



**F**or the second year in a row, December comes to a close with a dramatic reminder of the precariousness of daily life in the developing world -- and the continuing failure of the international community to provide adequate early warning systems, pre-crisis funding, and rapid, effective global relief for the victims of so-called "natural disasters" -- most of which are actually quite predictable, at least in the aggregate.

On December 26, 2004, it was the 9.0<sub>RS</sub> earthquake off the western coast of northern Sumatra, Indonesia's second largest island, the [fifth largest earthquake](#) recorded since 1900.

One year ago to the day, on December 26, 2003, the disaster in question was the 6.6<sub>RS</sub> earthquake that devastated [the city of Bam](#) in southeast Iran, at a cost of 26,500 lives, 25,000 injured and 80,000 homeless.

The death toll from this year's Sumatra quake is likely to [exceed 150,000](#), with thousands of people still missing, several hundred thousand who have been seriously injured, and more than five million -- most of whom were impoverished to begin with -- who are suffering from thirst, hunger, homelessness, lost employment, and the threat of mass epidemics.

Moreover, as we were reminded in Bam, among the worst consequences of such catastrophic events are the long-term traumas associated with losing friends, family, fellow citizens, livelihoods, communities, and whole ways of life.

As usual, most media coverage of the Sumatra tsunami has so far focused on its dire human consequences and the massive relief effort that has followed.

That is to be expected. But before our attention span drifts off to some other Third World calamity, it may be helpful to step back and examine some of the **systematic factors** that have contributed to the high costs of such mishaps over and over again – and the costs of this Sumatran “natural disaster” in particular.

Our overall theme is that there really is no such thing as a “natural disaster” per se. This is not to say that man-made forces were somehow responsible for last Saturday’s tsunami. Rather, as discussed below, we will argue that the degree to which any such natural event creates a social and economic “disaster” is often greatly under our control. And in the case of this particular tsunami, its catastrophic costs:

1. Were foreseeable, at least in a “sometime soon” sense, based on both long-term and recent experience with tsunamis in the Indonesian arena;
2. Were actually foreseen by several geological experts, some of whom have been advocating (unsuccessfully) for an Indian Ocean tsunami early warning system for years;
3. Could have been substantially mitigated if US, Japanese, and other scientists around the globe who monitor elaborate earthquake- and tsunami-warning systems, and had ample warning of this event, had simply shown a reasonable degree of concern, imagination, and initiative;
4. Might have been avoided entirely with a relatively modest investment in tsunami “early warning systems” for Indonesia and the Indian Ocean.

Furthermore, the global response to this horrific disaster has been long on the size of country aid pledges, dignitary press conferences, and “oh – the horror” press coverage.

It has been conspicuously short on actual aid getting through to the front lines. Today, almost a week after the disaster, aid efforts may be well-funded, but they remain sluggish, [disorganized](#), and ineffective, with at least as many additional lives in jeopardy right now for want of aid as perished in the original waves.

This is partly explained by the sheer logistics of getting aid through to remote, flooded regions like northern Sumatra. But, as explained below, it is also due to political factors, and the fact that the world community still runs humanitarian relief like a “pick-up” softball game.

Fortunately, this particular crisis seems to have captured the attention of the world's donor community. At this point, with more than **\$2 billion** in aid pledged by governments, multilateral institutions, and more than 50 private relief agencies, the real problem is not money, but organization.

Indeed, we may now want to demand that the UN, the US Government, the EU, and all these relief organizations get their acts together, and establish a permanent, well-run, well-funded global relief organization that can move more quickly the next time around.

Along the way, they should also pay far more attention to **preventive systems** that can help save the future victims of such disasters, before all the relief becomes necessary.



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