

the appropriate degree of bi-lateral and multi-lateral operability, particularly as far as navies are concerned. Granted, that providing humanitarian assistance is not the primary role of any navy, but in keeping with the flexibility that is inherent to the silent service the world over, the induction of landing ships and the 'gator' navy in affordable numbers can be a first step. Greater emphasis on oceanographic and meteorological co-operation is yet another area that lends itself to multi-lateral effort where the existing asymmetries can be meaningfully complemented and redressed. However, the anomaly that remains is that while global consciousness is jolted, howsoever momentarily when a tsunami strikes one part of the world and 200,000 lives are lost, the continuing deaths of millions in other parts of the world such as in Africa still remain peripheral.

History reminds us that when a triple earthquake accompanied by a tsunami destroyed Lisbon in 1755, two of the leading intellectuals of the time - Immanuel Kant and Jean-Jacques Rousseau calmed the fear generated about the unknown and introduced a degree of soothing rationality into the 'what to do next' debate that followed. It is averred that consequently a scientific enquiry into the study of earthquakes as a tectonic phenomenon related to the natural sciences received a fillip. In the 21st century, perhaps the current tsunami tragedy should encourage a similar response wherein apart from rationality, equal emphasis is placed on an *equitable* disaster and tragedy response network that harnesses the capabilities of both state and civil society - the former by way of the state infrastructure and the latter through the existing global NGO constituency - so that the tsunami orphan and the malnourished Dafur child receive equal attention.

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particularly in the A&N islands, both the initial and later estimates about the tsunami death toll and resultant destruction suggest that India was in position to deal with the tragedy. It was also felt that the other affected countries needed such help more urgently than India. In addition, the response from Indians across the national spectrum was immediate and generous, and the challenge was to disaggregate the tasks that had to be undertaken and assign priority to them. The first tenet of responding to a humanitarian disaster of this scale – whether natural or manmade – is to identify the discrete tasks and their relative chronological priority. Reconnaissance and rescue of the survivors and providing immediate medical/food relief is the primary task. Invariably damaged communication and transport links always make this task formidable. This is followed by the task of rehabilitation and re-construction of shattered lives and infrastructure – always a long term and lonely task. More often than not, the collective consciousness has a short memory and who in India today remembers the earthquake that struck Gujarat in January 2001 on Republic Day – or other similar disasters over the years – except those directly affected? Perhaps, it is moot to ask as to how many will remember this tsunami come Christmas 2005?

Thus, it was felt that rescue and relief is a task that India is better equipped to undertake on its own – given its economic and technological profile – and that appropriate assistance would be welcomed from all quarters for the later phase of rehabilitation and re-construction. For instance, it is possible that India may well need aid from global and regional monetary agencies for this in the year ahead. Also, on the regional grid, it has been accepted that there is an urgent need to put in place a tsunami warning network in the Indian Ocean – as exists in the Pacific – and both the knowhow and the technology for enabling such a system will perforce have to come from external sources.

The final aspect is about how much aid would be deemed appropriate in such circumstances. The US and some other nations, including Germany, were castigated for being tight-fisted in their initial responses and commitments. However, in recent days, the global response has been generous and it is estimated that the total commitments will exceed US\$4 billion – or about Rs 18,000 crore. My own position is that the needy and the impoverished cannot demand aid as a right. Yes, it is an ethical responsibility that devolves upon those more fortunate not to be so blighted, but then history tells us that man is not naturally altruistic and generous. And this abiding rhythm of human nature, like the deep ocean currents, is not likely to undergo any radical change. So, the lesson is: Be better prepared for the next humanitarian disaster and be more cognizant about our collective ethical responsibility to each other – whether one is an affluent foreign tourist or an impoverished native citizen – in an increasingly inter-dependent world.

Humanitarian assistance is an exigency that many militaries have identified as part of the post-Cold War mandate and the completely apolitical nature of this response lends itself to being a ‘doable’ priority. The tsunami tragedy ought to encourage greater emphasis on nurturing individual country capability and building

they were present. It is the speed with which similar succor was made available to the neighbouring states that is noteworthy. Within 12 hours of the tsunami tragedy – by the evening of December 26 – the first Indian naval helicopters were in Sri Lanka with urgent relief material and this, of course, has to do with the proximate nature of the island republic to the Indian peninsula. To complement this, by Tsunami Day 2 (December 27), two Indian Naval ship, INS Sharada and INS Sandhayak, dropped anchor in Galle and Trincomalee, respectively. The relief support to Sri Lanka began in earnest, with the third ship, INS Sutlej, also reaching Galle by December 28.

Simultaneously ships were diverted to Male in the island of Maldives in the southern Indian Ocean, with INS Mysore, a destroyer, arriving there by first light on December 28 and two other ships, INS Udaygiri and INS Aditya, arriving the following day on T Day 3 (December 29). Many of these ships had integral helicopter capability and were able to provide support from the air as well and this immediate response was invaluable in assuring the affected people that more help was on the way. This gratitude was expressed in abundant measure on the worldwide web, which played a vital role in the dissemination of information apart from the audio-visual media.

In addition to the assistance to Sri Lanka and Maldives, the Indian military was able to reach out to Indonesia as well and INS Nirupak was converted into a hospital ship and dispatched to the worst affected country on T Day 4 (December 30). At the time of writing this comment, the Indian military—which includes the Coast Guard—had deployed a total of 32 ships and 5,500 army troops into tsunami-related relief effort. The air force has airlifted more than 10,000 tonnes of relief supplies to locales in and around India, including the A&N Islands. There is no denying that the Indian assistance to the three affected nations is modest, given the scale of relief that is required. But, the spontaneity with which India extended relief and the alacrity with which the Indian military was able to deploy itself are indicative of the credibility of the country's humanitarian response machinery that spans the political, diplomatic and military determinant, and this has some pertinent pointers for the regional security grid that the professionals will be monitoring.

The initial interpretation by external interlocutors of the swift Indian response was to relate this to 'power projection' and a suggestion that India was tangentially making a case for permanent membership in the UN Security Council. Since interpretations are invariably subjective and influenced by past precedent, perhaps this linear extrapolation is reflective of certain traditional orientations that hark back to the Cold War and balance of power rationalisation. India, it may be recalled, made a similar swift response in 1989 when it dealt with an attempted mercenary coup in the Maldives (Op Cactus) by diverting its ships and landing paratroopers. The response to the tsunami was a direct function of time-space-platform compatibility as much as it was in 1989 and the preferred interpretation more akin to the post-Cold War systemic may be one of 'relevant response' as opposed to power projection.

As regards why India refused assistance from foreign NGOs and countries,

## **Tsunami Tragedy: Indian Response and Anomalous Apathy**

*C Uday Bhaskar*

The tsunami tragedy that struck large parts of Southern Asia, abutting the Bay of Bengal and the South Eastern Indian Ocean littoral, on December 26 marked a tragic start for the New Year. It is feared that the death toll in the affected areas may well cross the 200,000 mark. In many ways, this is the first multi-national disaster of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the affected countries including Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, Malaysia, Myanmar, amongst others, and stretching all the way across the ocean to the east coast of Africa. The affected people included not only the hapless citizens of the countries involved but many foreign tourists. Globalisation has, indeed, acquired an unintended connotation.

The initial estimates of the scale of the disaster were perhaps inaccurate and it was only with the passage of time that the actual contours became clear to the region and the global community. The word tsunami itself was new to the lexicon of the people in the region and with the previous such event occurring in 1883, it was to be expected that the entire event had a macabre tinge of novelty to it and even professionals such as meteorologists and disaster experts were caught unawares.

However, what merits note is the manner in which India was able to respond to this tragedy and the kind of assistance that was provided by the Indian military within the first 24 hours. A related debate was about why India did not seek or accept help from foreign sources on the one hand, and the response of the global community led by the US on the other. Various views have been expressed about Indian prickliness, the parsimony of the major powers and the kind of duties and obligations that devolve upon the global community – States and civil society – in the event of such natural disasters that warrant huge humanitarian assistance.

Consider the facts about the first determinant – the Indian response. Parts of the Indian east coast and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands were devastated and the first duty was to mount immediate and appropriate relief and rescue operations. This was done with alacrity and the civil administration was supported by the military wherever