

Tsunami Diplomacy

William Maley

In her recent confirmation hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the new US Secretary of State, Dr Condoleezza Rice, referred to the 'wonderful opportunity' for the United States which had been created by the tsunami which struck Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, the Maldives, Kenya and Somalia on 26 December 2004.

As Senator Barbara Boxer pointed out, the choice of the word 'wonderful' could scarcely have been more unfortunate, given the tragic effects which the tsunami had had on the lives of vast numbers of ordinary people. Nonetheless, it is the case that natural disasters can create political and diplomatic opportunities as well as challenges, and in the wake of the tsunami, it is useful to highlight what some of these may be.

It is useful to begin with some of the challenges. These are likely to be vast when a large-scale disaster has occurred, and this is especially the case when more than one state is affected.

In recent times, the term 'complex humanitarian emergency' has been coined to describe events of this sort, although as Dr Fiona Terry has pointed out, it is 'the international response that is more "complex"; proliferation in the number and type of actors in the field has exacerbated inherent dilemmas in the provision of humanitarian assistance' (Terry 2003: p280).

Four challenges in particular are worth noting.

The first is the challenge of time. Disasters by definition create casualties whose needs demand immediate attention. Often these are on a scale which overwhelms local authorities, creating an urgent need for external assistance. States which are positioned to provide such assistance quickly may win the gratitude of the beneficiaries. But even here, there are delicate issues which can arise.

Iran, for example, attracted some criticism for declining Israeli assistance in the aftermath of the catastrophic Bam earthquake, although it is doubtful whether Israel would gladly have welcomed Iranian officials to its territory had Israel been the victim of a similar disaster.

The second is the challenge of mobilising resources. In the long run, money is the key requirement for reconstruction in the wake of major disasters, but needs may well outstrip the memories of both politicians and their publics in potential donor countries. It is also the case that many states have budgetary processes which are not geared to deal with



While Thailand has welcomed tsunami aid relief, it has declined financial assistance indicating that other areas have more urgent needs.

long-term challenges, and which may have real difficulty in accommodating resource needs even in the short run. The sorry story of the failure of resources promised for Iraqi reconstruction to materialise on time is but one example of a wider problem, and it is a serious one.

The third is the challenge of allocating and prioritising resources. Where a disaster affects more than one country, how should resources be apportioned between the victims? Should need be the sole criterion for allocation, or should other factors (proximity to the donor, historical patterns of friendship or antagonism, the possibility of improving political relations via a generous aid program) be taken into account? These factors, of course, mirror those which can shape patterns of development assistance more generally. In addition, resources for disaster relief have alternative uses;



a case for generous contributions may need to be argued in the face of opposition from competing interests. And even if a large package of assistance is approved, there may be fierce competition between different agencies keen to dominate the implementation phase and thus win credit for any successes — although as Count Ciano famously warned, failure is likely to be an orphan.

The fourth challenge is that of making best use of the institutions for the delivery of humanitarian aid. Some donor governments may seek to dominate the delivery of relief, perhaps through the deployment of their militaries, in ways which may prove controversial even in desperately needy countries. Should they instead seek to act in concert with like-minded powers (as Australia, the US, Japan and India contemplated after the 26 December tsunami)? Should they work through NGOs? Or should they make use of the architecture put in place after the United Nations General Assembly in Resolution 46/182 of 1991 moved to rationalise the operations of diverse UN agencies with a mandate to assist those in need? Each option carries political risks, as well as potential political and humanitarian benefits.

What, then, might some of the opportunities be? Here, the answer will vary from country to country, and from situation to situation. However, three specific types of opportunity can present themselves, depending on exactly what kinds of effects the disaster creates.

First are mass effects, those which arise at the level of the mass public in either the donor or recipient country. Ordinary people in the donor country may be sensitised through media reports to the vulnerability and suffering of people in the territory which the disaster has affected. Where the cause is natural rather than social and political, it may be easier for citizens to put themselves mentally in the place of the victims. It takes no great feat of imagination to visualise what a tsunami might do to Sydney or Melbourne. On the other hand, if hitherto-remote populations show a genuine interest in the suffering of the victims, then at least some of the victims and their fellow countrymen and women may reappraise stereotypical images they may hold of those who dwell elsewhere. Not everyone will do so (and some may even resent the mendicant status which often follows huge disasters) but enough may do so to make a difference.

Second are elite effects, pertinent to those who either help shape public opinion or make key political decisions. Elite hostility can often blight state-to-state relations even when people-to-people relations are amicable. When disasters strike, leaders can come to the aid of other leaders. Australia's package of \$1 billion for Indonesia over five years in the wake of the tsunami has the potential to help rebuild elements of the Australia-Indonesia relationship which were deeply stressed as a result of Australia's maladroit handling of aspects of the East Timor situation in 1999 (Maley, 2000), although many other considerations also come into play in shaping the broader relationship.

Finally, disasters can have catalytic effects, especially when they occur in zones of internal conflict. These, however, are likely to be complex. If state decision-makers block aid to areas controlled by their opponents, in the hope

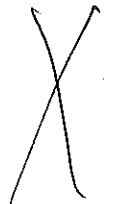
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of exploiting the humanitarian emergency to strengthen their own positions, the fallout in terms of heightened antagonism may be terrible. On the other hand, disasters can create openings for settling political problems if a sense of common humanity overwhelms the points-of-disagreement which otherwise separated the parties. When this happens, a door to effective peacemaking diplomacy may open.

William Maley, (2000), 'Australia and the East Timor Crisis: Some Critical Comments', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol.54, no.2, pp.151-161

Fiona Terry, (2003) 'Reconstituting whose social order? NGOs in disrupted states', in William Maley, Charles Sampford and Ramesh Thakur (eds), *From civil strife to civil society: Civil and military responsibilities in disrupted states* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2003) pp.279-299 at p.280

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Welcome to the first issue of the Diplomatic Bulletin of the Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy: *A message from the Director*

The Diplomatic Bulletin is a new component of the College's outreach to the diplomatic community and the wider world, a key element of the College's duties to foster high-level dialogue in the Asia-Pacific region.

Here you will find information about the College's activities, as well as reflections on issues in contemporary diplomacy.

After our first full year of operation we have much on which to reflect. Building our own community is a major task, so in this and future issues you will find profiles of the people who work within the auspices of the College, and of our students, both current and completed. In this issue we also celebrate our first class of graduates of the ANU Master of Diplomacy program. Our website for alumni is another community building effort.

As part of the responsibility of fostering understanding of key diplomatic challenges, the College also undertakes a number of important outreach activities, such as organising short courses, hosting seminars, and drawing together experienced practitioners through a Transnational Policy Forum.

In recognition of the new stage of development which it reached in 2004, the College was formally launched at a reception on 8 November 2004. Guests included members of the Diplomatic Corps, government and NGO representatives, members of the APCD International Advisory Board, participants in the Transnational Policy Forum, ANU staff and College students and graduates.

Addressing these guests, the Patron of the College, the Honourable Sir William Deane remarked on the significance of this act: 'Just as a ship is finally launched when all its essential parts are in



Professor William Maley (left), Sir William Deane (middle) and ANU Vice-Chancellor, Professor Ian Chubb, at the Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy (APCD) launch late last year.

place, so a College of this sort can appropriately be launched into the next phase of its life when it has drawn together the different strands of activity which form its mandate.'

We hope that you, in turn, may be drawn in to take part in events that the College organises for the wider diplomatic and general public. In the times in which we are living, effective diplomacy has never been more important, and fostering an understanding of why this is the case is an important task for the College. We hope that the Diplomatic Bulletin can make its own contribution to such an understanding.

Professor William Maley

'It is a great pleasure for me as Patron of the College to congratulate The Australian National University over its establishment, and to declare the Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy formally launched!'

Sir William Deane

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