

UN COORDINATION OF TSUNAMI AID?, II

Preparing to shift the tsunami aid programme into longer-term rehabilitation efforts in early 2005 was an even more daunting and complex task for UN coordination than the initial relief activities, as indicated by the following quotes.

"As the homeless of Aceh wondered about ... permanent shelter again, an Indonesian official declared that the government planned to rebuild the provincial capital, Banda Aceh, in the style of one of the most ostentatious cities in Asia. ...

According to rough estimates, Indonesia has received pledges of \$4 billion in foreign assistance for Aceh ... [not including private and corporate donations]. ...

'The Indonesians could rebuild Aceh twice over with the money they are receiving', said a Western diplomat ...

With so much rolling in ... the questions are beginning. How will the money be spent? Who will oversee the spending?

Western governments have ... circulated a document [to Indonesian officials on] ... lessons learned ... [from past, similar massive aid situations.] ... One of the suggestions ... [is to follow] Afghanistan, where the government set up a multidonor trust fund ... with [projects prepared] ... in keeping with international standards for procurement and financial management.

... [Indonesian NGO watchdog units] are understaffed and lack serious clout. [One has, however, established] that the government's estimate of 400,000 people living in makeshift camps is inflated ... [and is] probably less than half that. ... [UNHCR agrees with that assessment.]"

Jane Perlez, "As Aceh aid pours in, how will it be spent?", International Herald Tribune, **January 27, 2005.**]

"These days there is much talk about corruption in Asia. ...

With all the money and aid pouring into the region after the Dec. 26 tsunami, there ... are widespread fears that much of this ... more than \$7 billion in public and private pledges, will find its way into the pockets of unscrupulous people. Many are wondering if the political resolve to fight corruption is real or merely rhetorical. ...

But how easily can the Gordian knot of corruption be cut? A more realistic approach might be to talk about managing corruption rather than eradicating it entirely. ...

That would surely sound pretty worrying to the donors that have just pledged billions of dollars in aid ... to this region, where corruption of this kind is so ingrained that it is more natural than paying taxes. How much money are Western governments willing to see lost in the process of greasing palms and making up for inadequate wages in order to help the tsunami victims? ...

But it might not be too much to ask the regions' politicians to put their money where their mouths are and start thinking about realistic ways to manage the problem."

Michael Vatikiotis, "Greasing palms in Asia", International Herald Tribune, **January 27, 2005.**]

[Note: The author is the former editor of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*.]

" ... [It is estimated that only] ... 2 per cent of the \$4-5 [billion] spent on disasters by the UN and international charities goes on prevention. [An International Strategy for Disaster Reduction secretariat at the UN] is just four years old, [and] has no permanent budget and a tiny staff of 14 ...

Jan Egeland [the head of OCHA], says studies show that for every \$1 spent on disaster reduction about \$10 is saved by limiting the need for subsequent disaster relief.

...

[Yet Michael] Oxley of Tear-fund, a UK-based charity, ... accuses UN agencies of spending too much time scrapping for budgets and too little time co-ordinating their activities. ...

Optimists see signs in recent days that donor nations have put aside their suspicions of UN bureaucracy in the interests of getting an Indian Ocean [early warning] system up and running. The UN considers ... the process as a template for how international co-operation could be organized across the whole area of disaster prevention.

Yet when the next natural disaster strikes it is far from certain that the world will be any more prepared than the millions of Asians who thought tsunamis had little relevance to them."

David Pilling, "Prevention is better than a cure but the world is still unprepared for disaster", *Financial Times* (UK), **January 28, 2005**.

[Note: IO Watch believes that this lengthy article is a particularly excellent analysis of the core issues and complications involved in natural disaster aid reform.]

"While early-warning systems and international coordination are essential to limiting the impact of future disasters like the recent South Asian tsunami, they will count for little if vulnerable communities do not develop a culture of preparedness and risk reduction. ...

Beyond the grassroots level, national legal frameworks that can facilitate international assistance in cases of natural disaster need to be improved.

All too often, needed disaster response is delayed, or even obstructed, by national regulatory systems ... [including] difficulties for aid workers, problems getting relief goods through customs or permission to use telecommunications equipment.

Many governments need to be reminded of the commitments they had at the International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in December 2003 to review existing disaster management legislation and to improve its compatibility with international law and principles. They should not wait until the next earthquake or tsunami hits."

Markku Niskala, Secretary-general of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, "The next disaster", a letter in the *International Herald Tribune*, **January 29-30, 2005**.

"Experts realize that saving lives trumps all other concerns in an emergency. That's why normal purchasing practices, bidding rules and oversight are set aside in the hours and days after a crisis such as the [South Asian] tsunami. '[But when do you switch] from the emergency phase?', [says an expert] ... ' There are those who want the situation to stay as blurred as possible. You end up with a very nontransparent way of doing business.'

Jakarta has awarded emergency no-bid contracts to six state-owned construction

companies -- some tainted by mismanagement and corruption -- and [other] ...well-connected Aceh contractors [to build] ... resettlement camps for up to 100,000 refugees in 24 locations ... costing up to ... \$30 million -- most of it paid by foreign donors and none of it subject to international transparency norms.

International donors know they may have to get a lot more involved ... to make sure their aid is spent wisely and transparently. Aceh's acting governor, Azwar Abubakar, says ... he does not want to comment on rumors of corruption. 'I don't want a little money to destroy the world's empathy for us,' he says. In Aceh, however, that's an all-too-present danger."

George Wehrfritz and Joe Cochrane, "Money Pit: Reconstruction contracts in Aceh are ripe for corruption", Newsweek International, **January 31, 2005**.

"[Five weeks after the December tsunami,] ... the global outpouring of money and sympathy is only just beginning to ebb ... [But there are] ... pitfalls ahead.

The basic needs of the vast majority ... are already catered for. ...

But a [WHO mission in Aceh] ... found a glut of pain-killers and antibiotics and a shortage of soap and bandages. ... Little effort has been made to funnel aid to the most vulnerable -- orphans, widows, the elderly. ...

Meanwhile, ... the number of people unable to feed themselves continues to rise, as food stocks and savings run out and [they] ... are engulfed by the economic turmoil that has followed.

Furthermore, aid agencies seem torn between the fear that the world will soon forget about the catastrophe and the concern that the tsunami is eclipsing other equally worthy causes. This week Kofi Annan ... appointed Bill Clinton as his special representative on the relief effort, with a brief to help sustain international interest. Only a few days earlier, [the head of UNICEF] ... had called an end to fresh fund-raising for tsunami victims, while encouraging donations for children in need in 33 other countries instead."

"The rebuilding starts: Assistance has been generous: it has not always been well-spent", The Economist, **February 5th, 2005**.

"The overwhelming success of the tsunami disaster relief effort has exposed weaknesses in dealing with humanitarian crises elsewhere and reinforced calls for an improved system to deal with them.

EQUITY: 'A human life has the same value everywhere' ... [but the tsunami generosity undermines relief for millions of] ... victims of disaster and conflict elsewhere ...

DONORS: ... Most disaster-stricken nations rely on the same 10 donor nations as 20 years ago, despite spreading world prosperity ... 'We need more donors' ...

CASH IN HAND: Only \$360 [million] of the \$1 [billion] pledged for the UN's tsunami appeal has come in so far ...

TRANSPORT: One of the main bottlenecks in helping victims ... proved to be lack of ready transport to deliver aid. ... Permanent rapid response teams ...[are needed.]

COORDINATION: The UN is is generally seen as doing a good job in coordinating tsunami relief ... But inter-agency rivalry and disorganization have marred [its] work elsewhere ... including Darfur ...

[TRANSPARENCY: ACCOUNTABILITY TO VICTIMS, see next quote.]"

Frances Williams, "Tsunami relief success spurs calls for change", Financial Times (UK), **February 15, 2005**.

"TRANSPARENCY: "The UN has instituted new financial tracking procedures to increase transparency of its tsunami operations and accountability to donors, the public as well as governments. Once operational, it expects these procedures to apply to all the UN's humanitarian assistance activities.

ACCOUNTABILITY TO VICTIMS: Like all big aid operations, tsunami relief has suffered from ... "the anarchy of altruism'. Unwanted goods and volunteers pour into disaster-struck communities, hampering aid efforts and often trampling over cultural and religious sensitivities.

Stopping this is difficult. But most donor governments and the UN now try to work through agencies that have signed an international code of conduct on aid."

Frances Williams, "Tsunami relief success spurs calls for change", Financial Times (UK), **February 15, 2005**.

" ... Across Thailand's tsunami-battered yet still stunning Andaman coast, ... battles are taking shape between villagers, who lost homes and loved ones and wealthy, well-connected land developers who see this as the ideal moment to assert control over gorgeous beaches that could lure millions of tourists.

'This is a booming area with sky-rocketing prices -- the new frontier of boutique resorts' [says a visiting Thai senator.] 'Those who want to make a windfall profit see the opportunity to get rid of local communities.'

Thailand's complicated land law seems made to fuel disputes. The law recognizes various degrees of property rights ...

Even villagers with strong legal claims may be unaware of or unable to assert their rights, legal experts say.

'The mentality of the civil servants is that, to attract tourists, we have to chase local people away' says [another senator]. 'They think that people want sand, sea and sun but no small huts and no small boats.'

'We asked the officials: Where can we go, this is our place' [a fisherman said. An official] replied 'I have no idea.'"

Amy Kazmin with Panwadee Uraisin, "After tsunamis come speculators with eyes on Thai coastal land", Financial Times (UK), **February 19-20, 2005**.

"Much has been done to improve accountability [for humanitarian disaster aid] in the last several years by relief groups and large organizations like the World Bank. Now the United Nations -- itself under pressure in the oil-for-food scandal -- is setting the pace for innovative changes to combat fraud ...

The UN ... has brought in the accounting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers to upgrade its online system to track donations and monitor for fraud. ...

[Among recent donor changes,] most aid no longer goes directly to governments, in part because it ...[often] ended up in Swiss bank accounts controlled by dictators.

Now donors funnel their aid through UN agencies and nonprofit groups, or put it in trust funds administered by the World Bank and [UNDP] ...

Large-scale disaster programs ... [often involve confusion, over-extended aid workers and many corruption opportunities.]

The accounting firm of Ernst & Ernst is advising the Indonesian government, which ranked as the fifth most corrupt in the world, according to Transparency International ... [whose spokesman said] "I think it is very helpful that all of these groups have been willingly to publicly state the risk of corruption, but there are still real challenges out there ..."

Elizabeth Becker and Stephanie Strom, "Aid groups pledge close watch on tsunami funds", International Herald Tribune, **February 26-27, 2005**.

"More than two months after the deadly tsunami that hit the coasts of South and Southeast Asia, much of the region has moved on, and it is left to former American presidents and Hollywood stars to remind us that charity is still needed to address the lingering suffering and displacement of the survivors. ...

The tsunami surely teaches us that ... a warning system is needed to alert the millions of people who live along the region's coastlines. ...

Thailand's proposal for a regional tsunami warning center was shot down in flames by some of Thailand's neighbors who had axes to grind with Bangkok in other areas. Researchers say that only a few minutes' warning could have saved thousands of lives, and it isn't clear that the compromise of a series of connected regional warning centers will do the trick.

After the 1997 financial crisis ... [policy makers thought] long and hard about ways to prevent another one -- and actually implement policies to that effect. Sadly, it is probably too much to expect most governments to think as hard about the safety and welfare of their people as they do about the security of their bank deposits."

Michael Vatikiotis, "'A swift recovery obscures the tsunami's lessons", International Herald Tribune, **March 1, 2005**.

"Indonesia is considering asking the UNHCR to leave Aceh by the end of this month, saying the United Nations refugee agency may have outlived its usefulness and may be straying outside its mandate in the tsunami-stricken province.

Indonesia has long restricted access by foreigners to Aceh, the site of a decades-old separatist conflict that has generated allegations of human rights abuses by both security forces and rebels. ...

The UNHCR's response in Aceh had been unusual [said spokesman Robert Ashe,] ... because it involved a natural disaster zone, something the body was usually not involved in.

But the agency had been planning to stay until at least the end of the year to help reconstruction efforts, having raised almost \$60 [million] from donor countries to fund the rebuilding of communities.

Mr. Ashe said all of that was now on hold. 'Clearly we have to clarify what the future of our operation is in Aceh', he said."

Shawn Donnan, "Jakarta threat to UN agency's role in Aceh", Financial Times (UK), **March 6, 2005**.

"... [In] a stampede ... as chaotic as it is unprecedented ... [and] fueled by more than \$6.3 [billion] in global donations for tsunami relief, more than 250 local and international aid groups have set up shop in Aceh, many of them groups born out of the disaster itself. ...

Aid workers say the influx has complicated the delivery of help. But they also worry it has made it easy for Indonesia to start expelling groups it does not like from Aceh, which was closed to foreigners before the disaster because of a long-running separatist conflict. ...

The process has already led to threats that ... [UNHCR], which has planned reconstruction projects, may be asked to leave Aceh in large part.

Aid workers say this is because of a fraught history between Jakarta and the UN refugee agency that dates to 1999 and a UN-organized referendum that led to East

Timor's independence.

The rush into Aceh has yielded peculiar scenes in the conservative Muslim province, with Scientologists, evangelical Christian groups and yoga sects in some cases competing indirectly to help tsunami victims. But it has also contributed to aid groups sometimes working at cross-purposes."

Shawn Donnan, "Stampede of aid to Aceh leaves confusion on the ground", Financial Times (UK), **March 15, 2005**.

"The international response to the Indian Ocean tsunami has been prompt and generous ... but in general Asian countries have a long way to go in becoming significant providers of humanitarian assistance in the region, not to mention in the international community at large. ...

Until now, Asia has resisted the concept of humanitarian intervention, which has been adopted by Western and African regional groupings. Yet humanitarian assistance and cooperative action in coping with complex emergencies can serve as a new rallying point for Asian regional groups.

The tsunami clearly underscores the need for more focused mechanisms to deal with humanitarian emergencies in the region. The regional tsunami warning system is one such initiative. But regional organizations, in cooperation with international agencies, should also acquire expertise in disaster prevention and management.

There is an urgent need for a regional coordination center for humanitarian aid. ... Asian states could undertake training toward greater coordination of relief efforts, including earmarking necessary resources and joint training of civilians and military forces before disaster strikes.

A regional disaster management fund could also be explored. And civil society in Asia should develop mechanisms and institutions for transnational humanitarian assistance. ..."

Amitav Acharya, "Asia needs better ways to protect its people", International Herald Tribune, **March 16, 2005**.

In addition to these evolving developments, however, articles in April and June 2005 provided a very disturbing picture of a stalled programme in Aceh, Indonesia, months after the tsunami occurred. Though thousands of corpses have been cleared away, and looters have cleaned out the ruins, there is little sign of repairs and of the billions of dollars of assistance donated from around the world.

"The only thing we've gotten is small packets of food and supplies', says a shopkeeper. 'Where the money is, we don't know. It's just meetings, meetings, meetings.' ...

Last week, Indonesia's state auditing agency said it was having difficulty accounting for portions of more than \$4 billion it has received so far ...

As the months have passed, government action has been delayed. [A draft plan] ... is a daunting thing; it comes in twelve volumes. ...

The government faces a huge and complex task. It .. must rebuild ... entire economic and social environments.

But none of this seems to explain the silence of the barren city landscape ... [and] many fishing villages have simply disappeared. ...

As recovery inches forward ... it will encounter conflicts over inheritance and land ownership, bureaucratic inefficiency, competition among aid groups and among

government departments and, with so much money flooding in, the possibility of corruption on a gigantic scale. ...

Torn by unending war and political repression, battered by a natural disaster that may strike again, paralyzed by a reconstruction effort that just cannot seem to get started, Aceh today is not a place of hope."

Seth Mydans, "Months after disaster, smashed Indonesian city is still a ghost town: Paralyzed by a reconstruction effort that has yet to get off the ground", International Herald Tribune, **April 6, 2005**.

"When the people [in Aceh, Indonesia] rebuild homes on their old foundations, they will live among a checker-board of empty lots left behind by those who died in the tsunami six months ago ...

By the latest count, at least 127,000 people are dead, 30,066 are missing, and half a million have been displaced ...

It is difficult to build a new life when homes and public services have not begun to be put in place. ...

[An Indonesian official] was shocked at what he found here. ... [He said] 'When it comes to reconstruction -- zero.' ...

The billions of dollars of aid funds ... [received are caught in a budget process and won't be available] until at least September. ...

[A UN official] said that all the elements of reconstruction have been put in place. ...

But for the people who live here, it can be hard to understand ...

[Azwar Hasan, head of a local group helping displaced people, said] ... 'I'm thinking, 'Oh my God, people are coming here for needs assessments again and again ... They are getting lost in their blueprint. Everyone is talking about tomorrow. When are they going to do something?'"

Seth Mydans, "In Aceh, empty spaces won't be filled soon: 6 months after tsunami, little progress", International Herald Tribune, **June 25-26, 2005**.

Even the awesome and tragic Indian Ocean tsunami disaster will soon slip almost entirely out of the bright spotlight of the international media. But the multi-billion dollar relief and reconstruction programmes must go on, and the UN certainly has its co-ordination work, and management accountability tasks, cut out for it, as the recent quotes above demonstrate. As in other major areas of UN operations, IO Watch will continue to follow this evolving story.