

# The politics of the tsunami response

by Eva-Lotta Hedman

The Asian tsunami of 26 December 2004 destroyed lives and entire Indian Ocean coastal communities. Within minutes of an earthquake measuring 9.0 on the Richter scale striking the west coast of northern Sumatra in Indonesia, the first large tsunami hit these shores to devastating effect, especially between Banda Aceh and Meulaboh in Aceh. A massive upward shift in the seabed also caused tsunamis to hit coastal communities in parts of western Thailand, Burma, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, eastern India and the Maldives before reaching the coast of Africa, with terrible damage to life and property. In the aftermath of this massive natural disaster, some 290,000 people were dead or missing, and more than one million displaced, across 12 affected countries.

As news of this natural disaster broke, it sparked an extraordinary mobilisation of resources for humanitarian relief and assistance by private citizens and corporations, NGOs and governments in the affected countries and beyond. An elaborate international machinery of expertise in the coordination and delivery of relief and assistance in complex humanitarian emergencies was revved up and deployed in affected areas. In places, the sheer scale of the destruction posed formidable logistical difficulties for the delivery of basic humanitarian relief to affected populations and in many cases national and/or foreign military forces were needed to enable access to affected populations. Another major challenge in the emergency relief phase stemmed from the fluidity of displaced populations. This was especially the case in Aceh, as survivors from affected areas sometimes moved between public or community spaces, host families, tent camps and other temporary shelters.

Mapping the situation and location of survivors was not easy. National governments, international donors and humanitarian organisations put much energy into establishing the nature and extent of the impact of the tsunamis – the destruction of homes, livestock and livelihoods;

loss of property, land titles and other important documents; and damage to public infrastructure. A proliferation of damage assessments, surveys and maps, drawing on an array of expert knowledge, provided guidelines to shape donor and national government's rehabilitation and reconstruction plans.

Beyond issues of coordination and expertise in complex humanitarian emergencies, it is important to refocus attention on the nature, direction and pace of relief and reconstruction efforts which remain embedded within complex relations of power shaped by national and local politics in the affected areas. The diverging responses to the unprecedented direct impact of this massive single disaster on 12 different countries, with their own distinctive political, economic and social dynamics, underscores the powerful effects of everyday politics upon humanitarian efforts, whether amateur or professional, local or international. To date, however, little systematic effort has been made to examine the role or significance of political dynamics and patterns affecting humanitarian relief and reconstruction across tsunami-affected areas.

Between and between the natural disaster and pre-existing complex humanitarian emergencies, many tsunami survivors have had to negotiate a range of constraints. In the case of Aceh, where conflict, violence and a massive counter-insurgency campaign against separatists has displaced over 300,000 people since 1999, the IDP 'identity' of tsunami survivors has become politically sensitive and contested. By definition the term 'IDP' includes those forced by natural disasters to leave their homes, yet Indonesian government officials and international humanitarian organisations have at times referred to them as 'homeless'. Such distinctions have critical implications for identifying the rights and guarantees to protection and assistance of affected populations, as well as the role and obligations of local and national government set out in the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

In Thailand, with its punitive approach to containing a large refugee and migrant worker population from neighbouring Burma, there is evidence of *de facto* discrimination by local government authorities and Thai citizens against Burmese tsunami survivors in the affected southern provinces. As the Thai government declared a position of self-reliance in the coordination and delivery of post-tsunami emergency relief, thus affording an unrivalled opportunity for Premier Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai (Thai Loves Thai) political party to campaign for the 6 February 2005 elections, Burmese migrant workers were also comparatively isolated from alternative sources of assistance and support, including from their own military-led government. Burmese migrant workers have been excluded in the distribution of emergency relief and the implementation of Thai government aid programmes by local officials, as well as targeted for arrests by local police in post-tsunami crackdowns on 'illegal migrants', leading, in many cases, to eventual deportation back to Burma.

In the case of India, where the government also declined offers of a coordinated international humanitarian emergency response, there is evidence of discriminatory practices by local officials and populations alike against *dalits* (still commonly referred to as 'untouchables') in tsunami-affected areas. Trapped within a social structure of caste-based hierarchy and domination, *dalit* survivors were reportedly only reluctantly received in many temporary shelters and camps housing (higher caste) IDPs from coastal fishing communities; some *dalits* were driven away. There is also evidence of other IDPs preventing government officials, NGO staff and other civil society groups from distributing emergency relief to *dalits*.

Another crucial dimension of the tsunami emergency response stems from the primacy of military-strategic considerations in some of the worst affected areas, most notably Aceh, the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka and arguably,

the Nicobar Islands of India. Aceh has been massively militarised by the presence of 40,000 soldiers since a state of emergency was declared in May 2003. With forcible relocation into camps an integral part of recent counter-insurgency campaigns, the role of the Indonesian military in the post-tsunami distribution of emergency relief, as well as in the coordination of IDP relocation into controversial 'barracks', has seriously compromised the principles of humanitarian assistance in many cases. In the case of Sri Lanka, moreover, the coincidence of the tsunami's path of destruction with the so-called 'uncleared areas' along the coastal belt of zones controlled by the Liberation Tiger of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has made for a sluggish relief operation as the government in Colombo has firmly opposed any mechanisms to bypass its central authority. The absence of a central government response is further highlighted by the Somalian case. Finally, in the Nicobar Islands, home to Indian strategic naval bases, there is evidence to suggest that tsunami

relief and rehabilitation efforts were military-led and that they bypassed affected indigenous communities and local civilian administration.

As many humanitarian actors involved in the tsunami relief and reconstruction begin to evaluate their responses it is to be hoped that assessments will offer critical comparative perspectives on the varying responses undertaken by those agencies which operated in two or more affected areas, thus facing distinct and distinctly political challenges. The long-standing presence of UNHCR and other UN bodies in Sri Lanka prior to the tsunami suggests an illuminating contrast with Aceh, for example, with far-reaching implications on the relief efforts that ensued.

Concerns about shortcomings in meeting the rights of disaster-induced IDPs to protection have drawn attention to relations of power and politics within which IDPs remain embedded. Authors in this special issue of FMR highlight a

range of protection concerns in the aftermath of the tsunami, including access to assistance, enforced relocation, sexual and gender-based violence, safe and voluntary return, loss of documentation and restitution of property. Such concerns must be tackled at an early stage as the protection of economic, social and cultural rights tends to deteriorate over time. As the media focuses on other news, large tsunami-affected populations remain in areas of enduring conflict. It is high time to focus more systematic and comparative analysis on discourses and dynamics of state security and everyday politics, how they have influenced this complex humanitarian emergency and their implications for IDP protection and assistance.

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*Wreckage of beachfront homes in Banda Aceh, Indonesia.*

