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Full Text:

26 December 2005 represents the second anniversary of the Bam earthquake and the first anniversary of the Indian Ocean tsunamis. In addition to remembering the dead and recognising the living's current state, we should also look to the future to see what should change to avoid repetition of such disasters. Are the lessons from them being applied in order to think ahead of disaster before the next time happens?

The Kashmir earthquake killed approximately three times as many people as the Bam earthquake. Many of the same pre-disaster and post-disaster mistakes were evident, from lack of easy mitigation to transitional shelter. Perhaps we have not learned or perhaps we do not wish to learn.

Yet there were positives. Whereas the Bam earthquake appears to have done little for lessening tensions around Iran's diplomacy, India and Pakistan took significant post-earthquake diplomatic steps in Kashmir, despite ongoing militancy. We shall see whether or not these steps last. As well, Pakistan postponed an order of fighter jets to focus on the earthquake disaster--although the country has just received delivery of two F-16s. It is also unclear why Pakistan would not spend the same amount of money on disaster risk reduction and sustainability as on the military, including the fighters and nuclear weapons.

Meanwhile, the Indian Ocean tsunami warning system, repeatedly requested in the years before the tsunamis, has progressed--and has been linked to other hazards to some extent. Overall, the long-term nature of early warning systems has been somewhat acknowledged and they are high on the international political agenda. Unfortunately, Hurricane Katrina illustrated how many people still believe that issuing a forecast and/or warning equates to a complete warning system. Plus, despite many political leaders being lambasted for not appreciating the extent of the tsunami catastrophe when it was evident to anyone watching the news, the White House failed to recognise the Katrina calamity until forced to do so.

More positively, as part of the evolving canvas of disaster risk reduction, setting aside portions of humanitarian aid budgets for proactive mitigation is increasingly acceptable. Regarding response, the UN has approved a new fund to immediately provide money for humanitarian emergencies, rather than having to await event-specific donations.

In contrast, the American House of Representatives sent to the Senate a budget which increases defence spending by approximately the same amount as it decreases health and education programmes. That will kill more people than Katrina. Some of that defence increase, however, appears to be related to Hurricane Katrina and bird flu. Perhaps, then, the increase is reasonable, although it begs the questions "why is that under defence?" and "what does that say about the paradigms adopted for these disaster issues?". Furthermore, while fervently preaching fiscal and moral responsibility to other countries (including through the IMF), the U.S.A. in the previous five years has creatively transformed a \$200+ billion budget surplus into a \$300+ billion budget deficit. What disasters will that create?

The U.S.A. and Pakistan epitomise trends in other countries. Assuming that the criticism applies only to those countries would be unfair. We have plenty of examples of what has gone wrong in the past few years. Are there any more examples of what has gone right? As we mark the anniversaries of appalling events which should not have happened, who has used them to think ahead of disaster?

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