

The other side of charity in Southeast Asia

VIEW



FARISH A NOOR

In Aceh there is now a veritable race among foreign donors. The US has a head-start. One reason it is so prominently visible is because it has eliminated other donors. Indonesian relief groups, many of them linked to local Islamist parties have been kept out and many Arab and South Asian donors cannot donate for fear of being accused of funding 'radical groups'

north-western province of Aceh, and a further three hundred thousand missing and displaced. Almost immediately the government of neighbouring Malaysia came to the fore to offer aid and assistance, but not without the prompting of the Malaysian public, who loudly condemned the initial indifference of the Malaysian media that hardly gave the event on the first day the coverage it deserved.

Malaysia's apparent charity is also laced with political concerns, for when the tragedy struck the Malaysian government was engaged in a nationwide round-up of illegal Indonesian migrant workers who were being sent back to Indonesia. The Malaysian government went as far as resorting to the use of national reserve forces, and threatened the illegal immigrants with punishments that included fines and whipping.

But the most visible actor on the stage in Indonesia's Aceh province today has to be the United States of America, alongside its ally Australia. The American government has directed its troops and naval forces to Aceh, sending in soldiers as well as army helicopters to help with the relief effort. No doubt, this act of apparent benevolence was likewise coloured by genuine political concerns as well.

Coming as it did at a time when the image and standing of the United States is at its lowest ebb, the tsunami tragedy was — ironically — a boon for some. The American government knows very well that its reputation and credibility have suffered greatly of late, and in the battle for hearts and minds of the Muslim world countries like Malaysia and Indonesia are of enormous strategic importance as they have come to be cast as 'model Muslim states' that Washington believes other countries ought to follow.

America, therefore, has tried its best to win over the support of Southeast Asian Muslims in both Indonesia and Malaysia, and in the case of the former has gone as far as setting up 'American corners' in Indonesian universities, to showcase the American way of life and to illustrate the meaning of American values. American NGOs, donor agencies and foundations such as the Asia Foundation are also at the forefront of pumping in millions of dollars to 'progressive' and 'liberal' Indonesian and

Malaysian Islamist NGOs, think-tanks, universities and other institutions, with the hope of ensuring that the two countries do not fall into the hands of the more anti-American streams of political Islam.

At the same time Washington seems oblivious to the fact that its arrival in Indonesia is not without precedent. Despite President Bush's pledges to help Indonesia recover from the tsunami catastrophe, the people of Indonesia remember the role that America played for so long as the strongest supporter of the Soeharto regime, from 1965 to 1998. Indonesians also recall with horror the collusion of the US — notably its intelligence agencies — in the blood-bath that led to the destruction of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) in 1965.

Today, America's relief efforts show the same signs of political Machiavellianism of the past. In areas like Aceh, there is now a veritable race among foreign donor agencies to get as much help on the ground as soon as possible. The US has a head-start thanks to its logistical advantage. But another reason why it is so prominently visible is because it has eliminated other donors: Indonesian relief groups, many of them linked to local Islamist parties like the Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS) and movements like the Hidayatullah have been kept out from Aceh, on the grounds that they might be working alongside radical Islamist forces.

To make things worse, Washington's 'War on Terror' in Southeast Asia has obstructed many Arab and South Asian donors who cannot donate to Aceh for fear of being accused of funding 'radical Islamist groups'. As a result of these restrictions, Muslim relief organisations from countries like Malaysia, Pakistan, the Gulf states and beyond are forced to make the long trip to Aceh themselves, to hand over the money and aid they have collected personally. A Malaysian Muslim-based relief group has complained that unlike the Americans and their Western allies, the US as well as Indonesian authorities treat Muslim NGOs with suspicion and make them feel unwelcome.

So deep is the scepticism of American intentions and its agenda towards the Muslim world that even the leaders of moderate Islamist organ-

isations in Southeast Asia are not impressed by the US's latest humanitarian efforts. As Ahmad Azam, president of the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM) noted: "After the September 11 tragedy, followed by the attack on Afghanistan on the pretext of getting Osama Bin Laden for it, and then invading Iraq on the questionable basis of supposedly amassing weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the Muslim world will never trust the US as a nation that stands for freedom, human rights and justice. The treatment of the so-called terrorists in Guantanamo Bay, the massacre in Falluja and Afghanistan while at the same ignoring the series of assassinations of Palestinian leaders has destroyed whatever credibility the US had left as an advocate for peace."

Such sentiments have also become the norm among leading advocates of human rights and democracy in the region. In the words of Chandra Muzaffar, president of the Movement for a Just World, one of the leading NGOs in Malaysia, Washington's relief efforts may well come to naught, for "we have now reached a point where there is widespread antipathy towards Washington amongst Malaysian Muslims".

As for the Acehnese themselves, they have their own doubts and suspicions about the role and agenda of the US and its Western allies in Aceh. Why, they ask, are the Americans there now, to hand out aid, shelter and medical supplies? Why were they absent when the province of Aceh was caught in a civil conflict with Jakarta and the Indonesian army; when thousands of Acehnese were murdered and buried in mass graves in the jungle; and when the social infrastructure of Aceh, including its schools and colleges were being destroyed? The answer is obvious enough. When the Aceh uprising was at its peak and the Indonesian army at its most brutal in the province, Washington — under the leadership of successive presidents from Gerald Ford to Bill Clinton — was the strongest supporter of the Indonesian regime.

Dr Farish A Noor is a Malaysian political scientist and human rights activist, based at the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), Berlin

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THE TSUNAMI TRAGEDY THAT STRUCK the countries of Southeast and South Asia recently has been compounded further by the vicissitudes of politics. Thus far we have witnessed both the redeeming demonstration of human charity that extends beyond borders, as well as the less-than-dignified posturing of governments that can only think within the constraints of their borders.

The tragedy in Southeast Asia was quickly transformed into a gross pantomime of states and governments: the country worst hit by the catastrophe was undoubtedly Indonesia, with more than a hundred thousand killed in the