the latter, as the governor of hurricane-prone Florida, knows a thing or two about coping with natural disasters. (It probably wouldn't be too unkind to suggest that he grew up with one.)

One fears there may be an ulterior motive, though, in trying to build brother Jeb's international profile. The clique that controls the present administration must, after all, be on the lookout for a suitable candidate

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According to a spokesman for the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Large-scale disasters tend to result in mammoth pledges which ... do not always materialize in their entirety. The figures look much higher than they really are. What will end up on the ground will be much less."

That's not a particularly reassuring state of affairs. It suggests that once Aceh and eastern Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu and Phi Phi and Phuket fall off the international media radar, the funds will begin to dry up. Which means that, along with debris, the worst-affected areas will remain strewn with misery for a long time to come. Perhaps indefinitely.

Another potential problem is the fear that whatever funds from foreign governments do flow through will be allocated by juggling existing budgets for humanitarian aid. Money earmarked for Sudan or Congo, in other words, may now be redirected to Indonesia or Sri Lanka.

Attention to one part of the world needn't, of course, mean neglecting another area. But that's the usual modus operandi in a milieu where the generosity of governments is dictated by politics rather than compassion.

In the US, meanwhile, the White House has rejected suggestions from Vermont senator Patrick Leahy that some of the unspent \$16 billion authorized for the reconstruction of Iraq could be used to alleviate Asia's agony. It may be a sensible idea,

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Some disparities do get noticed, however. The almost morbid fascination with rows of corpses and scenes of utter devastation has led some observers to wonder why hardly any images have emerged from Fallujah after its capture.

The irony of this discrepancy wouldn't have been lost upon Susan Sontag, the American writer and public intellectual who died last week after a 30-year battle with various forms of cancer. Better known for her essays than her fiction, Sontag was a controversial figure who at different times infuriated both the Right and the Left, and whose ideas on an eclectic range of subjects were invariably provocative and stimulating.

One of her final public interventions was a lengthy essay in *The New York Times Magazine* last May on the significance of the Abu Ghraib photographs, in which she excoriated the Bush administration and its policies. A much shorter piece in the *New Yorker* in September 2001, meanwhile, had reinforced her "un-American" reputation. In it she took aim at "the self-righteous drivel and outright deceptions being peddled by public figures and TV commentators", adding that "whatever may be said of the perpetrators of Tuesday's slaughter, they were not cowards".

It also contained two sentences that may serve as a suitable epitaph — and not just for Sontag: "Let's by all means grieve together. But let's not be stupid together."

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