

Making Peace When Disaster Strikes: Sri Lanka, Aceh and the 2004 Tsunami

HOWARD B. SCHAFER | DECEMBER 2011

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF DIPLOMACY

On the day after Christmas 2004, a powerful 9.0 magnitude earthquake under the Indian Ocean off of northern Sumatra sent massive waves crashing against the coastlines of countries as far away as Kenya and Madagascar. This tsunami killed or left missing some 226,000 people and displaced an estimated 1.7 million more in fourteen Asian and African countries.¹ Damage to property—infrastructure, residences, government buildings, and commercial establishments—was enormous. Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, and the Maldives were the most seriously affected. Dramatically filmed on the cameras and cell phones of local inhabitants and the many western tourists caught up in the catastrophe, the tsunami attracted instant and extensive worldwide attention and sympathetic response. Foreign governments, international agencies, and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) alike quickly undertook what became a global effort to assist local authorities to rescue and rehabilitate the victims and begin rebuilding the extensive stricken areas.

Two of the areas struck most severely by the tsunami were the northern and eastern coasts of Sri Lanka and the Aceh region of Sumatra in Indonesia. Both these areas had for years been the scene of bloody fighting between government forces and separatist insurgents. The rebellions both stemmed from the unhappiness of ethnic minorities—the Tamils of Sri Lanka and the Acehnese of Indonesia—with the treatment they received from central governments dominated by others. But the history of the two insurgencies; the record of efforts to end them by force or through negotiations; the degree of international concern about them; the role of outsiders, including aid

The contours of diplomatic engagement are changing rapidly, as are the environments in which diplomacy is crafted, honed, and practiced. New media have changed the pace and content of political awareness and provided new tools for diplomacy.

Every global issue now tests the assumptions and practices of traditional diplomacy. Non-state actors—whether benign or malign, constructive or disruptive—now play increasingly important roles in the conduct of international politics and lead us to think differently about global development, conflict, and reconciliation.

These issues, conditions, and actors are helping to refine, and perhaps redefine, what diplomacy means, how it is conducted, and how we examine the new terrain of diplomacy.

1. Statistics are drawn from the U.S. Agency for International Development, *Fact Sheet #39, Fiscal Year 2005* (Washington, DC: July 7, 2005).

donors, in seeking to resolve the disputes; the evolving political and military situation on the ground; and the constantly shifting connection between all of these factors were very different in the two tropical island nations.

This study examines the impact the catastrophic tsunami had on efforts to bring about negotiated settlements of the two insurgencies. It focuses especially on how the tsunami and its aftermath influenced the political perceptions and strategies of the contending forces, the policies of aid-giving foreign government and international organizations, and the nexus between these factors.

SRI LANKA

The tsunami hit the coast of Sri Lanka with exceptional fury. Some thirty-five thousand Sri Lankans were killed or left missing by the giant waves, and over five hundred thousand of a total population of 19.5 million were displaced. The total financial loss was estimated at about \$1.5 billion. The extent of the catastrophe was unprecedented in the history of the island nation. Fortunately, Colombo, the country's metropolis and principal seaport, was largely spared.

The areas of Sri Lanka most severely affected by the tsunami were in the country's Northern and Eastern Provinces. In December 2004, much of the Northern Province and some areas in the Eastern Province were controlled and administered by the insurgents of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE). Since 1983, the LTTE had engaged government forces in a struggle to form a separate state comprising these two provinces, which they claimed was the traditional homeland of Sri Lanka's Tamil

minority. (This civil war would go on for four and a half more years, till Sri Lanka's armed forces finally destroyed the LTTE in May 2009.) The population of the Northern Province was overwhelmingly Tamil. The Eastern Province was a roughly equal mix of Tamils, Sinhalese (who formed a majority of Sri Lanka's overall population), and Muslims, a smaller minority ethnic group. Each of these communities formed majorities in some parts of the province. The government did not have access to much of the island's eastern and northeastern coastal belt, which had suffered the most extensive damage. There, as in other parts of the country it controlled, the LTTE maintained a parallel state structure.

Actual combat in the civil war had waxed and waned over the years as cease-fires and negotiations alternated with periods marked by bitter fighting. This combat was accompanied by LTTE attacks on government targets and assassinations of political leaders and by widespread atrocities carried out by Sri Lankan military and police forces.

With assistance from the Norwegian government, the two sides negotiated a cease-fire-in-place in February 2002, and six rounds of formal peace talks facilitated by Norway began that October outside Sri Lanka. These talks were designed to determine the relationship between predominantly Tamil areas and the rest of the country. The two sides had very different, seemingly irreconcilable, views on this issue. The Norwegians also took the lead in the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission, a group of officials from Nordic countries who were tasked with overseeing the cease-fire and dealing with truce violations. Norway, the United States,

Japan, and the European Union (EU) formally co-chaired the peace process.

Despite encouragement from the Norwegian and other foreign governments, the process had stalled by the time the tsunami struck. Many feared that it would soon break down altogether. Support for the peace process had faltered on both sides. Both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE increasingly questioned its usefulness in promoting their objectives and faced internal political problems that reduced their willingness and capacity to move forward.² But although political violence and cease-fire violations rose to high levels, and the LTTE withdrew from the talks in April 2003, the agreement was still in place in December 2004. Some called this tenuous situation “no-war, no-peace.”

Sri Lanka had long been an important recipient of external economic assistance. This assistance had declined from roughly 7 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in the 1990s to 2 percent in 2001 so that the country could no longer be classified as aid dependent. In addition to

foreign countries and multilateral organizations such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), INGOs had long-standing programs in the island. These included Oxfam, CARE, Save The Children, and Doctors Without Borders. Aside from providing economic assistance and helping coordinate the aid programs of other official donors, the World Bank played an unusually active role in the effort to bring about a political settlement. Senior officials of the bank in Colombo and at the bank’s headquarters in Washington were convinced that unless the peace process was successful prospects for substantial economic and social advance would be exceedingly limited.

The initiation of the peace process in 2002 led to a major increase in international funding and a change in the priorities of the donors. The following year, the World Bank initiated a four-year program that included \$800 million in grants and interest-free loans from its International Development Association (IDA). That June, an international aid conference in Tokyo that included representatives from the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the United States, Japan, and the European Union pledged a total of \$4.5 billion over a multiyear period. The World Bank, ADB, and the Japanese were the most generous of these participants.

The Sri Lankan government participated in this conference, but the LTTE did not. The decision of the LTTE not to attend came soon after it had announced it was suspending negotiations with the government. This action was a serious setback to the peace process. But international economic assistance to LTTE-held areas, which the peace process had made pos-

2. Following parliamentary elections in early 2004, President Chandrika Kumaratunga’s People’s Alliance had formed a coalition government with the staunchly Sinhalese Buddhist leftist party, the Janata Vimukthi Perumuna (JVP), whose leaders took a very hard line against the Tamil community and the LTTE. Kumaratunga’s room for maneuver was also diminished by the prospect of the end of her presidential term in 2005 and the political ambitions of her prime minister, Mahinda Rajapaksa. (Rajapaksa succeeded her as president and adopted policies that led to the battlefield defeat of the LTTE.) On the insurgent side, the LTTE had been weakened by the defection of its leading commander in the Eastern Province, Colonel Karuna. This major setback almost certainly made the LTTE even less inclined to pursue a peace settlement.

sible, continued to flow. As before, it was funneled through front organizations the LTTE controlled.

The pledges made by international donors in the Tokyo conference were designed in important parts to provide financial incentives to peace, the so-called “peace dividend.” The conference declaration, which the Sri Lankan government helped draft, stated: “Assistance by the donor community must be closely linked to substantial and parallel progress toward fulfillment of the objectives agreed upon by the parties at Oslo,” where the accord facilitated by the Norwegians had launched the peace process. The donors interpreted this stipulation in different ways. Their acceptance of it did not mean that they had abandoned their other objectives, notably economic development and improved governance. Indeed, the more market-oriented economic policies and the greater focus on building better administrative institutions the Sri Lankan government fostered in the early 2000s made many of the foreign donors more willing to provide the enhanced funding the Tokyo conference had pledged. Jonathan Goodhand and Benedikt Korf argue that some of the more prominent international aid-givers, including the World Bank and the IMF, saw their assistance as an opportunity to help the right-of-center United National Front government then in power to implement the liberal market reforms it was promoting. The authors found that smaller donors focused on “micro-managing peace” through a set of tools such as track-two dialogue facilitation and local peace and dialogue workshops.³ But whatever

strategy different organizations adopted, and whatever priorities they assigned, the linking of economic assistance to specific political objectives in this “internationalization of the peace process” was unprecedented in the long annals of foreign aid to Sri Lanka.

In the 1990s, both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE had resisted efforts by international donors, including NGOs, to promote peace efforts. In 2003, however, the government revised this policy. The LTTE, however, did not. As Goodhand and Bart Klem found: “Dangling the carrot of aid in front of the LTTE meant little to them unless there were meaningful interim governance arrangements in place to enable them to decide how resources were used and allocated.”⁴ In the LTTE’s view, “The internationalization process [had] reduced them to a junior partner with little or no formal power.”⁵ For an organization that insisted on parity with the government, this was unacceptable.

This did not mean, however, that the LTTE

dikt Korf, eds., *Conflict and Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka: Caught in the Trap?* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 12. Writing in the same volume, Oliver Watson and Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu called this the “liberal peacebuilding” model. They maintained that for many donors, particularly smaller European ones, this simultaneous pursuit of economic and political reform alongside measures to resolve the conflict led those donors to adopt strategies “envisaging a supportive role for civil society organizations where they could build on their existing competence in the humanitarian, development, and policy fields to perform a variety of roles.” These included “supporting mechanisms to broaden societal engagement in the peace process, addressing conflict at [a] societal level, promoting bottom-up reform of governance, and building popular support for the peace process.” Ibid., p. 184.

4. Ibid.

5. Goodhand and Klem, *Aid, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, pp. 79–80.

3. Jonathan Goodhand, Jonathan Spencer, and Bene-

was excluded. Along with the flow of assistance through LTTE front organizations, the engagement between the LTTE and international donors reached levels very unusual in relations between such donors and nonstate actors. LTTE leaders were courted by many donor governments and multilateral organizations, whose senior officials regularly traveled to their headquarters. LTTE representatives were warmly welcomed abroad.

On the ground, donors were able to develop pragmatic working relationships involving the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government. During the initial stages of peace talks, when LTTE-government relations were still relatively cordial, hybrid mechanisms were evolved to ensure the delivery of international donors' humanitarian and reconstruction assistance to the northeast. But governmental and, to a lesser extent, nongovernmental donors almost certainly felt more comfortable working under the jurisdiction of the Sri Lankan authorities than of LTTE cadres. Engaging with established regimes was something they were familiar with and organized to do.

The United States was obliged to deal with the LTTE differently. In October 1997, the Clinton administration had declared it a foreign terrorist organization. This designation makes it "unlawful for a person in the United States or subject to the jurisdiction of the United States to knowingly provide material support or provide resources to such groups."⁶ At the same time, Washington accepted the LTTE as

a negotiating partner of the Sri Lankan government and supported a negotiated settlement between the two.

Under these circumstances, the United States provided all of its economic assistance to government-controlled areas. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which programmed this assistance through various private sector groups and NGOs, insisted that in mixed Sinhalese-Tamil areas its aid go to both communities. It saw this method as a way to bring about more effective interaction between the two communities and hence promote the peace process.

This designation of the LTTE as a terrorist organization had ruled out its participation in a 2003 aid donors' conference in Washington. That conference had set the stage for the donors' pledging session convened in Tokyo a few months later. Some commentators have concluded that it was this exclusion that led the LTTE to refuse to attend the Tokyo session because it had been denied the parity with the government that it demanded. But what seems more likely is that the LTTE was looking for a pretext to avoid going to Tokyo: it feared that the peace process was gaining so much momentum that the LTTE's room for maneuver would be drastically reduced.⁷

6. The list includes foreign organizations that are designated by the secretary of state in accordance with section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, as amended.

7. Teresita C. Schaffer (former U.S. ambassador to Sri Lanka), interview with author, March 2011; Jeffrey Lunstead, "United States' Role in Sri Lanka's Peace Process 2002–2006," (Colombo, Sri Lanka: The Asia Foundation), p. 36. Lunstead was U.S. ambassador to Sri Lanka at the time of the tsunami. His essay was a supplementary study to *The Sri Lanka Strategic Conflict Assessment 2005*, published by the Asia Foundation. In another study, Ambassador Lunstead recalled that there was no legal prohibition on American officials meeting with LTTE members.

The tsunami struck when the offices of many multilateral organizations, national governments, and INGO's were closed for the holiday season. This event initially slowed the mobilization of international resources. But soon "well-resourced agencies and very small ones, competent and incompetent, well-prepared and unprepared, secular and faith-based, reputable and disreputable, household names and unknown, ambitious and humble, opportunistic and committed, government and non-governmental, national and international, bilateral and multilateral, well-established and just-formed—they all turned up."⁸ Many foreign governments participated or made donations, from the richest led by the United States to the poorest, such as Mozambique, Nepal, and East Timor. Early pledges made by national governments at a United Nations (UN)-convoked meeting in Jakarta on January 6, 2005, represented by far the most impressive response ever made to a natural disaster.⁹

The decision not to meet with them was a policy decision prompted by the post 9/11 environment when, it was argued, it was "simply a political impossibility for the United States to be in direct contact with a designated terrorist organization." ("Superpowers and Small Conflicts," in *Conflict and Peacebuilding*, Goodhand, Spencer, and Korf, eds., p. 63).

8. *Joint Evaluation of the International Response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami: Synthesis Report* (Tsunami Evaluation Coalition, July 2006), p. 55. The reference is to the overall response to the tsunami, but several knowledgeable sources attest that it certainly applies to Sri Lanka.

9. See Tim Huxley, "The Tsunami and Security: Asia's 9/11," *Survival*, 47:1: 123–132. Among the prominent participants were the prime ministers of Japan and China, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, and Indian Minister of External Affairs K. Natwar Singh. Powell visited Sri Lanka on his way back to Washington. The conference was chaired by Kofi Annan, the UN secretary general. Former

According to the Consortium for Humanitarian Assistance, 348 new agencies were registered in Sri Lanka immediately after the tsunami in what some called "a donors' circus." One experienced, somewhat cynical, observer found that far more visible than foreign government relief organizations were "the vast numbers of NGOs which arrived in Sri Lanka intent on spending money.... The problem for most of them was to find ways [to spend it]."¹⁰ His favorite among the many organizations in this competitive humanitarianism was "Noah's Wish," an American NGO that assists animals in disasters. The president of Oxfam America, which had had much previous experience in providing economic assistance in Sri Lanka, complained that the surplus of good intentions led to relief agencies tripping over one another in an "anarchy of altruism" that produced waste, duplication, and frustration.¹¹ Some traditionally small organizations found themselves grap-

presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton came to Sri Lanka a month later as part of their tour of tsunami-affected countries. George W. Bush, the incumbent president, had asked them to head a private sector fund-raising effort.

10. Jock Stirrat, "Competitive Humanitarianism: Relief and the Tsunami in Sri Lanka," *Anthropology Today*, vol. 22, no. 5 (October 2006): 5. "Part of the problem," Stirrat reported, "was not just that international or foreign NGOs were under pressure to spend money but that they were under pressure to spend it in particular ways. Thus NGO representatives were only too aware of the presence of TV teams and reporters, and many organizations had their own film crews to record their activities. . . . Competition was not just a matter of getting rid of money but getting rid of it in the right way which would fit with western donors' vision of what relief should be."

11. Stephanie Strom, quoting Raymond C. Offenheiser in "Amid Good Intentions, Aid Workers Try to Bring Order to the Generosity," *New York Times*, January 3, 2005.

pling unfamiliarly with sizeable budgets.

Many of the new arrivals had no interest in linking the assistance they provided with the peace effort or the other issues that had motivated multilateral organizations and foreign governments. Their objective was solely humanitarian, and they provided their aid with no political strings attached (or even considered). The tsunami crisis also led many established government and nongovernmental donor organizations that had focused earlier on peace-making efforts to broaden their operational mandates to include reconstruction and relief work. Not surprisingly, wherever international agencies had had a pretsunami presence, the assessment of needs was more comprehensive.¹²

The level of international donations to Sri Lanka skyrocketed. During 2005, international multilateral and national government donors pledged \$3 billion, and another \$1 billion was channeled through NGOs. The military, especially the U.S. armed forces, played a significant role, but their participation was relatively short-lived. Broadly speaking, funding was allocated to countries in proportion to their need, with the lion's share going to Sri Lanka, Indonesia, India, and the Maldives, noted as the most affected countries. Of these, Sri Lanka was probably "over aided" compared to the others. Commenting sourly on the overall response of these international agencies, European Union Aid Commissioner Louis Michel called the allocation of funding a donor "beauty contest," with world leaders vying to announce spectacular aid pledges regardless of the actual needs or

capacities of affected countries.¹³

There was considerable speculation in the immediate post-tsunami period about the impact the storm would have on the peace process. Would the need to deal with the widespread destruction lead to cooperation between the government and the LTTE and hence brighten prospects for progress toward a negotiated peace? Or would problems sparked by the distribution of relief aid, especially assistance from foreign governments, multilateral organizations, and international nongovernmental organizations, stoke animosity between the two sides and set back hopes for forward movement in negotiations? Would the massive flow of aid through organizations it controlled inflate the LTTE's sense of empowerment and make it even more difficult to deal with?

The attitude of the foreign aid providers would also be important. How would they deal with the competing needs and demands of the government and the LTTE for relief for people in the areas under their respective control? Would they continue to link economic assistance to the peace process as they had in recent years? What form would such linkage take? And, more broadly, what shape would international diplomacy take in the altered circumstances of post-tsunami Sri Lanka?

The fact that the cease-fire, albeit an increasingly shaky one, was still in place in December 2004 gave aid-givers some reason to hope that they would be able to deliver short-term emergency relief to all the ethnic groups affected

12. Telford, Cosgrove, and Houghton, *Joint Evaluation of the International Response*, p. 47.

13. Ibid., p. 49, which quotes an Agence France-Presse story.

and could plan longer-term reconstruction and development programs in a more favorable environment than they had dealt with before the tsunami struck.¹⁴ The tsunami also led some of these donors to believe that efforts to link assistance—now greatly enhanced—to progress in the peace process would have better prospects for success and that the process would be energized as a result. The havoc caused by the storm and the subsequent “disaster diplomacy” would, in this upbeat view, “create space and impetus for resumed negotiations toward peace.”¹⁵

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan struck this theme when he visited Sri Lanka in early January following the Jakarta tsunami aid-giving meeting. He said that by working together in relief and reconstruction efforts, the Sri Lankan communities could instill enough confidence in each other and accelerate the peace process.¹⁶ In a 2011 exchange of correspondence with the author, U.S. Ambassador to Sri Lanka Jeffrey Lunstead recalled that at his embassy “we had no idea how [the tsunami] would impact the peace process but we *hoped* that it would allow the two sides to work together on reconstruction and build some momentum on the political side. The model was Aceh.”¹⁷ In more dramatic language, V.S. Sambandan, the Colombo correspondent of the South Indian

newspaper *The Hindu*, observed: “The killer waves [threw] up fragile hopes of a fresh beginning for a bleeding nation.”¹⁸

Initially there was considerable interethnic cooperation in response to the tsunami. People from adjacent Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim neighborhoods and villages joined together, sharing relief items and assisting one another with rescue and clean-up activities. In the north, low-level representatives of the government and the LTTE sat together in locally based Tidal Wave Task Force meetings to plan the distribution of relief aid to tsunami victims. Soldiers of the Sri Lankan army and armed LTTE cadres reportedly worked together to repair storm-damaged roads. Checkpoint commanders on both sides loosened rules to ease the flow of aid. A Norwegian aid worker who was a member of the Tidal Wave Task Force told *New York Times* correspondent David Rohde that this was the closest cooperation between the LTTE and the government since the two sides signed the 2002 cease-fire agreement. “It’s a very different atmosphere,” she said. “We all feel like we are working toward the same goal.” Rohde found the positive, spontaneous reaction to the disaster “reminiscent of the sense of unity that spread across the United States following the September 2001 terrorist attacks.”¹⁹ It proved short-lived.

In Colombo, President Chandrika Kumaratunga echoed the call of other political and religious leaders for national unity when she declared in an address to the nation that “it is not

14. See Oxfam International End of Project Report (2008), p. 17.

15. Goodhand, Spencer, and Korf, eds., *Conflict and Peacebuilding*, p. 169.

16. V.S. Sambandan, “An opportunity for Sri Lanka to come together: Annan,” *Hindu* (India), January 10, 2005.

17. Ambassador Lunstead, message to the author, April 11, 2011. Aceh is discussed below.

18. V.S. Sambandan, *Frontline*, June 18–July 1, 2005. *Frontline* is fortnightly published by *Hindu* (India).

19. David Rohde, “In Sri Lanka’s Time of Agony, a Moment of Peace,” *New York Times*, January 4, 2005.

possible to deal with a massive calamity of this magnitude separately as Sinhalese, Muslims, or Tamils.”²⁰ Foreign governments and multilaterals echoed this sentiment. The Norwegians, continuing their role as leaders in international efforts to bring peace to Sri Lanka, urged that a joint government-LTTE mechanism be set up to mobilize and manage the distribution of rehabilitation resources. The World Bank also promoted this approach.²¹ As will be seen, it took months before such a mechanism was agreed to, and it never went into operation.

Writing in *The Hindu* at about the same time that Rohde had offered his optimistic report in the *New York Times*, Sambandan was becoming less sanguine about prospects for communal harmony and a peace settlement. He warned that although there were initial steps of cooperation across the island’s political spectrum, “a true reconciliation appears as elusive as it was during previous decades.”²²

His pessimism was well taken. The hopeful, post-tsunami amity soon began to give way to renewed antagonism between the government and the LTTE. This would accelerate in the following months. But as early as January 5, senior LTTE leader S. P. Thamilselvan publicly accused the government of making “political propaganda” out of the relief effort by exaggerating the amount of aid it was sending to LTTE-controlled areas and discriminating against these regions. He declared that he was rejecting an in-

itation from President Kumaratunga to participate in a newly created, all-party task force for disaster management. An angry finger-pointing contest quickly developed between the government and the LTTE over the relief distribution issue. But whatever the facts—and each side typically offered a very different narrative—Thamilselvan’s rejection of Kumaratunga’s invitation reflected the LTTE’s continuing determination to project itself as a separate entity and a state-in-being. “Joining a national task force,” the widely respected Colombo think-tank director Paikiasoty Saravanamuttu succinctly told Jonathan Steele of *The Guardian* (U.K.), “would look as though they’d given up those pretensions.”²³ Instead, the LTTE sought to use the post-tsunami situation to win international recognition of its “virtual state” by reinforcing its ties with foreign governmental and nongovernmental aid agencies.²⁴

Amplifying Thamilselvan’s charge in an important statement later in January, Velupillai Prabhakaran, the leader of the LTTE, maintained that the government was misusing international aid and demanded that the international community ensure “equitable distribution” of aid to affected people. He wanted the government to implement relief programs in a manner

23. Jonathan Steele, “Relief effort is propaganda trick, say Tamil Tigers,” *Guardian* (U.K.), January 5, 2005. Saravanamuttu was and remains director of the Centre for Policy Alternatives.

24. Not surprisingly, the LTTE angrily denounced the Sri Lankan government’s decision not to allow visiting UN Secretary General Annan to inspect a devastated town in LTTE-controlled territory. The Sri Lankan foreign minister reportedly said that permitting such a visit would have made the LTTE look like a sovereign government. (Jehangir S. Pocha in the *Boston Globe*, January 15, 2005.)

20. Quoted in “Sri Lanka and the Tsunami,” editorial in *Hindu* (India), January 5, 2005.

21. Author’s interview with a World Bank official who was in Colombo at that time, July 2011.

22. V. S. Sambandan, “Sri Lankan parties bury the hatchet for now,” *Hindu* (India), January 2, 2005.

that would “build confidence at the national level” and “contribute to . . . peace building in future.”²⁵

The government, for its part, maintained that tsunami victims in Tamil-majority districts in the north and east largely controlled by the LTTE were receiving more assistance than those elsewhere. (Cynics, ever in abundant supply in Sri Lanka, declared that officials and LTTE cadres were conniving to siphon off government-supplied material in a profitable mutual arrangement. They alleged that this had been going on since the beginning of the insurgency.) Political parties in the south also chimed in. The United National Party, the largest opposition group, demanded greater transparency. The radical Sinhalese Buddhist Janata Vimukthi Perumuna (JVP), a member of Kumaratunga’s ruling coalition, objected to *any* role for the LTTE while at the same time seeking to enhance its own political strength by organizing well-publicized relief efforts in the affected areas.

International donors became increasingly concerned as the antagonism between the two sides heightened. Visiting Sri Lanka in late January, a Norwegian cabinet minister declared that one of the key challenges for the donors was to ensure that the “people not be held hostage” to the political situation.²⁶ Eric Solheim, Norway’s special envoy to Sri Lanka, warned

that “unless they find ways of cooperating, neither the government nor the LTTE can do any rehabilitation [in the north and east]. They need each other.”²⁷ In a report they issued in early February, the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, and the Japan Bank for International Cooperation, three of Sri Lanka’s most generous supporters, also stressed the importance of nonpoliticization and nondiscrimination in resource allocation.²⁸

Responding to such concerns, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar publicly clarified his government’s policy on the distribution of foreign tsunami assistance. “In respect of the LTTE-controlled areas,” he declared, “there will simply have to be a common effort to ensure that the funds are properly and effectively deployed. The funds themselves will come to the government and therefore it is the government’s duty to ensure that there is equitable allocation.... The policy of the government and the policy of the international donors has been that funds cannot be remitted directly to the LTTE.” Kadirgamar, a Tamil who would soon become the victim of LTTE assassins, blurred this tough position, however. He said that “a route may have to be established through which the funds come officially to the government and are given to various organizations operating in the LTTE areas.” He hoped a “working arrangement” could be put into operation soon. Although the foreign minister did

25. V.S. Sambandan, *Hindu* (India), January 23, 2005. The occasion was Prabakaran’s meeting with the visiting Norwegian foreign minister. At the meeting, Prabakaran alleged that the government was trying to tilt the balance of military power.

26. V.S. Sambandan, “Norway’s Plea,” *Hindu* (India), January 23, 2005.

27. Somini Sen Gupta, “Foes Will Need to be Friends in Rebuilding of Sri Lanka,” *New York Times*, February 2, 2005.

28. V.S. Sambandan, “Tsunami Rehabilitation: The Rebuilding Phase,” *Frontline*, vol. 22, iss. 4 (February 12–25, 2005).

not publicly say so, he was well aware that these organizations, like all others operating in LTTE-held territory, would be subordinate to the parallel government the LTTE had established there, just as aid-distributing bodies in these areas had been before the tsunami struck.²⁹

President Kumaratunga called this approach a “working arrangement for the equitable allocation and implementation of post-tsunami aid.” After months of negotiations between government and LTTE representatives that were monitored and supported by the World Bank, the United States, Japan, and to a lesser degree the European Union, it took shape as the “Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure,” better known as “P-TOMS.”

The basic idea of this joint mechanism was to involve the LTTE and parties representing the Muslim community in distributing resources and allocating projects for reconstruction in the tsunami-affected coastal areas in the north and east by giving them (especially the LTTE) very generous representation in a newly established, highly complex and cumbersome, three-tiered administrative structure that some likened to a Rube Goldberg contraption. Foreign governments and international organizations led by the World Bank would provide funding to P-TOMS, whose multiple committees would then decide how to distribute it. To permit U.S. participation, which would otherwise have been ruled out because of Washington’s designation of the LTTE as a terrorist organization, a second “window” was set up through which

funding would be directed only to non-LTTE recipients. Other international donors had no need to use this unusual special arrangement.

It took months of secret negotiations to reach agreement on the way P-TOMS would be organized and operate. While the two sides haggled and dithered, the positive impetus that the tsunami had given to peace efforts further weakened, and potential spoilers had more time to torpedo the plan.

There were many such spoilers on hand. They attacked the scheme from different directions. Hardline Sinhalese groups such as the JVP decried P-TOMS as a sellout to “terrorists” that would lead to the breakup of the country. Ignoring the obvious impossibility of the government’s doing so under current political and military circumstances, they insisted that the government alone carry out reconstruction efforts throughout the island, including in LTTE-held areas. Sinhalese opponents of P-TOMS also alleged that the scheme would extend and “formalize” LTTE control over the entire north and east, including areas then held by the government.

These Sinhalese groups saw evident political advantage for themselves in stoking nationalist and communal fires. But some members of President Kumaratunga’s own People’s Alliance were also uncomfortable with the plan. And Tamil groups that opposed the LTTE objected to P-TOMS making the LTTE the sole representative of the Tamil community.

These reactions imperiled Kumaratunga’s coalition government, which depended on the support of minor Sinhalese Buddhist parties to maintain its parliamentary majority. The

29. V.S. Sambandan, interview with Lakshman Kadirgamar, *Frontline*, vol. 22, iss. 4, (February 12–25, 2005).

JVP, the most important of them, pulled out of the coalition when the government refused to submit to its ultimatum demanding that the P-TOMS plan be scrapped. Overcoming these disruptive tactics, the government moved forward with the measure, and the LTTE signed off on it. But, significantly, neither the government nor the LTTE displayed much public enthusiasm for the agreement.

Foreign donors generally welcomed P-TOMS despite some misgivings about its feasibility.³⁰ The World Bank helped conceive and refine it, and a Norwegian official brought the document from Colombo to LTTE headquarters in the northern town of Kilinochchi to be signed. As noted, the plan included a substantial role for the international community. The Sri Lankan parties to the plan were to appoint a suitable multilateral agency (expected to be the World Bank) to act as the custodian of internationally donated funds for reconstruction. These were estimated to come to nearly \$3 billion. Foreign representatives were also to serve as observers at meetings of the mixed-member (government, LTTE, and Muslim) multilevel committees that would administer the program and dole out the funds.

But even after P-TOMS had become law, considerable concern remained about its falling

victim to a realignment of Sinhalese political forces as elections approached. Observers also speculated about the tactics the LTTE would adopt in playing the major role it was assigned in implementing the plan, given its continuing objective of establishing a separate Tamil state. Some feared that the LTTE would pocket the gains it had scored by the formalization of its role in Sri Lanka's political-administrative structure, and in this more greatly empowered position become even less interested in resuming the peace process that the international backers of P-TOMS so strongly supported.

At this point, the Sri Lankan Supreme Court unhelpfully entered the act. Replying to petitions filed by JVP members of parliament, the court stayed two key operating clauses of the P-TOMS agreement. Although the government tried to persuade the court to modify its judgments, opposition to P-TOMS quickly gained momentum among hardline Sinhalese politicians, including Buddhist monks. The LTTE, for its part, began a drumbeat of accusations against the government for alleged violence and other misdeeds committed against the Tamil community. In this darkening situation, efforts to resume peace talks failed when the two sides proved unable even to agree on a suitable place to meet.

The death knell for P-TOMS or some modified version of it was struck when Mahinda Rajapaksa, who as prime minister ranked second in Kumaratunga's government and aspired to succeed her, reached political deals with the JVP and another hardline Sinhalese party dominated by Buddhist monks that won Rajapaksa their support for his presidential candidacy. The most important of his undertakings was a

30. In an April 11, 2011, message to me, Ambassador Linstead wrote that the P-TOMS was probably unworkable because of its complexity, among other reasons, including the failure of the negotiators to include representatives of the Muslim parties in their sessions. "Nonetheless," he concluded, "it was a sincere attempt to develop a mechanism for the government of Sri Lanka, the LTTE, and the Muslims to work together on reconstruction. If it had been implemented it might have had some positive effects, but it fell victim to the changing political winds."

commitment to Sri Lanka's unitary structure, a sharp change from the support the People's Alliance had given to a federal solution to the civil war in the previous election. This was anathema to the LTTE. Rajapaksa also agreed that P-TOMS would not be activated and that no other role in Sri Lanka's political or administrative structure would be given the LTTE without a lasting solution to the "national question."

The Rajapaksa-JVP pact also stated that the 2002 cease-fire agreement "shall be reviewed and revised fully" and "completely redone" by removing clauses that were "prejudicial and harmful" to national security, "foster and nurture separatism," and were inconsistent with the Sri Lankan constitution.³¹ Recognizing that Rajapaksa would be her ruling party's candidate in the upcoming presidential election, Kumaratunga withdrew her government's request to the court for reconsideration of the P-TOMS issue.

Rajapaksa's agreements with the two hardline Sinhalese parties effectively spelled the end of any hope that the tsunami of December 2004 would foster the peace process and eventually lead to the settlement between the government and the LTTE that the international community had tried so long and hard to promote. As violence escalated and the cease-fire agreement became even more tenuous, the *New York Times* reported on the eve of the first anniversary of the tsunami: "Squabbles over aid combined with the legacy of recrimination have so worsened the conflict that Sri Lanka seems closer to war than it has at any times since the peace

process began nearly four years ago."³²

In retrospect, this grim turn of events and the renewed fighting that followed seem inevitable. Although the Kumaratunga government came close to establishing a joint mechanism for the distribution of assistance provided by foreign donors for post-tsunami reconstruction, the outside assistance that flowed into Sri Lanka in such large quantities proved in the end to be not a way of bringing the government and the LTTE together but instead a further bone of bitter contention between the contenders.

For the LTTE, delivering this greatly increased assistance to their constituents through a formally constituted body in which they had equality with the government offered a level of political empowerment that went well beyond any claim they could have realistically made before the tsunami. And, not unimportantly, this power would have been highly visible as P-TOMS representatives worked together to divide unprecedented levels of aid. It is no surprise that sensing this, the parties representing hardline Sinhalese communal sentiment aggressively pushed back.

Although the World Bank had, as so often before, played a major role in this post-tsunami phase of the peace process, neither the bank nor other major international donors could use the power that their tsunami assistance seemed to offer to prevent the eventual breakdown. They could not realistically threaten to cut off their highly publicized relief because they were dissatisfied with political developments on the ground. That would have been considered

31. V. S. Sambandan, "Conflict Within," *Frontline*, vol. 22, iss. 20 (September 24-October 7, 2005).

32. *New York Times*, December 24, 2005.

contrary to their humanitarian missions and cost them international public support. And of course many smaller, post-tsunami donors in Sri Lanka were concerned exclusively with the humanitarian aspect of assistance. They knew and cared little about the political implications of their aid.

Ultimately, the P-TOMS plan, or any scheme to provide a major role for the LTTE in aid distribution, would if implemented have almost surely soon come afoul of the different political objectives of the two sides. As the Sri Lankan scholar and commentator Jayadeva Uyangoda, a Sinhalese, has succinctly put it:

The LTTE in its approach to post-tsunami cooperation with the government continued to rely on the argument of strategic parity. The LTTE's claim that it should receive direct international assistance and that it should be recognized by the government as well as the international community as the principal actor in the post-tsunami recovery process in most parts of the Northern and Eastern Provinces was essentially based on the self-understanding of being in parity with the Sri Lankan state. On the other hand, from the point of view of the Sri Lankan government, political and humanitarian engagement in the new, post-tsunami phase with [the] LTTE required a strategic approach in which the Sri Lankan state's claims to exclusive sovereignty could have been re-established.³³

These differences could not be overcome in the months following the tsunami. In the end, as it does in most civil wars, only a victory on the battlefield would bring about a settlement.

ACEH

The province of Aceh at the northern tip of Sumatra was the land closest to the epicenter of the earthquake that triggered the December 2004 tsunami. The devastation there was overwhelming. Some one hundred fifty thousand died or were left missing, and five hundred thousand were made homeless of a total population of 4.2 million. Aside from some areas in the neighboring province of North Sumatra, which were touched much more lightly, the rest of the sprawling Indonesian archipelago was largely unaffected.

But as chance had it, it was in Aceh that the Indonesian government had for years faced its most serious armed challenge from separatist elements. So in Indonesia, as in Sri Lanka, the tsunami would spark a major effort in "disaster diplomacy." However, unlike the failed post-tsunami attempts to resolve the long struggle between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, the diplomacy between the Acehnese rebels and the government of Indonesia that followed the tidal wave succeeded in bringing about a peace settlement that survives to this day. This was a major accomplishment following years of effort to end the rebellion either on the battlefield or through negotiations.

By the time the tidal wave struck, Aceh had been roiled for decades by periodic secession-

33. Jayadeva Uyangoda, "Ethnic conflict, the state and the tsunami disaster in Sri Lanka," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 6:3 (2005): 341–352.

ist uprisings against the Indonesian central government. These revolts were sparked by the Acehnese conviction that their distinct cultural and ethnic identity, strict interpretation of Islam, and relatively late colonial subjugation by the Dutch warranted independent status for the province. They resented what they considered, with considerable justification, Jakarta's exploitation of their rich oil, natural gas, and timber resources. They despised the outsiders, largely Javanese, who had migrated to Aceh from elsewhere in the country looking for jobs—and in their view got a disproportionate number of the better ones. Many native Acehnese were unhappy with Indonesia's secular system and called for more rigorously Islamic legal and social codes. This Acehnese desire for separation was anathema to the Indonesian central government and won scant sympathy from people in other parts of the country.

Since 1976, these periodic uprisings in the province had been led by the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM: Aceh Freedom Movement). They had intensified over the years as GAM's armed insurgent forces became larger, better trained and equipped, and better funded (for some time by the Libyan government of Moammar Qaddafi).³⁴ The most recent GAM-led bid

for independence began in 1999 following a decade of often brutal repression of Acehnese rebels by the government of President Suharto (1965–1998), a staunch advocate of a strong, centralized administration for Indonesia.

Suharto's fall from power seemed to offer an opportunity for Jakarta and the Acehnese to explore the possibility of a peaceful resolution of the conflict. But although the ousted president's successors adopted measures that gave Aceh greater control of its cultural and social affairs and a more generous share of its natural resources, they failed to head off GAM's sudden reappearance in 1999 and the rapid growth in its armed strength that followed.

The revitalized militants adopted a strategy that featured assassinations of local officials and efforts to replace them with a parallel government structure. It also included harassment of Javanese migrants, economic sabotage, and attacks on schools and individual teachers, seen as unacceptably inculcating students with the official Indonesian nationalist narrative. Despite a brief cease-fire, by 2001 as many as 80 percent of Aceh's villages were reportedly under GAM control. The Indonesian government's writ no longer ran in most of the province.³⁵

As it had in suppressing earlier rebellions, Jakarta dispatched powerful military and police units to Aceh to crush the uprising. These forces, numbering an estimated fifty thousand, enjoyed considerable autonomy from the central civilian government. They operated in a virtual legal vacuum and often used harshly repressive

34. Estimates of the extent of Libyan assistance vary widely. According to Hasan diTiro, GAM's founder, an estimated five thousand GAM guerrillas were trained in Libya between 1986 and 1989. Other estimates are much lower, in the 250–2,000 range. Indonesian military intelligence claims that 583 members of GAM are "Libyan graduates." (See Kristen E. Schulze, *The Free Aceh Movement (GAM): Anatomy of a Separatist Organization* (Washington, DC: East-West Center, 2003), p. 30, and Michael Ross in *Understanding Civil War*, Paul Collier and Nicholas Sambanis, eds., (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2005), p.

43.

35. Collier and Sambanis, *Understanding Civil War*, p. 50.

measures. The GAM, too, engaged in widespread brutality. Aceh's people and economy suffered badly in the escalating conflict.

Several efforts were made to end the fighting and move toward a settlement, but after showing some initial promise they all eventually failed. As Kirsten Schulze points out, the problem was that the two sides saw the negotiations in conflicting ways: "While the Indonesian government saw this dialogue as an alternative to its previous reliance on the security approach to manage the violence in the province, GAM saw it as yet another tool in its struggle for independence."³⁶

specially important for GAM was the participation of various outsiders in the negotiations. This gave the conflict an international dimension. The dialogue process was facilitated by a Swiss-based NGO³⁷ and foreign "wise men," including retired U.S. Marine General Anthony Zinni³⁸ and former Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuan, who also became involved. Their effort was backed by the World Bank, the United States, Japan, and the European Union, which offered to provide funding for Aceh's economic rehabilitation should agreement be reached—a "peace dividend." The bank, the Americans, the Japanese, and the Europeans encouraged the negotiations and were present on

the sidelines of the talks.³⁹

GAM was pleased with this foreign role. Like many other insurgent movements, including the LTTE, it sought formal recognition by the international community, preferably as an equal of the government it was fighting. GAM saw this as a significant element in the negotiating strategy it adopted to win independence. It welcomed the seeming (or at least claimed) parity with the central government that direct bilateral negotiations with Jakarta, facilitated by foreign government, international organizations, and prominent outsiders, implied. Like the Sri Lankan government in its negotiations with the LTTE, the Indonesian government never accepted this rebel claim. In pursuing this goal, GAM leaders drew on the example of East Timor's successful 1999 bid for independence, which had enlisted the support of foreign governments and NGOs by stressing human rights abuses by Indonesian armed forces.⁴⁰

These negotiations were the most important of the moves to bring about peace in Aceh in the years following the overthrow of Suharto. They led to the signing in December 2002 of what proved to be a short-lived "Cessation of Hostilities Agreement" (COHA) between GAM and the Indonesian government, by then led by President Megawati. This "COHA" called for the storage of GAM weapons, the relocation

36. Schulze, *The Free Aceh Movement*, p. 44.

37. This was the Henry Dunant Center, which worked through its head office in Geneva and a local office in Banda Aceh, the capital of Aceh.

38. Zinni was acting unofficially. Earlier, before his retirement, he had played a significant role in important U.S. negotiations with the leaders of Pakistan.

39. Unlike the LTTE, GAM was not on Washington's list of terrorist organizations, and U.S. representatives were not precluded either by law or policy from having contact with it.

40. Some analysts, including Kirsten Schulze, argue that GAM tried to provoke such activities by the Indonesian armed forces both to win international sympathy and to solidify its support by Acehnese angered by the violence.

of Indonesian security forces and the recasting of their mission, and the establishment of peace zones. It also set up a Joint Security Committee comprising small detachments of Indonesian Army (TNI) and GAM troops who were to work alongside a comparable number of monitors drawn from Indonesia's fellow Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members Thailand and the Philippines. The committee was commanded by a highly regarded Thai general.

This hopeful phase lasted only five months. Both signatories repeatedly violated provisions of the COHA, and the small international monitoring groups proved unable to enforce the agreement. In a last-ditch effort to save it, a conference was held in Tokyo in May 2003 under World Bank auspices. The meeting was attended by GAM representatives based in exile in Sweden; those from Aceh who had been invited were prevented from coming at the last minute, probably by military authorities in the province. The U.S. and Japanese ambassadors to Indonesia attended. A senior EU official represented Brussels. The World Bank delegation was led by its senior representative in Indonesia, who played a leading role in conceiving and organizing the conference. He reiterated the bank's pledge to fund rehabilitation efforts in Aceh if the negotiations succeeded. The other foreign representatives present made similar commitments.

Despite this international diplomatic support, the Tokyo conference failed. It seems likely that Megawati saw little political gain for herself, especially since the major supporter of the effort was her rival and eventual successor as president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who

then held the position of coordinator for political and security affairs in her government. Following the breakdown of the Tokyo conference, Jakarta launched an offensive to suppress the GAM rebellion and imposed martial law. This was softened to "a state of civil emergency" in May 2004.

As on previous occasions, the fighting that followed was accompanied by widespread atrocities committed by both sides. By the eve of the tsunami in late 2004, the tide had turned in favor of the government. GAM was at its weakest since martial law had been declared and counterinsurgency operations had resumed. It could no longer operate a parallel government and was largely confined to remote areas. By many accounts, its leaders were looking for a way out.

Yudhoyono, who came to power in October 2004 following Indonesia's first direct democratic presidential election, was committed to resolve the Aceh conflict, if possible through negotiations. He and his vice president, Yusuf Kalla, quickly sought to restart the peace process by reaching out to GAM. Kalla was the prime mover in these efforts. At his behest, a team of his associates held several secret meetings with midlevel figures associated with GAM to work out a framework for a peace settlement. The negotiators mutually agreed to an informal and confidential list of terms. This initiative and the terms developed by its midlevel participants never had official sanction, either from the Yudhoyono government or the Sweden-based GAM leadership. But they were a vital element in making possible the breakthrough that led to the 2005 peace settlement.

Following the imposition of martial law, the Indonesian government had placed Aceh off limits to outsiders. Diplomats, foreign representatives of official and nongovernmental international organizations, and non-Indonesian journalists were effectively barred from entering the province, as were representatives of human rights organizations. The government was determined to prevent the world from learning firsthand about the repressive measures and human rights abuses that its forces were committing in the province. It was prepared to forgo foreign economic assistance for Aceh. (International economic assistance continued to other parts of Indonesia.)

This policy was later softened somewhat. But it remained very difficult for diplomats and other foreigners to move about on the rare occasions when they were allowed in at all. As one American diplomat assigned in Indonesia at the time recalled, "The diplomatic note [submitted to the Indonesian foreign ministry in Jakarta] requesting permission to enter required, among other things, identities of all persons said diplomat intended to visit, which the government could approve or disapprove. . . . In other words, Aceh continued to be off limits to diplomats and other foreigners except when they went through the long and iffy process of obtaining prior Government approval of travel, dates, itinerary, and persons to be met in Aceh."⁴¹

41. June 2011 message to author from a U.S. diplomat who was assigned to Indonesia at the time. The diplomat noted that the problem was exacerbated for official Americans (and presumably nonofficial ones as well), by Jakarta's negative perceptions of U.S. interests. He recalled that "our policy had long been to fully support Indonesian sovereignty and unity but to express deep concern over [President] Megawati's militarization of the conflict because of human rights concerns and, even more important, the fact

Thus GAM had limited opportunity to get out its story, at least not from within the province itself. GAM leaders headquartered in Swedish exile, GAM supporters among Acehnese expatriates in Malaysia, and Acehnese sympathetic to GAM elsewhere in Indonesia (many in Medan in North Sumatra close to Aceh) tried to make up for this by contacting foreigners. But it was not the same thing as these foreigners being on the spot in the province itself.

The only international organization that had any significant presence in Aceh in the immediate pretsunami period was the World Bank, which ran a community development effort at the village level. According to a bank official who served in Indonesia at the time, the program, which was carried on elsewhere in Indonesia as well, worked very effectively in Aceh. This may have been because decisions were reached outside the government: facilitators were chosen by villagers themselves, and these decided how to allocate the small amounts of money the bank provided. The official recalled that the government and the GAM both

that it was likely to further alienate the Acehnese and thus make eventual peaceful settlement of the conflict even more unlikely, uncertain, [and] distant. The [government of Indonesia], especially the TNI, viewed us as antagonistic on Aceh matters, with a view in the TNI, especially, but also among many other Indonesians (and within GAM) that we were 'on the side of GAM' against Indonesia. Not true, of course; we were always doing our best to be honest brokers among all sides, but that had always been the perception. And the perceptions were right in one sense—the U.S. has always been open to talking with GAM, taking its aspirations seriously; we've always had a special relationship with Aceh and the Acehnese, especially in the area of higher education, a subject of enormous importance to Acehnese."

welcomed the program. But he also noted that very few foreign representatives of the bank were directly involved in Aceh itself.⁴² One can only speculate as to why Jakarta gave the bank's project such unusual treatment. It may have reflected the important, sympathetic, and non-threatening role bank representatives in Indonesia had played over the years.

The tsunami dramatically ended this government-imposed quarantine and led to Aceh's sudden reopening to an unprecedented flow of foreigners. A massive relief and reconstruction effort was launched immediately after the tidal wave. As in Sri Lanka, a large number of international organizations hurried to the scene to help. Save The Children estimated that 650 organizations provided assistance following the disaster.⁴³ Inevitably there were problems of gaps and overlaps in the aid distributed. These overlaps no doubt reflected to an important extent the competition of the donors to fund popular, highly visible, and long-lasting projects. Inappropriate aid was another problem. Inevitably, the media seized on the more outlandish examples of unneeded items. The *Guardian* (U.K.) reported that distribution included Viagra and ski jackets; Agence France-Presse called attention to donations of Santa Claus costumes.⁴⁴

Military contingents were sent by several foreign governments, including the United States, which dispatched the aircraft carrier

Abraham Lincoln and diverted to Aceh a Marine expeditionary force bound for the Persian Gulf.⁴⁵ (The *Abraham Lincoln* was also used as a floating hostel by foreign aid workers who could not find accommodations in the largely destroyed towns.) Many foreign leaders, including Secretary of State Colin Powell, who attended the meeting of international donors held in Jakarta on January 6 also traveled to Aceh to personally inspect the damage and relief efforts there.

Aside from UN bodies and official multilateral and foreign government organizations such as the World Bank and USAID, the responders included such familiar groups as the Red Cross/Red Crescent, World Vision, Oxfam, Save the Children, CARE, and Catholic Relief/CARITAS. A host of smaller, international non-governmental organizations, as well as many Indonesian NGOs, also participated. The result, as a Relief Web report put it six months after the tsunami struck, "was a reversal of traditional roles in humanitarian operations on the ground. Normally, UN agencies and official donors provide the core relief framework and the NGOs fill in the gaps. In this recovery operation [in Aceh], the periphery has moved to the core—NGOs command resources of over two billion U.S. dollars, similar to amounts of official [international] donors and Indonesian public sources, and the NGOs have been the first to begin reconstruction efforts on the ground."⁴⁶

42. Author's phone interview with a senior World Bank official, July 2011.

43. Save The Children Report, "Two Years Later: Rebuilding Lives After the Tsunami" (London: UK: 2007).

44. Telford, Cosgrove, and Houghton, *Joint Evaluation of the International Response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami*.

45. This military involvement was relatively short-lived. Most forces left Indonesia by the March 26, 2005, deadline set by the Indonesian defense minister. (Ibid.)

46. Relief Web, "Indonesia: Rebuilding a Better Aceh and Nias—Six month report," June 25, 2005. <http://www.reliefweb.int/node/413434>.

These international relief operations operated in a confused, uncertain, and sometimes dangerous political and security environment. Immediately after the tsunami struck, GAM announced a unilateral cease-fire to facilitate relief operations. President Yudhoyono, for his part, ordered the army to “restore safety in a more defensive way.” Nonetheless, the government sent thousands of reinforcements to Aceh, and fighting soon resumed. Troops who had carried out relief operations right after the tsunami returned to combat duty. The *Washington Post* reported in late January that “military commanders insist that there is no ‘offensive operation’ underway against GAM and that any attacks are defensive, aimed at rebels who are disrupting the relief effort. The rebels say the military is trying to provoke them into reacting, but that they are under orders not to respond.”⁴⁷ Although there were some initial reports of small acts of cooperation between individuals from the government and GAM in relief efforts, these did not gain much traction and never reached the impressive levels witnessed in Sri Lanka in the early days after the tsunami struck.

Despite these and other conflicting reports of the military and political situation on the ground in post-tsunami Aceh, several points seem reasonably clear about the impact that the tidal wave had on relations between the international donor community and GAM, and what this signified for a prospective peace settlement:

Major international donors were prepared to deal with GAM and its front men. As a senior USAID official recalled, “We reached out to

GAM.”⁴⁸ These donors had no political or ideological hang-ups about doing so and concluded that the Indonesian government would not object. But they had had little, if any, previous contact with GAM on the ground in Aceh, so there was nothing they could build on to establish a new relationship that would involve GAM’s distributing relief goods to tsunami victims. And many of the hundreds of INGOs operating in Aceh following the tsunami probably never had contact with GAM and knew little about the nature of the insurrection.

The leaders of the Indonesian government in Jakarta had no problem with the involvement of international donors distributing aid through GAM. Some senior officials may even have welcomed this arrangement as a way of fostering an attitude on GAM’s part that would be conducive to progress toward a peace settlement. But many locally based military units and civil servants evidently thought otherwise. They tried to prevent donor-GAM contact and cooperation and sought to assure that relief and rehabilitation material did not fall into GAM hands.

GAM was ill-positioned to receive and distribute such assistance, however, even when it was made available to them. GAM’s forces had been trounced on the battlefield over the previous two years and were confined to fairly remote hill areas. This had spared them much of the death and destruction the tsunami wreaked on coastal settlements and the Indonesian armed forces and other government officials stationed there. But it meant that they were not present where most of the relief and rehabilitation

47. Ellen Nakashima, “Indonesia Offering ‘Olive Branch’ to Rebels,” *Washington Post*, January 28, 2005.

48. Author’s phone interview with a senior Jakarta-based USAID official, July 2011.

activities were carried out and had no organization on hand that could effectively play an assistance role.

Continuing harassment by the military and local civil officials made any GAM role in relief operations very problematic. All aid workers were required to register. The Indonesian authorities claimed this was necessary for their protection, an assertion that many on the spot questioned. Aid agencies were obliged to inform the military of all their movements. In some cases, the army insisted on escorting food deliveries to tsunami victims, very possibly to assure that it did not go to GAM leaders for redistribution. Thus, as Jason Enia convincingly argues: “The army’s presence in Aceh was based on conflicting roles: the provision of disaster relief and the simultaneous pursuit of the Acehnese guerrillas.”⁴⁹

These two roles coincided in the military’s effort to deny to the GAM any of the credit, popularity, or power that aid distribution could win for the rebel group, what the *New York Times* called “looking at relief efforts as a continuation of the war.”⁵⁰ Philippe Le Billon and Arno Waizenegger put it this way: “Indonesian military control of ‘humanitarian space’ in Aceh undermined GAM’s ability to participate in relief, with Indonesian Government forces portraying GAM as a criminal and terrorist organization in order to undermine its legitimacy, justify continued counter-insurgency and control movements by relief agencies” until a peace

settlement was reached.⁵¹

International donors did not make this a serious issue in their dealings with the Indonesian government on relief measures. Their main task, as they saw it, was working closely with the government to deal with a critical situation. International donors greatly admired the way the Yudhoyono government handled the operation. They cooperated closely with the new organization it had set up to deal with the crisis.

While major donors continued to support the peace process, they did not make their assistance conditional on progress toward a settlement. Nor, under the catastrophic circumstances, could they possibly have done so. Yet, as Le Billon and Waizenegger further argue, “Many aid organizations recognize[ed] an historical pattern of military propaganda and coercion—thereby giving GAM greater political legitimacy for its negotiations with the Indonesian government.”⁵² Smaller and newer donors, of course, were less well versed in the politics of Aceh, and their interests were exclusively humanitarian.

Despite the continued fighting on the ground, negotiations between the Indonesian government and GAM began in Finland in January 2005. These were facilitated by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, a renowned and much-respected figure in the world of international conflict resolution.

The tsunami played an important role in moving them forward. It changed further the

49. Jason Enia, “Peace in its Wake? The 2004 Tsunami and Internal Conflict in Indonesia and Sri Lanka” (Los Angeles, CA: University of Southern California, 2006).

50. *New York Times*, January 8, 2005.

51. Philippe Le Billon and Arno Waizenegger, “Peace in the wake of a disaster?: Secessionist conflicts and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami” (London, U.K.): Royal Geographic Society, 2007).

52. Ibid.

already changing political dynamics both in Jakarta and among the GAM leadership in Sweden and Aceh. The GAM leaders, whose forces had earlier been badly weakened by the successful TNI counteroffensive, were more inclined to compromise as they sought to rebuild their ravaged province and recognized the difficulty of carrying on their struggle in the new, tsunami-created physical circumstances. Indonesian leaders, who had been preparing the ground for a compromise settlement in the weeks before the tsunami, may also have been more inclined to move forward in light of the obvious suffering, the more sympathetic attitude of the broader Indonesian public to the Acehnese, and the widespread publicity that the catastrophe had received around the world.

A key breakthrough in the talks was the acceptance by GAM of a status for Aceh that fell well short of independence. But the Yudhoyono government, too, offered important concessions, which its commitment to a more democratic and decentralized Indonesia helped make possible. The result was a new political equation that gave the Acehnese greater control over their own resources and social and cultural affairs but kept them as an integral part of the Indonesian state.

The peace settlement was signed on August 15, 2005, Indonesian Independence Day. In a joint press statement, issued on July 17 that foreshadowed it, the two sides prominently mentioned the role of the tsunami in bringing about the settlement:

The Government of Indonesia and Free Aceh Movement confirm their commit-

ment to a peaceful, comprehensive and sustainable solution to the conflict in Aceh with dignity for all. The parties are committed to creating conditions within which the government of the Acehnese people can be manifested through a fair and democratic process within the unitary state and constitution of the Republic of Indonesia. *The parties are deeply convinced that only the peaceful settlement of the conflict will enable the rebuilding of Aceh after the tsunami disaster on 26 December 2004 to progress and succeed.* (Italics added.) The parties to the conflict commit themselves to building mutual confidence and trust.⁵³

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The 2004 tsunami that struck Sri Lanka and Indonesia influenced in very different ways the political strategies and mind-sets of the contending government and insurgent forces; the role of the international community in its efforts to bring about a peaceful settlement of the two civil wars; and, most important, the outcome of the peace processes in those two island nations. The most obvious of these differences was that in the months following the tsunami, efforts to develop a mechanism to distribute the massive relief and rehabilitation assistance provided by foreign donors to tsunami victims exacerbated the dispute between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE and eventually led to a resumption of the island's civil war, while in Indonesia

53. Joint statement by the Government of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), July 17, 2005. Available at <http://www.cmi.fi/?content=press&id=61>.

the storm heightened the already serious willingness of the Indonesian government and the GAM to reach a compromise settlement.

Many excellent studies, some of them cited in these pages, have sought to explain why the tsunami helped bring peace to Indonesia and failed to do so in Sri Lanka. Rather than offer yet another analysis of this intriguing question, this paper concludes by suggesting some issues that diplomats and scholars might address as they consider past efforts to make peace in times of natural disaster or contemplate undertaking fresh ones. These include the following:

- *The military and political situation on the ground when the disaster occurred and how the contenders appraise this.*
 - ◊ What do these cases tell us about the interplay between political, military, and assistance environments?
 - ◊ What can we learn about how international actors should deal with insurgent demands? What do the cases tell us about the impact of natural disasters on the willingness and ability of peacemakers and insurgents to deal with one another?
 - ◊ Under what conditions should international donors be willing to distribute disaster relief supplies through insurgent-controlled channels? How much effort should be made to encourage the national government to permit this and to ensure that subordinate bodies (police and military) make this possible with the express purpose of encouraging peace negotiations?
- *The physical and psychological impact of the disaster on these contenders and their constituencies and the attention the disaster attracted elsewhere.*
 - ◊ Have diplomats and assistance providers taken full account of the ways that communities understand their situations under such duress?
 - ◊ How does the record of peacemaking efforts before the disaster influence foreign interlocutors when disaster strikes?
- *The apparent bottom-line demands of the contending sides.*
 - ◊ Is there any evidence that these contenders might become more flexible either as a consequence of the disaster or for other reasons?
 - ◊ How should foreign actors take advantage of potential new flexibility?
- *The importance members of the international community attach to the conflict, their interest in its peaceful resolution, and their earlier roles in trying to bring about a settlement.*
 - ◊ Should the idea of a “peace dividend” be encouraged among major interlocutors such as the World Bank, major powers, and neighboring countries?
 - ◊ What is the likely impact of the enhanced flow of economic assistance on the mind-set of the insurgents, on their sense of empowerment, and on their aspirations for legitimacy?

The answers to many of these questions will obviously become clear for each crisis only with the passage of time. But the experience of the author of this paper strongly suggests that analysts seeking to understand the process of peace-making at times of natural disaster should reflect on them as they begin their studies.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Howard B. Schaffer is a retired American Foreign Service officer who spent much of his thirty-six-year career dealing with U.S. relations with South Asia. He served as ambassador to Bangladesh (1984–87), political counselor at American embassies in India (1977–79) and Pakistan (1974–77), and was twice deputy assistant secretary of state responsible for South Asian affairs. He retired from the Foreign Service in 1991 and joined ISD soon afterwards as Deputy Director and Director of Studies. He was later the Senior Counselor of the Institute from 2009 to 2011.

Institute for the Study of Diplomacy
Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service
Georgetown University
Washington, DC 20057

telephone 202-965-5735

fax 202-965-5652

Web site <http://isd.georgetown.edu>