



So far, the Boxing Day 2004 Sumatra tsunami is still not quite the most destructive earthquake-related disaster in history – but this may soon change. Until now the casualty records have been held by the 7.8 Richter scale earthquake that leveled Tangshan, China, in July 1976, and took at least [244,000 lives](#), and by the 1556 earthquake in China’s Shanxi province that claimed [830,000](#).

However, the Sumatran quake has already resulted in more than 150,000 deaths, including [94,081 confirmed dead](#) in Indonesia, [nearly 9000 dead or missing](#) in Thailand, [15160 in India](#), (with [up to 20,000 more](#) in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands), [44,000](#) in Sri Lanka, and [396](#) in Tanzania, Somalia, the Seychelles, Madagascar, the Maldives, Burma, Malaysia, and Bangladesh. And the latest reports from UN observers in the region indicate that [even these high death tolls may grow “exponentially.”](#)

The Sumatra earthquake’s purely economic impact is expected to be [relatively slight](#), since most of its victims were indigenous poor people in remote areas, and the region’s tourist industry will quickly recover. Japan’s 1995 Kobe earthquake, in contrast, caused [more than \\$100 billion of property damage](#).

However, in terms of lives lost, injuries, displaced people, and damage caused [beyond the boundaries](#) of the country where the earthquake originated, the Sumatra tsunami is already clearly a record-setter. While other tsunamis have had cross-border impacts, this one has already taken more lives in more countries than all the other tsunamis since 1800.

In other words, this was one of the most profound ***transnational disasters*** ever. It is therefore not surprising that it has already commanded a record response from the world's aid donors, as we will see below – at least on paper.

For the moment, at least, the developing world may have finally succeeded in capturing the First World's attention, if by nothing more than by the sheer power of its own suffering. Perhaps we will now finally come to understand that **both the relief and the prevention of such disasters are appropriate global responsibilities.**

We may also wish to reserve some of our benevolence and good will for the victims of **more "routine" Third World perils** -- for example, the two million children who die from drinking dirty water each year, the 1.6 million people who still die each year from tuberculosis, and the 1.2 million who die from malaria. These **continuing disasters** may not be as dramatic, sudden, and visible as tsunamis and earthquakes, but they are just as deserving of our concern.

TO THE RESCUE?

A*près le fait*, the world community has mounted a huge relief effort to provide clean drinking water, food, medicine, energy, medical care, and temporary shelter for 5 million displaced people.

The most rapid progress has been made on fund-raising. In one week, 45 governments and international institutions **pledged more than \$3.2 billion** in humanitarian aid, more than the world spent on all such disasters from 2002 on. The official government pledges so far have included an incredible [\\$680 million from Germany](#), [\\$500 million from Japan](#) (\$3.91 per capita), [\\$350 million from the US](#) (\$1.19 per capita), \$182 million from Norway (\$39.13 per capita), \$96 million from the UK (\$1.59 per capita), \$250 million from the World Bank, \$76 million from Sweden (\$8.39 per capita), \$76 million from Denmark (\$14 per capita), \$309 million from other EU member countries (\$1.02 per capita), \$66 million from Canada (\$2.06 per capita), \$60 million apiece from Australia (\$3 per capita) and China (5 cents per capita), and \$50 million from South Korea. Somewhat less generously, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have contributed \$10 million each, South Korea \$50 million, New Zealand \$3.6 million, Singapore \$3 million, Venezuela, Libya, Tunisia, and UAE \$2 million, Turkey \$1.25 million and Mexico \$100,000.

Furthermore, there are also [discussions underway](#) among G-8 countries to provide debt relief Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and the other victim countries, which

might yield another \$3 billion a year -- so long as these countries agreed to spend it on aid for tsunami victims.

Three days after the quake, President Bush had promised just \$35 million. As [several observers](#) noted, that was just 12 cents per capita, less than 10 percent of Canada's per capita effort. As Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy said, "We spend \$35 million before breakfast in Iraq."

Furthermore, in 2004, the US Congress provided **\$13.6 billion** to Florida's hurricane victims, 5.6 times more than the \$2.4 billion that the US spent on *all global humanitarian assistance* that year.

Colin Powell quickly rebuked the critics in public, reminding them that the \$2.4 billion amounted to 40 percent of the entire world's budget for humanitarian relief in 2004. Apparently he also quietly lobbied the President to increase the official US aid package.

Meanwhile, in addition to the pledges of official government aid, more than [fifty private relief agencies](#) have also pitched in. The American Red Cross alone reports that it has already received [\\$79 million](#) in private aid pledges for tsunami victims, while CARE US has received [\\$3.5 million](#), Doctors Without Borders \$4 million, Save the Children \$3 million, Americares \$2 million, Oxfam US \$1.6 million, Catholic Charities \$1.1 million, and World Vision \$1 million.

Private donors from European countries have also been exceptionally generous. For example, [Swedes' 9 million people have contributed](#) more than \$60 million, in addition to the \$76 million their government had offered – a total of \$15 per capita. And Norway's 4.6 million people have raised nearly \$33 million of private money, in addition to their government's \$180 million – **a global record of \$46 per capita** just for Sumatran tsunami victim relief.

THE PAPER THEY'RE PRINTED ON?

Unfortunately, the historical record shows that **such official disaster aid pledges are cheap** -- they often do not result in "new money," and many countries actually renege on their official pledges completely.

For example, in the case of Iran's [Bam earthquake](#) in December 2003, 40 donor countries also responded to a similar **"UN flash appeal,"** pledging \$1.1 billion of aid. However, one year later, [less than 2 percent](#) (\$17.5 million) of that [was forthcoming](#). Most of the foreign aid workers and journalists came and went in less than a month, and Bam's reconstruction problems have long since disappeared from the headlines. While significant progress has been made in

restoring basic services like water and electricity, most of the city's 100,000 former residents are still unemployed and living in tents.

[Similar renegeing](#) by the world community has also been the pattern in most other recent disasters, including Mozambique's 2000 floods, Central America's Hurricane Mitch in 1998, and similar crises in Somalia, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh.

It will be interesting to see whether the victims of the Sumatran tsunami experience similar donor fatigue. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has already predicted that recovering from the tsunami will take some countries a decade.

ANOTHER AD HOC RELIEF EFFORT

The outpouring of all this assistance for the tsunami's victims on short notice has been impressive. But perhaps we should not be so proud of ourselves. The reality is that aid for the tsunami victims has organized like another ad hoc "aid pick-up-game," where the world waits until there is already a life-and-death crisis and millions in peril to swing into action, raise money, and move aid to the frontiers of need.

This reactive approach has many unfortunate side-effects:

- ✎ Each time there is a crisis, world aid organizations have to scramble to pass the hat, *even as* they are also scrambling to deliver assistance.
- ✎ The actual delivery of relief on the front lines is much slower than it needs to be.

As usual, in the case of the Sumatra tsunami, most of the victims are located in remote areas with poor transportation systems, water systems, and many other problems. Several key regions – in this case Indonesia's Aceh province, Sri Lanka's eastern regions, and Somalia – also have active guerilla movements and local warlords. Some countries -- India, in this case – have also insisted that they don't need any foreign assistance, showing that they care more about national pride than helping their own people.

However, when it comes to disaster relief, all these problems were par for the course, and predictable. Yet, inexcusably, the world community continues to organize every new massive relief effort from scratch.

One result is that in most of the affected countries, it has taken more than a week to get medical aid and substantial quantities of food, blankets, and clean water – to the victims. In a situation where hundreds of thousands are injured

and each incremental day costs hundreds of lives, only [Finland and Norway had relief planes in the air by Tuesday December 28](#), two days after the disaster. Most aid donors needed a whole week.

- ✎ Given the semi-voluntary nature of the relief process, national interests, domestic politics and media exposure play an excessive role in deciding how much aid is given, who manages the assistance, and how much goes to any particular crisis – as compared with raw human need.
- ✎ Another result was last week’s unseemly spectacle, where donors like the US, the UK, and Japan conducted a veritable public auction for their aid pledges. The results may have little to do with actual aid requirements. We can only hope that this time around the pledges will be honored.
- ✎ There is a tendency for global aid efforts to be limited by the media attention span – as Bam’s victims, the residents of Sudan’s Dafur region, and the veterans of many earlier disasters have learned the hard way. When the number of “new bodies” tapers off, so does the attention – and the aid.

THE NEEDS FOR A GLOBAL AID ORGANIZATION

If global humanitarian aid were run on a more business-like basis,

- ✎ There would be ample global “reserves” set aside for such emergencies – like a self-insurance pool. This could be funded by a global tax in proportion to objective measures of donor capacity like population size and wealth.
- ✎ In case of an actual calamity, we would not try to assemble “aid brigades” on short notice from dozens of different organizations all over the globe and expect them to work well together under impossible conditions. There would be already be a global organization in place, ready to respond rapidly, with coordination agreements and contingency plans already worked out with local governments.

This organization would also have basic stocks of transportation equipment and relief supplies pre-positioned in key regions. After all, the US military alone now has [890 bases](#) around the world that are on ready-alert, prepared to fight wars at a moment’s notice. The world community has zero “aid bases,” prepared to fight to save human lives at a moment’s notice.

Given the increasingly global nature of so-called “natural” disasters, the current approach to global humanitarian relief is no substitute for a permanent, well-funded, global aid organization.



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