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## The Political Tsunami: Not all Death and Destruction is Natural

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## Chapter 6

# The Political Tsunami

### *Not All Death and Destruction Is Natural*

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The 2004 tsunami tragedy was far more complex than the simplified story of an earthquake-induced wave causing unprecedented death and destruction; it was also a story of unsustainable development and relentless war that added to the wave's death toll. As the region rebuilds, comes the story of institutional displacement of tsunami-ravaged communities. This chapter examines tsunami stories that most of the world's media did *not* tell and the environmental and social injustice that such silence nurtures.

### "Shock and Awe" in Aceh

The global humanitarian outpouring of support for victims of the 2004 Asian tsunami has surpassed all previous relief efforts in history (Deen, 2005, "Donations . . .," 2005). Grassroots efforts coalesced across the world to raise money and send aid to the nations devastated by the wave. Even the stingiest Western governments quickly yielded to public opinion and anted up billions in aid funds. We have also seen the tsunami bring out the worst in humanity. In the Aceh region, for example, where approximately two thirds of the tsunami victims lived, the government of Indonesia found the disaster immensely helpful in their brutal campaign against the Acehnese people and their movement for self-determination. The global media, for the most part, has ignored the conflict, leaving the Indonesian government free to carry on their military campaign without much international scrutiny.

Aceh is what reporters have called a "breakaway province" ("Aceh Peace Hope," 2000; Shari, 1999). Officially a part of Indonesia, the Acehnese have been fighting a military campaign for independence for 28 years; prior to that, they resisted both Japanese and Dutch occupation of their land (Budjeryn, 2005). Using the Bush administration's "War on Terror" and the recent United States invasion of Iraq as justifications, the Indonesian military invaded Aceh in May

of 2003, terming their action a “Shock and Awe” operation (Blumenthal, 2005a), complete with “embedded journalists” and the “blessing of September 11<sup>th</sup>” (Perlez, 2003, p. 11). Though the Indonesians claimed their military operation was a police action aimed at restoring order in Aceh, it quickly took on the brutal aura of an invasion, complete with F-16 bombing missions and strafing runs using low-flying American-built planes.

The Indonesian military is employing the same tactics in Aceh as they did during their brutal quarter-century occupation of the now independent nation of East Timor, where their military operations killed one third of the Timorese population. In an October 2004 report, Amnesty International (2004) documents “a disturbing pattern of grave abuses of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights” in Aceh, including a wave of “unlawful killings, torture, ill-treatment and arbitrary detention” that encompass the entire province. It also documents that under Indonesian military occupation, women and girls have routinely been subjected to rape and other forms of sexual violence. The Indonesian military often doled out such tortures in retribution when family members were suspected of involvement in the independence fight led by the Free Aceh Movement, which the Indonesians have labeled as a “terrorist organization.” Indonesian military interrogators not only tortured Acehnese prisoners—they forced the prisoners at gunpoint to torture each other.

### Silencing the Aceh Story

Why is none of the aforementioned in the news? First, there is the “embedded reporter” factor. Indonesia banned all journalists not declared “embedded” (following the U.S. model) with the military in May of 2004 (Amnesty International, 2004; Reporters Without Borders, 2005) after journalists reported on human rights violations in the province. In practice, this translates into an almost blanket ban on non-Indonesian journalists. The remaining Indonesian reporters have proven subservient to government propaganda demands, as evidenced by a statement made by Derek Manangka, News Director for Indonesia’s largest commercial television channel. Speaking at a seminar about press coverage in Aceh, Manangka explained, “We journalists should be red and white first and defend the NKRI” (Harsono, 2005). The NKRI (Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia) is the Indonesian government. The Red and White is the Indonesian flag.

There are other reasons Aceh is a “non story.” The official economy of Aceh is based on a massive Exxon/Mobil natural gas extraction project that, according to estimates on Pacifica Radio’s *Democracy Now!* (2005), has netted \$40 billion worth of the resource so far. Very little of this money has flowed into the local Acehnese economy; nearly a quarter of the children were suffering from malnutrition before Tsunami 2004 struck. This relationship explains Indonesia’s economic motivation to maintain tight control over the province, as well as the Acehnese drive for independence.

The Exxon/Mobil connection also might explain the American corporate media's reluctance to cover this remote region of the world in much the same way that it fails to cover human rights abuses in other resource-producing nations friendly to American corporate interests. Put simply, stories exposing the wrongdoings of politically connected energy corporations often rile the feathers of both advertisers (such as the oil industry) and institutional investors (who simultaneously own interests in both media and energy corporations); hence, reporters and editors low on the corporate food chain traditionally avoid such stories. As for the Bush administration: It is highly unlikely that they will have bad words to say about Indonesia, a nation that is both a "partner" in their "War on Terror" and a friendly host for their campaign contributors at Exxon/Mobil.

### Finishing the Job in Aceh

Tsunami 2004 provided a big boost to the Indonesian campaign against Aceh, killing more Acehnese than the Indonesians themselves could politically get away with, at the same time wreaking chaos upon the province and its population—including members of the Free Aceh Movement. Taking advantage of this sudden strategic gift, the Indonesian military immediately set upon the tsunami-stunned Acehnese survivors, exerting control over relief operations and using control of food and water as weapons against the independence movement.

Prior to the Tsunami, Amnesty International (2004) reported that it is difficult to document the extent of the abuses in Aceh because the Indonesians banned most foreigners (with the notable exception of Exxon/Mobil workers) and all journalists from the province. With post-tsunami relief aid, however, came the return of the international press corps. While the Indonesians ostensibly allowed the press back into Aceh to report on the Tsunami damage to "Indonesia" and the need for international aid funds, journalists also reported on witnessing Indonesian troops beating Acehnese who came to relief centers looking for food. The Indonesian military, according to those press reports, took over control of relief supply distribution, requiring identification cards from tsunami survivors, many of whose houses and belongings, including identity (ID) cards, were washed away. Indonesians interrogated Acehnese without ID cards, suspecting them of being rebels (Amnesty International, 2005b). The Indonesian military, by its own admission, killed at least 120 such suspected insurgents shortly after the tsunami struck (Budjeryn, 2005). Andreas Harsono (2005), writing for *Nieman Reports*, cited rebel leaders as claiming only 20 guerrilla fighters were among the dead—with the rest being civilians, adding that he gave more credit to the rebel version of the story.

It is no surprise that Indonesian officials ordered journalists reporting on extrajudicial killings and other human rights violations in the wake of the tsunami to leave Aceh (Reporters Without Borders, 2005), explaining to Australian journalists that, "Your duty here is to observe the disaster, not the conflict"

(Chulov, 2005a, p. 1). The Indonesians limited the remaining journalists to two cities and ordered them to keep the military apprised of their plans (Amnesty International, 2005; Reporters Without Borders, 2005). The Acehese, for their part, wanted an international presence to remain in Aceh, hoping that, with the world watching Aceh, the Indonesians would be less able to kill the Acehese with impunity. Toward this end, the Acehese rallied in the Indonesian capital of Jakarta shortly after the tsunami to demand that an international presence remain in Aceh.

Although Aceh suffered the brunt of tsunami damage, the global media for the most part provided little if any depth or context to their reporting on Aceh. Their stories tended to be generic, such as tales of hunger and homelessness. With the exception of a few media outlets, such as the Inter Press Service News Agency or the (London) *Guardian*, there was almost no reporting on how Tsunami 2004 was in effect used as a weapon against the embattled Acehese people. Without world support, the tsunami-devastated Acehese could not prevail against the Indonesians. In August 2005, eight months after the tsunami hit Aceh, the Free Aceh Movement agreed to disarm in return for limited autonomy and Indonesian cooperation in the international effort to rebuild Aceh (Huuhtanen, 2005, p. 26; Sipress, 2005, p. A8).

### Meanwhile in Sri Lanka

Since gaining independence from Great Britain in 1948, Sri Lanka has been embroiled in an ethnic conflict between the dominant Sinhalese and the minority Tamil ethnic groups. In 1979, this conflict evolved into a full-fledged war between the main Tamil militia—the Tamil Tigers—and the Sri Lankan Army. During the past quarter century, both sides have committed grave human rights violations rising to the level of terrorism, targeting large numbers of civilians. During the last 20 years, the conflict has claimed upwards of 60,000 lives (BBC, 2000; Liu, 2005; Tamil Tigers, 2005). Hence, it comes as no surprise that in the immediate aftermath of Tsunami 2004, both sides “warred” over control of post-tsunami relief efforts (Asia Africa Intelligence Wire, 2005). Given the situation in Aceh, where the Indonesian government used tsunami relief aid distribution as a tool to root out and sometimes kill suspected (usually wrongly suspected) insurgents, it is understandable why the Tamil Tigers would not want the Sri Lankans to run relief operations.

The Tamil Tigers claimed that in the weeks after the tsunami struck Sri Lanka, killing 31,000 people, the Sri Lankan government hampered the flow of relief supplies into Tamil Tiger-controlled areas (Liu, 2005). The Sri Lankan government, three weeks after the tsunami, prohibited U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan from visiting the area and assessing the situation, citing “security concerns” (Liu, 2005).

As in Aceh, the withholding of aid by the central government became a tool in its war against an insurgent movement seeking self-determination. Similarly, the international media for the most part ignored this rather ugly side story, instead choosing to focus on the happier story of a world pulling together in the aftermath of disaster. Operating in the comfort of relative obscurity, Sri Lanka effectively withheld desperately needed aid when it was most needed, gaining a military advantage over the Tamil Tigers while at the same time fueling their indignation and worsening the conflict (Bedi, 2005). Such is the power of silence.

It was not until June of 2005, a full six months after the wave devastated the Tamil homeland, that the Sri Lankan government finally agreed to share \$3 billion in international aid with a Tamil Tiger-coordinated relief effort (Bedi, 2005). Although the agreement opens the way for further communication between the Sri Lankan government and the Tigers, hopefully paving the way for eventual peace talks, it also came six months after it was desperately needed, causing the Tamil people to languish for six months despite a global outpouring of aid meant to ease their suffering.

### The Attack on Women

Women have suffered a disproportionate number of tsunami casualties, particularly in the war-torn areas of Aceh and the Tamil zones of Sri Lanka, where they died at between three or four times the rate of men (Kandaswamy, 2005; Oxfam, 2005a, 2005b). Oxfam (2005a, 2005b) has reported that there are various reasons for the high number of women's deaths. In particular, they report, women tended to stay behind to look for missing children during evacuations. Other women, home alone with children when the wave hit, were unable to hold on to both children and stationary objects such as trees, and were, hence, washed away. For cultural reasons, many women did not have the swimming or climbing skills that proved necessary for survival. In many instances, men were out fishing, where they encountered a flatter more survivable wave. In Sri Lanka, the tsunami hit at the hour women traditionally bathed in the sea. Across the region, many women were home while men were out running errands away from the sea or working in the fields—two activities that put them further from harm's way.

Those women who survived, moreover, tended to also suffer at a disproportional rate. According to Oxfam (2005a, 2005b) and other sources, women experienced sexual harassment and physical abuse in and around crowded refugee camps, those problems being particularly acute in government-supervised camps in Aceh and Sri Lanka (Amnesty International 2005a, 2005b; Inbaraj, 2005). Women have also suffered a disproportionate loss of income in post-tsunami economies, putting them at increased risk for sexual exploitation, economic dependence, and under pressure to enter early marriages.

Although there is nothing the world can do posthumously about the disproportionate number of women killed when the tsunami struck, the disproportional suffering of female survivors can be abated. But first, the world has to know that it is happening—yet another area where the global media has let survivors down. In its silence, it is complicit with allowing the conditions under which the women of Tsunami 2004 are currently being abused and exploited.

### **Not a Natural Disaster**

Differing levels of damage left in the wake of natural disasters is seldom a random natural occurrence. In the case of the Asian tsunami, damage was greatest in areas where irresponsible shoreline development impacted the environment. In the region struck by the tsunami, nature provided a double barrier of coral reefs and mangrove swamps, which have historically protected low-lying areas. The coral reefs both temper waves and provide an early warning system to people who see the huge waves break over the offshore reefs. The mangrove swamps sacrifice themselves, breaking tsunami forces as their tangled, flexible, exposed roots absorb shock waves, and larger mangroves act as a break wall (Lean, 2005; Sharma, 2005).

Over the past 50 years, however, we have seen a wholesale destruction of both coral reefs and mangrove swamps across the Indian Ocean. Coral reefs have fallen victim to pesticide and sewage runoff, deforestation-induced siltation, illegal coral mining, dynamite destruction used both in dredging channels and in fishing, and in quarrying operations where crushed coral is used in construction. Many scientists also argue that global warming is contributing to the destruction of the world's coral reefs (Adam, 2005; Lean, 2005; Sharma, 2005).

Mangroves have fallen victim to loggers, shrimp farms, and tourist developments. At the time Tsunami 2004 struck, loggers in Aceh were actively harvesting mangroves for export to Malaysia and Singapore, where they would often be processed into consumer goods for export to the West. Tourism developers have been clearing mangroves to develop beaches and, subsequently, hotels with no protection against waves. The main killer of mangroves in the Indian Ocean, however, is the shrimp industry—which is heavily financed by the World Bank. The shrimp companies destroy mangroves in order to build shrimp ponds in their place, cashing in on the world's voracious appetite for the tiny crustaceans. After two to five years, the shrimp ponds cease to be productive and are abandoned, leaving behind decimated ecosystems and toxic residue (Sharma, 2005).

Some of the worst mangrove depletion has occurred over the years in Aceh, where satellite photos show seaside shrimp farms and towns on former mangrove swamps. Hence, it is no surprise that with the mangrove swamps that traditionally absorbed such waves and shored up coastal geology gone, the tsunami devastation was so severe. By contrast, many tsunami-stricken areas that still had coral or mangrove intact suffered only minor losses of life. On Thailand's Surin Island, for example, where the coral reef is still healthy, loss of life was

minimal. The reef broke the force of the waves. People seeing the turmoil of the waves crashing above offshore coral reefs ran for safety before the waters arrived. Experts credit healthy mangrove stands in Southern India, the Malaysian island of Penang, and in Burma (Myanmar) for playing a similar role. When the tsunami waves struck, they lost their destructive power as they uprooted millions of mangroves (Lean, 2005).

In short, irresponsible use of pesticides, shrimp farming, coral mining and dynamiting, mangrove logging, and resort development is ultimately responsible for tens of thousands of tsunami deaths. These victims were written off by most of the world's media, however, as simply being victims of a "natural" disaster; in reality, many tsunami victims were actually victims of a natural event compounded by unnatural environmental destruction of natural protective environmental features that could have saved them. This destruction of mangroves and coral has been tragically underreported in the world's media the past half century, allowing special interests to quietly wreak the environmental havoc that ultimately caused so many tsunami deaths. The media's continued underreportage of this story only promises to allow this situation to worsen, leaving more coastal communities vulnerable to future tsunamis.

### Meanwhile in "the Stone Age"

One of the few inspiring stories to come out of the tsunami tragedy is that of the indigenous Great Andamanese, Jarawa, Onge, Shompen, and Sentinelese people who survived the tsunami with very little loss of life (Budjeryn, 2005; Misra, 2005). Much of the world originally feared that entire cultures living on remote islands in India's Andaman and Nicobar island chain were wiped out by the tidal waves. Hence, the global media celebrated the fact that not only did they seem very much alive, but that a naked Sentinelese man reportedly fired upon an Indian Air Force helicopter with a bow and arrow.

In covering the story for the BBC Jonathan Charles (2005) reported that the islanders had very little contact with and, by inference, understanding of the outside world—hence the arrow incident. In reality, the indigenous populations of the Andaman and Nicobar islands have had extensive contact with the outside world. These descendents of African peoples were first visited by Marco Polo who, in accordance with the racism of the times, described them as "no better than wild beasts." European slave-traders later raided the islands for slaves. Starting in the 1800s, British troops visited wholesale massacres upon the islanders. An Indian land grab in the 20th century forced most of the remaining islanders from their ancestral lands. Slavers continued to raid the islands well into the second half of that century, long after the international slave trade was thought dead. So it seems that the islanders have a much better understanding of the outside world than the BBC would suspect. And that quaint bow and arrow thing might be a bit more complex than a cutesy story about a naked savage.



Charles' report described the isolated islanders as still living in "the stone age," reporting how the islanders survived the tsunami that killed hundreds of thousands of other people living in similar low-lying environments across the Indian Ocean: "They survived the devastation by using age-old early warning systems," running "to high ground for safety after noticing changes in the behavior of birds and marine wildlife." Western tourists vacationing in the region, by contrast, stood still and videotaped each others' deaths as they watched in dumbfounded stupor as the wave approached. Other non-"stone aged" people frolicked in the presurge tidal ebb or stood transfixed on beaches watching a wall of water approach.

Scientists, the BBC reported, were "examining the possibility to see whether it [the indigenous knowledge] can be used to predict earth tremors in the future." Andaman and Nicobar islanders, like other indigenous peoples, shun contact with outsiders, fearing that such contact would lead to a loss of their traditional knowledge, essential in keeping them alive and in harmony with their environment. It was the very loss of this knowledge that contributed to the death toll among Westernized peoples in the devastated region. Although the global media reported on the remarkable survival of the islanders, their reporting lacked depth and context. In particular, they tended to ignore the natural companion story about the fatal impact of loss of indigenous culture and knowledge throughout the rest of the region.

### The Tourism Tsunami

Many coastal communities decimated by the tsunami are now bracing themselves for a second calamity, slated not to be rebuilt, but to be replaced by upscale tourist developments. Ironically, much of this development will be funded by international tsunami relief aid being diverted by regional governments to subsidize the tourism industry. In Sri Lanka, for example, the government is prohibiting residents of fishing villages from rebuilding their homes, arguing that the policy protects the former residents from future tsunamis. The policy also allows higher density tourist facilities to be built on the former sites of these fishing villages, however, effectively and transparently expropriating the valuable waterfront property while failing to mitigate any dangers. "The developing situation," according to the Sri Lankan-based Alliance for the Protection of Natural Resources and Human Rights, "is disastrous, more disastrous than the tsunami itself..." (cited in Nesiah, 2005)

The ideal of displacing poor fishing communities and replacing them with economically lucrative tourism developments throughout the region is not new. What is new, though, are the "emergency powers" regional governments have bestowed upon themselves in the wake of the tsunami. Ostensibly in the interest of "tsunami relief and reconstruction," they are now forcefully pushing previously untenable development plans onto a shell-shocked population. In the

aftermath of Tsunami 2004, the government of Sri Lanka established the Task Force to Rebuild the Nation (TAFREN), for example. Dominated by business leaders, the task force has no representatives of tsunami-affected communities, nor does it have any academics or scientists. TAFREN's utopian plan for a new post-tsunami Sri Lanka envisions large-scale commercial fisheries, high-end tourism, and an export agriculture industry all erected in place of subsistence fishing communities (Bianchi, 2005). The Sri Lankan government is also using the cover of tsunami relief to rebuild and enact a pro-corporate economic restructuring of the nation's economy, reviving, for example, unpopular plans to privatize that nation's water systems (Nesiah, 2005).

Likewise, the Indian government is using tsunami reconstruction to impose what critics call unsustainable agricultural projects on the Andaman and Nicobar islands. The Society for Andaman and Nicobar's Ecology (SANE), an environmental group based in the stricken area, argues that the Indian government, "has shown no understanding of the islands' unique and fragile ecology in rebuilding homes, schools and livelihoods," in effect laying the seeds to exacerbate damage during the region's next "natural" disaster (Acharya, 2005).

### Are Tourists Lives More Valuable?

It is clear that most of the governments in the tsunami-affected region seem to value tourism development more than they value their own indigenous ocean-side villages. Hence, it should come as no surprise that, in covering the disaster, the Western media tended to follow suit, paying more attention to the lives of tourists than to the lives of locals. In one rare exception to this rule, Jeremy Seabrook (2004) wrote in the (London) *Guardian*, "The tsunami struck resorts where westerners were on holiday. For the western media, it was clear that their lives have a different order of importance from those that died in the thousands, but have no known biography" (p. 20). Seabrook was speaking metaphorically. Of course the hundreds of thousands of Asian victims have biographies; it's just that Westerners tend not to have been acculturated to relate or respond to them. Hence, we saw the same double standard in the Western reporting about the tsunami that we see whenever natural disasters strike the Third World. There is an ad hoc exchange rate representing the larger number of Third World deaths that it takes for a disaster story to get equal coverage with a story about a disaster in a developed country.

The suffering tourist story was also easy for Western journalists to write because they did not have to travel too far to find such stories—escaping tourists were clogging the same airports and airport hotels where journalists were arriving (Nesiah, 2005). V.S. Sambandan, writing for the *Nieman Reports*, noted that coverage of the disaster lacked a "geographical spread," because "The story stopped where the road ended" (2005, p. 76). With roads usually ending where tourism development ends, journalists often failed to venture beyond these areas.

With Western media coverage focusing on tourist casualties and damaged resorts, audiences are left with a perception that exaggerates the percentage of overall damage sustained by the tourism industry, as opposed to what happened in native villages. So, it seems natural to them that, in the aftermath of the disaster, relief aid should be directed to rebuilding tourist facilities. Lost in this shuffle is any mention of how such rebuilding in effect would hit indigenous communities with a second tsunami.

### The Media Rises or Sinks to the Occasion

For the global media, Tsunami 2004 was a big sell. Television news ratings soared as viewers clamored for images of disaster (Wallenstein, 2004). The same fascination drove sales of tsunami documentaries weeks later ("Tsunami Docs Sell . . .," 2005). What was good for the media was also good for tsunami victims, as news reports jolted viewers and stirred them to offer help in the form of personal monetary donations, and the exertion of pressure on their governments to do the same (*Asia Africa Intelligence Wire*, 2005; "Disaster Reportage . . .," 2005; Johnson, 2005; Robins, 2005). *Television Week* (2005) reports that, "By acting responsibly and sensitively, the industry has served not only as a vital source of information but also as a major catalyst and leader in generating aid for those in need" ("Disaster Reportage . . .," p. 13).

Arthur Johnson, writing for *This Magazine* (2005), asks us to, "Just think of what might—or might not have happened had newspapers, news magazines, television networks, websites and blogs the world over not been seized with the horrific death toll and devastation caused by this great wave" (p. 13). The problem, however, is that reporting was mostly limited to images of disaster, with little context. The story presented here of a political tsunami—of devastation exacerbated by environmental destruction and irresponsible development, followed by culturally destructive redevelopment, has gone mostly unreported. News reports can stir people into action, and the lack of reporting, by contrast, can keep audiences ignorant of problems and in turn, apathetic and inactive. As editors around the world choose to ignore or downplay the political tsunami story, native peoples are suffering a second tsunami of forced displacement while continuing environmental destruction and irresponsible development sets the stage for the next disaster.

### The American Tsunami

Much like the Tsunami 2004, Hurricane Katrina, which submerged New Orleans in September of 2005, packed both natural and unnatural punches. In 2001, the United States Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) reported that a hurricane hitting the below-sea-level city of New Orleans was one of the three

most likely major disasters to hit the United States. In a series of investigative reports, the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* illustrated how the city's levee system, designed to protect it from flooding in the event of a hurricane, was insufficient and in need of structural maintenance and enhancement (Blumenthal, 2005b; Bunch, 2005). The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers project to shore up the levee system suffered a crippling budget cut in 2003, with officials claiming the money was diverted to pay the soaring cost of the country's invasion of Iraq and the Bush administration's tax cuts. The following year, in 2004, the Bush administration cut the funding for the levee project by 80%, bringing repairs to a halt. At the time, there was hardly any media attention paid to the issue outside of New Orleans.

When Hurricane Katrina hit, at first it looked like it would strike New Orleans with a direct hit, hurling a 30-foot-high wall of water against the 15-foot-tall levee system. The storm changed track, however, and veered to the east, decimating the cities of Biloxi and Gulfport, Mississippi. Rather than pound New Orleans, Katrina's counterclockwise winds blew offshore toward the sea, seemingly sparing the city from a devastating tidal surge. Early the next day, New Orleans residents awoke to a relatively calm morning and a more or less dry city. It seemed they had dodged the bullet. Later in the morning, however, the city began to slowly fill with water. Despite being spared from the brunt of the storm, the levee system protecting the city from a swelled Lake Pontchartrain breached. The problems were exacerbated by a federal policy that allowed the wetlands that would otherwise protect a coastal area from a storm surge, to be decimated (Blumenthal, 2005b).

When disaster struck, the death toll soared because there was no plan to evacuate 100,000 of New Orleans's poorest residents who had neither access to automobiles nor funds for gas or hotels. Many mostly African-American residents were left stranded without food, water, or medicine for up to seven days as the U.S. federal government thwarted volunteer relief efforts while failing to mount an effective effort of their own. Hundreds of people who survived the initial storm died during this period.

Perhaps the levee would have failed even if the federal government had funded the needed repairs; perhaps it would not have. We will never know. What we do know is that a political decision was made to allow New Orleans to remain vulnerable. And we know that a human-made levee system failed when confronted with a predictable force, flooding a city and killing scores of impoverished residents who were left behind with no means to evacuate. Like the 2004 Asian tsunami, many of Katrina's victims were double victims—of both natural and unnatural forces.

### Same Story?

Before the levee broke, New Orleans was almost 70% African American. Nearly half of the city's black population struggled to survive below the federal poverty

line. Many also struggled to stay in their neighborhoods as the forces of gentrification threatened to remove them. In the aftermath of the levee break and the ensuing evacuation, that struggle was lost, leaving one of the United States' most important and historic black communities displaced.

Plans are now being drawn up to rebuild this decimated city, just as the tsunami-devastated region is being rebuilt. In all likelihood, New Orleans' poorest evacuees, like the residents of the tsunami devastated area, will have little say as planners redesign their former city. "The power elite of New Orleans," according to *The Wall Street Journal's* Christopher Cooper (2005b), "insist the remade city won't simply restore the old order." Cooper goes (2005a) on to describe New Orleans before the flood as being "burdened by a teeming underclass." (2005b, p. A1). That underclass is now scattered across North America in a diaspora. It is questionable as to whether or not many of the displaced residents will have the means or the impetus to return to a new New Orleans, and it is even more unsure that the new city will welcome them or have a place for them.

Whether New Orleans' residents, like the Asian tsunami victims, will endure a second storm of displacement will depend on whether or not the media chooses to cover the political aspects of their flood. This is the ultimate agenda setting power of the media when it comes to supposedly "natural" disasters. By disseminating riveting images of devastation, it has successfully spurred us into action as we generously donate to a host of relief organizations. Whether that money is used justly or unjustly may depend, in part, on whether or not the media adequately covers not just the initial disaster, but the long-term aftermath as well. In the case of Tsunami 2004, the media was quick to congratulate itself for its role in promoting empathy and, in turn, record donations to relief organizations. With tsunami disaster relief money now funding environmentally irresponsible development and the permanent displacement of tsunami victims, it seems the media is not worthy of the self-adoration they initially bestowed upon themselves.

As this book goes to press, New Orleans' wealthiest property owners are being compensated for their losses, while renters and poorer homeowners without adequate insurance coverage are being left homeless and in financial ruins. Many of them are resigning themselves to starting new lives far from a home town they can not afford to return to. Likewise, resort owners and developers in the region devastated by the Asian tsunami are benefiting from redevelopment programs as many of the region's poorer residents are finding themselves permanently displaced from their ancestral homelands. In both cases, death and destruction was exacerbated by government policies that left New Orleans' levees weak, and Asia's mangroves and coral reefs depleted. In October of 2005, thousands died in mudslides when Hurricane Stan hit Central America, in a tragedy that was exacerbated by rampant deforestation that left topsoil vulnerable to erosion.

What we're seeing is the same story repeated over and over again, where the destruction from a plethora of natural disasters is augmented by not so natural forces leaving disempowered communities particularly vulnerable. High real estate prices and bad land-use schemes force poor people onto flood plains;

poorly constructed houses collapse as sturdier ones survive earthquakes and hurricanes; all while environmental degradation places communities in harms way. Once disaster hits, political forces often capitalize on the ensuing chaos, pushing through their own utopian plans for a brave new redeveloped world—often leaving disempowered communities out of the planning process and vulnerable to economic, social, and “natural” disasters.

Disaster coverage in the global media is traditionally devoid of depth or context, leaving a bewildered public ignorant of the complex realities behind a seemingly endless chain of catastrophes. The global media has the technology to instantaneously communicate with most of the world’s households, but the message that the media chooses to disseminate fails to serve common needs. In this media environment, the public remains nescient while mangroves and coral reefs continue to be depleted, levees lack maintenance, forests are deforested, and victims are revictimized.

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