

The Asian Tsunami: three weeks on

14 January 2005

Summary

Almost three weeks since the tsunami disaster struck on 26 December 2004, more than one million people living in the Indian Ocean region remain displaced. The appalling death toll could still increase, unless the humanitarian response reaches all those in need with appropriate life-saving assistance.

Beyond the immediate threats to life, the disaster may reduce nearly two million people to poverty, unless the massive reconstruction effort of the next few months and years specifically aims to reduce poverty.

The humanitarian crisis of the tsunami is not yet over. The 'poverty crisis' of the tsunami may have only just begun.

Governments have started to meet these challenges at a series of meetings since 6 January 2005 in Jakarta, Brussels, Geneva, Paris, and elsewhere. Now, Oxfam urges governments and others to take immediate action as follows:

- Contribute the full US\$ 977 million requested by the UN for urgent humanitarian aid in the immediate future – including the 26 per cent not yet even pledged.
- Make a 'double humanitarian pledge', combining funds for the survivors of the tsunami with a commitment to fully fund the UN's 2005 Humanitarian Appeal for US\$ 1.7 billion for those affected by the world's 14 other major humanitarian crises.
- Support the UN Emergency Relief Co-ordinator as the leader of international humanitarian assistance, in co-operation with the tsunami-affected governments – and use this process as a model for a stronger UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the future.
- Contribute military assets in response to requests from the UN and national governments, to provide vital but temporary support for the humanitarian response under the overall civilian leadership of the UN.
- Ensure that affected minority and opposition groups, children, and women in vulnerable situations receive aid without discrimination or neglect.
- Guarantee safe, continued access for UN agencies, and international and national NGOs, contributing to immediate humanitarian relief, and rehabilitation and reconstruction. Safe access should not depend on the use of armed escorts for the delivery of aid, but rather, where needed, on immediate ceasefires.

- Ensure that all displaced people are given a genuine choice: either to return home with the necessary support – or to remain in the camps as long as necessary.
- Swiftly fund reconstruction strategies, developed by each affected government with the participation of the affected people themselves and their civil society, ensuring that the strategies specifically aim to reduce poverty.
- Begin rehabilitation now, even while the emergency phase continues – with the same aim of reducing long-term poverty.
- Confirm that all tsunami-related aid is funded in addition to existing aid commitments and will not be taken from current aid budgets allocated to humanitarian relief or poverty reduction elsewhere.
- Commission an urgent assessment to determine what level of debt is now sustainable, after the tsunami, for each of the indebted affected countries. Cancel the remainder of the debt provided the relief is spent transparently on poverty reduction.
- Remove EU and US tariff barriers against exports of textiles and clothing from tsunami-affected countries.
- Encourage transnational clothing companies to defer any decision to shift production out of tsunami-affected countries.
- Use the extraordinary momentum of the international response to the disaster to make 2005 the year in which governments commit themselves to the following aims:
 - Ensure the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, by immediately providing for the world's poorest countries additional aid worth at least US\$ 50 billion; by cancelling debt for the poorest countries; and by preparing to conclude the Doha Trade Round in 2006 to make global trade rules work for the poor.
 - Protect civilians in all humanitarian crises, by accepting that governments have a 'responsibility to protect' civilians everywhere, making this commitment when they meet at the UN Millennium summit in September 2005; by pressing for an international Arms Trade Treaty; and by fully funding every UN humanitarian appeal.

The response to date

Governments from around the world have responded to the tsunami with unprecedented promises of aid. In almost every case, this response has followed, not led, enormous demonstrations of public compassion and generosity. Since 6 January, ministers and officials have met in Jakarta, Brussels, Geneva, Paris, and elsewhere to talk about humanitarian relief, reconstruction, and debt relief.

On 6 January, in Jakarta, they confirmed the UN's leading role in co-ordinating aid. On 11 January, they pledged 74 per cent of the US\$ 977 million requested for immediate relief. On the same day, the European Trade Commissioner stated: 'There are trade measures we can use to assist rebuilding'. On 12 January, the Paris Club offered to freeze the debt repayments from tsunami-affected countries. All of this is welcome.

But governments have not yet even promised 26 per cent of the humanitarian aid needed – still less disbursed these urgently needed funds to the UN. They have not yet

even explored the possibility of cancelling debts owed by some of the affected countries, something that would release far more money for reconstruction. They have not taken action to remove tariff barriers against exports of textiles and clothing from affected countries. As international media attention already declines, there is still an enormous amount to do.

Oxfam International's Briefing Note of 7 January 2005 – 'The Asian Tsunami: the challenge after the Jakarta summit' – contains more details on the affected countries and draws historical lessons to be learned from other disasters. Most of these points are not repeated in this Note.

A crisis not over

Almost three weeks after 26 December 2004, more than one million people remain displaced by the tsunami. The latest figures from the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), issued on 10 January 2005, report 1,237,068 displaced survivors, as well as the 153,397 confirmed dead and 27,194 still missing. Most of these displaced people are in the two countries worst affected: Indonesia (694,760) and Sri Lanka (504,440). In the absence of official figures, Oxfam estimates that there are also more than 377,000 people displaced from their homes in India, living in some 549 camps across the country.

The appalling death toll could still increase, unless the humanitarian response reaches all those in need with appropriate life-saving assistance. Heavy rains in Aceh, Indonesia, have increased the risk of cholera and other waterborne diseases. In one camp, Enak Bansar, Oxfam has fitted latrines and is providing clean water for 3,400 people. One Oxfam worker, Mona Laczó, reports: 'The rain is the major problem, camps are flooded . . . There are still aftershocks – especially at night. We get up and go outside into the rain, which is coming down steadily.' Throughout the affected areas, homes and other buildings, roads and bridges, water and electricity supplies, crops, irrigation and fishery infrastructure, food and fuel supplies all remain in ruins.

Beyond immediate threats to life, the tsunami may reduce nearly two million people to poverty, unless the massive reconstruction effort to come in the next few months and years specifically aims to reduce poverty. 'Poverty is potentially the most important impact of this natural disaster', said Ifzal Ali, the chief economist of the Asian Development Bank, on 13 January. One million Indonesians and 645,000 Indians could be reduced to living on less than US\$ 2 a day.

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Humanitarian aid

Donor governments' pledges appear to cover most of the US\$ 977 million called for by the UN Secretary General on 6 January 2005. US\$ 722 million was officially pledged to the Flash Appeal at a donors' meeting in Geneva on 11 January. Japan, the UK, Norway, Germany, and the European Commission were the five donors who promised to contribute more than US\$ 50 million each. Other donors should immediately pledge to give the outstanding 26 per cent to meet the appeal. They should make sure that it is genuinely 'new money', not money recycled from previous pledges. At the donors' meeting on 11 January, only Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Norway declared their intention to do so. One third of the UK's contribution

comes from its Treasury, and two thirds from its Development ministry's contingency fund. Unfortunately, the whole system of recording governments' donations is so opaque that it will be difficult to determine how much of the aid for the tsunami's survivors is 'new' or not.

'Double humanitarian pledge'

Past behaviour of donor governments suggests a second danger. The extraordinarily generous response so far made to the catastrophe in the Indian Ocean region may threaten funding for the other 14 major humanitarian crises in the world, including the three very grave threats to life in Sudan, northern Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, where more than 3.5 million people have been killed, directly or indirectly, as a result of armed conflict since 1998.

The surest way to avert this danger is for governments to immediately pledge and contribute funds to the UN's other humanitarian appeals. They should make a 'double humanitarian pledge' - to fund the tsunami appeal and also to contribute the US\$ 1.7 billion requested for the UN's other Consolidated Appeals.

Quality and co-ordination in humanitarian aid

The Jakarta summit on 6 January confirmed the UN's leading role in co-ordinating post-tsunami assistance. Governments should support the UN Emergency Relief Co-ordinator, Jan Egeland, as the leader of the international humanitarian response, in co-operation with the tsunami-affected governments, civil society, and affected people.

The UN itself should work as one team, led by Jan Egeland and the UN national co-ordinators in each affected country. They must provide the necessary leadership, identifying the appropriate area and sector for the life-saving work of every other international agency.

At every level, the humanitarian response should reach the quality of the *Sphere* standards adopted by humanitarian agencies after their inconsistent performance in the central African refugee crises of the mid-1990s. These should be the minimum acceptable standards in disaster response. In India's Kanniyakamuri district, Oxfam has not only been using the standards in its own work, but encouraging others to apply them too. The government District Collector agreed that all agencies providing shelters must work to the same *Sphere* standards.

Effective humanitarian relief also depends on providing the aid that affected people want. The UN's estimates of the aid needed, when issuing its Flash Appeal, have been understandably preliminary and approximate. The UN was right to develop this appeal swiftly, to mobilise and distribute funds as fast as possible. Now, it should take a strong role, with national governments, in co-ordinating needs assessments and ensuring the effective participation of affected people. After the initial need for the distribution of physical goods has been met, past experience of previous disasters shows that there will then be a need for aid in the form of cash, to encourage economic recovery.

UN and NGO international agencies should be providing what local people cannot provide for themselves, not duplicating the enormous self-help efforts of the affected communities and authorities. For example, in Chinnoor, a village in India's Tamil Nadu state, Oxfam's Programme Co-ordinator, P. J. Chacko, emphasises that 'we are

trying to fill critical gaps', giving hygiene kits to 9,000 families, while many other agencies are providing other vital help.

In this spirit, the UN World Food Programme has rightly pledged itself to try to buy food locally, or at least in the region, in order to support the local economy. Wherever this is possible, it is absolutely right to do so.

Using military assets

The humanitarian response to date, including some of the aid delivered by Oxfam International, would not have been possible without the contribution of military assets by a number of affected governments, and others. The UN has rightly called for military support as a vital but temporary contribution to disaster relief, under its overall civilian leadership.

However, in areas of Aceh (Indonesia), and northern and eastern Sri Lanka, where certain groups have been in conflict with national governments, the UN and others must carefully calculate the advantages and disadvantages of using military assets, given the evident potential for one side or another in those conflicts to perceive such intervention as a threat.

Protecting all those in need

All the humanitarian aid must be distributed on the basis of impartial assessments, according to the fundamental humanitarian principles of humanity and neutrality. The UN and donor governments should give special attention to the needs of minority groups, indigenous people, members of opposition groups, and low-caste people affected by the tsunami, ensuring that they receive aid without discrimination. Others – including children, women in vulnerable situations, and migrant workers – who often miss out when aid is distributed, must not be excluded. Some survivors, however, need more than just physical aid. Displaced people will want to return to rebuild their homes and livelihoods, many of them in the very near future. They must be given a genuine choice: to return home with the necessary support – or to remain in the camps for as long as necessary. They need adequate legal and material support to do that. The affected governments should neither retain people in camps longer than necessary, nor force people to leave until they are ready. As prescribed by international refugee law, all movements of people should be voluntary, and should be carried out in safety and with dignity. Aid agencies should make sure that they are treating displaced people and their 'host communities' in proportion to their needs.

In other crises, the vulnerability and economic dislocation of displaced people and others has often increased the exploitation of minors, the trafficking of women and children, and commercial sex work (for those who have no other economic alternative). The UN must explain, within the framework of its Flash Appeal, how it will address these problems, and the likely spread of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases.

Despite the tsunami, lasting peace in Aceh and Sri Lanka remains elusive. Both governments and all warring parties must protect all those in need, and all civilians, and allow them access to the life-saving aid that many need. All parties should guarantee safe, continued access for UN agencies, and international and national NGOs, who are contributing to immediate humanitarian relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction work. Safe access should not depend on the use of armed escorts for the

delivery of aid, but rather, where needed, on immediate ceasefires. Armed escorts can compromise the independence of human agencies and are therefore to be avoided.

‘Reconstruction plus’

Reconstruction must do more than recreate the poverty that existed before the tsunami. It must aim for ‘reconstruction plus’, specifically aiming to reduce poverty, ensure environmental sustainability, and reduce vulnerability to future disasters.

Implementing this principle does not have to wait until the emergency response is over. Employing affected people immediately in building shelters and in other humanitarian work can also help them to rebuild their own livelihoods. Such cash-for-work programmes are already planned in Indonesia, and should be urgently considered in Sri Lanka and other affected countries. Good-quality humanitarian work and the beginnings of ‘reconstruction plus’ should go hand in hand. That imperative is not yet recognised in the UN Flash Appeal, which sets aside only 1.4 per cent of its total budget, for example, for rebuilding agriculture and fishing.

The livelihoods of fisherfolk, small-scale farmers, artisans, and others have all been devastated by the tsunami. Reconstruction plans must support the recovery of every affected sector and, as with humanitarian aid, scrupulously avoid discrimination. Most of the affected coastlines were home to poor fishing communities and indigenous settlements whose legal title to ownership of their land is unclear. They should now be allowed to rebuild their lives where they have lived in the past.

In Sri Lanka and the Maldives particularly, many poor people depend on tourism. Both governments, the local business community, and tour operators should immediately work to ensure that tourism recovers as swiftly as possible.

Donor governments must swiftly fund these strategies – quickly enough to avoid another problem: the gap between the short ‘emergency phase’ and the under-funded ‘reconstruction phase’. Twelve months after the earthquake that struck the Iranian city of Bam in December 2003, only five per cent of the planned new houses had been built. According to its Governor, Ali-Mohamad Rafizadeh, speaking on 11 January 2005, his town had so far received only US\$ 55 million of the US\$ 120 million that had been promised when international attention had focused on the disaster a year before.

The international response to the tsunami disaster must therefore be swift and sustained over at least five years. As with humanitarian aid, pledges for reconstruction should be honoured. Promises totalling US\$ 3.3 billion have been made, but this sum must cover humanitarian aid as well as reconstruction. The total needs are enormous. According to its government, Sri Lanka alone needs almost US\$ 3 billion for reconstruction. Governments should publish clear timetables, showing when they will distribute their aid. Aid should be given as grants, not loans, and not ‘tied’ to benefit commercial companies in donor countries – a common feature of international assistance which substantially reduces the amount of money available for the real benefit of poor people.

Equally important, aid provided in response to the tsunami should be genuinely ‘new’. It should not be recycled from previous commitments, nor taken from budgets that would otherwise be spent on humanitarian or development aid elsewhere in the world. This means that it must be funded by finance ministries, or must otherwise be genuinely additional to governments’ existing aid budgets.

Debt relief for reconstruction

Debt relief for some of the tsunami-affected countries could potentially release billions of dollars for reconstruction. This should be a vital priority, provided that all proceeds from that relief are spent on 'reconstruction plus' and for the reduction of poverty.

When the Paris Club of creditors met in Paris on 12 January 2005, they offered to freeze debt repayments from tsunami-affected countries. Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and the Seychelles indicated that they would take advantage of this offer, the terms of which should now be negotiated with each of them.

But the Paris Club failed to go beyond agreeing a temporary suspension of debt repayments. The members should commission an urgent assessment to determine what level of debt repayments is now sustainable, after the tsunami, for each of the indebted countries. This assessment must be independent and transparent.

The results of such an assessment should swiftly lead to the cancellation of debts above that sustainable level, so long as the proceeds are spent on 'reconstruction plus' and to reduce poverty, and provided that the decision and the process are transparent to both creditors and the people of the countries concerned. Such cancellations should be negotiated between each affected government and its creditors. Creditors should *not* insist, as they usually do, on conditions intended to advance economic liberalisation, such as removing measures to protect national rice production.

Trade barriers against tsunami-affected countries

The European Union and the USA should help disaster-struck countries by immediately improving access to their markets for exports that are vital to the region's economies, notably clothing and footwear. Increased exports could ensure tens of thousands of jobs, raise incomes, and generate the foreign exchange that affected countries need for essential imports and the enormous challenge of post-tsunami reconstruction.

Six days after the tsunami hit, on 1 January 2005, the Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA) came to an end. This quota system gave textiles and clothing from Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Indonesia better access to EU and US markets than that granted to exports from China and India.

The EU and USA should immediately remove tariff barriers against imports of textiles and clothing from tsunami-affected countries. To avoid unintended discrimination, such zero tariffs should probably be extended to a handful of other poor countries that are highly dependent on textile and clothing exports.

Neither the USA nor the EU has so far acted to remove trade barriers since the tsunami, although the European Trade Commissioner, Peter Mandelson, conceded on 11 January that 'there are trade measures we can use to assist rebuilding in the countries affected by the disaster, notably speeding up measures to improve their access to our markets'. The Commission announced that its officials in tsunami-hit countries were identifying businesses affected by current EU trade measures such as anti-dumping duties. 'These could', it said, 'be reviewed, with the possibility of suspending them.' Oxfam is pressing Europe to act immediately, with measures to include removing all tariffs on textiles and clothing imports from affected countries.

The EU should also immediately simplify its 'rules of origin' affecting the Maldives and other Least Developed Countries, in order to improve their access to European

markets. The Maldives should be entitled to supply clothes for the European market without paying import taxes, but the EU insists that both the fabric and the clothing must be made in the Maldives in order for goods to qualify – a condition that the Maldives, along with other countries such as Bangladesh and Cambodia, cannot meet. As a result, the Maldives have to pay duty on three-quarters of their sales.

Beyond corporate donations

Many corporations have made generous donations to tsunami appeals in a number of countries. Naturally, their corporate social responsibility in relation to the survivors of the disaster is equally important.

Transnational clothing companies, such as Wal-Mart, Next, and NIKE, source goods from Sri Lanka and Indonesia. Some might have been considering shifting their production from tsunami-affected countries to their cheaper competitors, such as China. Any decision on relocation should be deferred. On 12 January, Cooperative Retail, a major UK retailer, confirmed to Oxfam that it is 'maintaining the current status of supply to mitigate the impact of the MFA phase out'.

In response to the tsunami disaster, some US companies appear to have postponed their plans to relocate from the region. Visiting Sri Lanka on 13 January, Senator John Corzine said that US companies, which have sourced clothes and textiles worth an average of US\$ 2.5 billion from Sri Lanka since they joined the MFA in 1974, had been planning to withdraw from the country after the MFA came to end. Now, he said, because of the 'devastation of the tsunami in Sri Lanka, most of the US companies would continue doing business in Sri Lanka until further notice'.

Building on momentum

The danger is that the extraordinary flow of international generosity since 26 December will evaporate now that the tsunami no longer dominates news bulletins around the world.

There is now an opportunity for governments, building on the unprecedented momentum of the response, to make 2005 the year in which they plan effectively to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. And there is another challenge: to use the opportunity provided by the UN High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change to take major steps to protect civilians around the world from the impact of armed conflict.

Before the tsunami, these were the challenges that governments faced in the months leading up to the UN summit in New York in September 2005. The unprecedented international response to the tsunami really does show that it is only a matter of will that is preventing governments from dramatically reducing the poverty and disease that kills thirty thousand people around the world *every day* – and from protecting at least some of the innocent civilian casualties of modern war.

To meet the challenge of 2005:

- Developed governments should provide at least US\$ 50 billion in aid to the poorest countries immediately, in addition to existing aid budgets. They should set out definite timetables, formally submitted to the OECD, to contribute 0.7 per cent of their gross national product (GNP) in the form of official development aid by 2010. No developed country should be granted a permanent or semi-permanent seat on

the UN Security Council – whose composition will be hotly debated this year – before it has established its timetable.

- Creditors should ensure that the debt-relief deal for tsunami-affected governments should not be concluded at the expense of relief for other poor indebted countries. Debt repayments that total US\$ 100 million a day are a major obstacle to efforts to reduce global poverty. When they meet in early February, the G7 Finance Ministers must agree to cancel 100 per cent of the debts of the world's poorest countries, in order to enable them to meet the Millennium Development Goals. There should be greater debt relief and longer rescheduling terms for other indebted countries.
- Governments should get set to conclude the Doha Trade Round in 2006 – building on the ministerial meeting due to be held in Hong Kong in December 2005. This should deliver new trade rules which will (a) end dumping of subsidised exports from rich countries, (b) ensure that poor countries have the power to decide the pace and scale at which they open their markets, and (c) end rich countries' discrimination against the products of poor countries.
- Governments should seek to protect civilians in all humanitarian crises, by accepting their 'Responsibility to Protect' civilians everywhere, when they meet at the UN summit in September; by pressing for an international Arms Trade Treaty; and by fully funding every UN humanitarian appeal.

The response of Oxfam International

Since the tsunami first struck, staff and local partner organisations of Oxfam International have been delivering aid to hundreds of thousands of people.

Many of Oxfam's own staff in Sri Lanka had their homes and possessions destroyed, some barely escaping with their lives. But they immediately began to help others. One of our Programme Co-ordinators in Sri Lanka is Mohamed Saifullah. 'I was in Kinniya', he describes, 'when the disaster first happened. The first thing I did was organise the collection of bodies with *Kinniya Vision* [a local organisation which Oxfam has supported since 2000]. With one hundred volunteers collecting the bodies, we began the identification process. The bodies were cleaned, and the religious ceremonies were carried out. We buried 284 people. *Kinniya Vision* collected more bodies, but also the sick and injured and took them to doctors. The hospital was completely destroyed.'

In Sri Lanka, we have worked with the government and local partners to provide up to 125,000 people with essential items such as clothing, cooking utensils, hygiene kits, latrines, generators, water tanks, and temporary shelter. Over the next two years, we aim to help communities to return to their homes and rebuild their lives in the north, east, and south of the country, starting with 40,000 families in the first six months. In Indonesia, our partner organisations in Aceh have delivered food, medicines, blankets, and plastic sheeting for shelter; our own Aceh operation is now building latrines and delivering water for 23,000 people, and this number is increasing by thousands daily. In India we have provided more than 18,000 people with essential relief items like those in Sri Lanka, and we plan to reach about 300,000 people over the next 12 months, promoting public health and restoring livelihoods and local environments. In the coming weeks, we aim to deliver aid to more than 600,000 people across all the countries affected. We are committed to the long-term support of affected communities, and funds donated to Oxfam since 26 December will allow us to support them for years to come.