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PEACE IN ITS WAKE? THE 2004 TSUNAMI AND INTERNAL CONFLICT IN INDONESIA AND SRI LANKA

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Almost every recent natural disaster that has occurred within a zone of conflict has been followed by expressions of hope from both diplomats and journalists that the disaster might somehow lead to peace. In order to assess whether the concept of "disaster diplomacy" has any merit, more systematic comparative research is needed, contrasting cases where disaster diplomacy seems to have been present with cases where it has not. As a step in this direction, this article explores the differing outcomes with respect to the separatist conflicts in Indonesia and Sri Lanka that followed the 2004 tsunami. In each of these cases, the tsunami provided an opportunity for separatist groups to supply critical public and private relief goods and thereby send a powerful signal about the functional legitimacy of their respective claims to autonomy. In this way, the tsunami affected the separatists' relative bargaining strength, creating an atmosphere more inclined toward peace in Indonesia and renewed civil war in Sri Lanka. The differing narratives suggest that the world pay more attention to post-disaster conflict zones given their positive and negative dynamic potential.

INTRODUCTION

In August 2005, eight months after the tsunami that killed almost 130,000

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Indonesians, the Indonesian government signed a tentative peace agreement in Helsinki with the rebels from the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka or "GAM"). The agreement, among other things, called for GAM rebels to surrender their arms in return for a promise of amnesty from the Indonesian government. It was a hopeful sign in a conflict that had disrupted life on the northern tip of Sumatra since 1976, killing over 12,000 people. Almost immediately, the agreement was hailed in the press as a victory for "disaster diplomacy" – the notion that natural disasters can open up space for peaceful diplomatic interaction between states or domestic factions in conflict (e.g., Aglionby 2005).

In Sri Lanka, however, the story was quite the opposite. Eighteen months after the tsunami, the majority Sinhalese-led Sri Lankan government and the separatist group, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE or "Tamil Tigers"), were headed for civil war (Huggler 2006). Prior to the tsunami, a 2002 cease-fire agreement that had halted two decades of combat between the government and insurgents had been steadily crumbling, and hostility between the government and the separatists seemed to be escalating. The conflict had killed almost 65,000 people since the early 1980s. However, in the months following the tsunami, which killed over 30,000 Sri Lankan citizens, the tensions between the Sinhalese government and the Tamil Tigers increased dramatically.

For a variety of reasons, natural disasters tend to be worse in places that are relatively under-developed and often racked with internal or external conflict (Pelling 2003). Since the reconciliation between Greece and Turkey that appeared to follow from a series of earthquakes in the two countries in 1999, almost every major natural disaster that has occurred within a zone of conflict has been followed by expressions of hope that some diplomatic good might emerge from the tragedy. The tsunami proved to be no different. Within a week of the tsunami's occurrence on December 26, 2004, many were evoking memories of the politically transformative effects of past natural disasters with hopes that the current disaster could somehow lead to peace in conflict ridden countries such as Indonesia and Sri Lanka (e.g., *From the Ruins* 2005; McNeil 2005; Thakur 2005).

How can we explain the different outcomes in these two cases? Why did relative peace emerge following the tsunami in Indonesia but not Sri Lanka? What role, if any, has the natural disaster played in each outcome?

There are still many important questions about whether and how disaster diplomacy works that remain unanswered. What is the role, if any, that disasters play in fostering peaceful diplomatic interaction between conflicting parties? If there is a role, what is the mechanism through which

diplomacy emerges? Is the natural disaster merely a conduit for more intensified cooperation on issues unrelated to the conflict, which generates a kind of spillover effect that leads to peaceful diplomacy between warring parties? If so, is there something specific about recovery and relief from a natural disaster, as opposed to other types of cooperation, which makes it a more likely context in which these spillovers might be produced? In addition, does the natural disaster serve to change the peoples' attitudes and perceptions about their enemies? If so, what effects does this have on diplomacy between warring parties? Finally, to the extent that the natural disaster might play some role in engendering diplomacy, how lasting are its effects? Alternatively, could any of these mechanisms lead to an increase in conflict rather than an increase in peace?

The answers to each of these questions carry important policy implications, especially as scientific studies demonstrate higher levels of confidence that the future incidence of violent, weather-related, natural events will increase as a result of the current pace of global climate change (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2007). Thus, this article comparatively traces the processes toward peaceful diplomacy and renewed civil war in Indonesia and Sri Lanka, respectively, following the 2004 tsunami, with the aim of gaining a preliminary set of both theoretical and policy-related conclusions. By proceeding in this fashion here and in the future, analyzing and comparing a wide variety of both successful and unsuccessful cases, we might be able to more fully explain whether there is any theoretical or empirical truth to the popular notion of disaster diplomacy. If there is, we may be better equipped to understand why natural disasters provide the space for conflict resolution in some instances but not others.

This article argues that the 2004 tsunami offered the respective separatist movements in Indonesia and Sri Lanka a chance to demonstrate their functional ability to govern. These demonstrations served as important signals that in turn had the effect of either strengthening or weakening their relative bargaining positions vis-à-vis their governmental opponents. In the case of the GAM in Indonesia, the separatists struggled to perform some of the necessary functions of government – relief and recovery efforts in Aceh – in the aftermath of the disaster. Some of this struggle was because of the separatists' own incompetence, but much was due to the Indonesian government and military's ability to block the separatists' efforts to assist the people of Aceh. Regardless of the reason, these relative inabilities sent a signal of weakness to both the people of Aceh and the government of Indonesia. This signal served to damage the GAM's claim to legitimacy and as a result significantly decrease its bargaining leverage.

Without the continued intransigence of the GAM, the possibility of a peaceful resolution to the conflict increased.

However, in the case of Sri Lanka, where the Tamil Tigers were able to perform relief and recovery functions relatively successfully and the Sri Lankan government was not able to thwart such efforts, the separatists' success served as a signal that their claim to legitimate governmental authority had some merit. As a result, they were able to approach the bargaining table from a stronger relative position, resulting in more separatist intransigence, and in the end, renewed civil conflict.

THEORETICAL TRACTION: CIVIL WARS AND SIGNALING

Much of the earlier work on natural disasters associated politics with negative outcomes such as corruption, obstruction, and the like (Freudenheim 1979; Cuny 1983; Albala-Bertrand 1993b, 1993c), and intentionally avoided characterizing disasters as political. However, recent scholarship has taken a much different view, arguing that natural disasters are fundamentally political events and that the connections between politics and disaster in all facets should be more fully explored (Wolensky and Miller 1983; Blocker, Rochford, and Sherkat 1991; Belgrad and Nachmias 1997; Drury and Olson 1998; Olson 2000; Van Belle, Rioux, and Potter 2004; Drury, Olson, and Van Belle 2005). With specific respect to the politics of conflict, recent scholarship views disasters as "focusing events" (Birkland 1996, 1998) or "critical junctures" (Olson and Gawronski 2003) in which significant changes occur in the community and through which major policy shifts can take place. In this context, disasters could have both positive and negative effects on conflict.

Despite these advances – as well as the fact that the term disaster diplomacy has gained some traction in the popular press – the body of academic literature that exists on natural disasters and conflict is ambivalent whether disasters lead to greater conflict or peace. For example, a highly positive correlation appears to exist between the number of fatalities in a disaster – one measure of its severity – and the amount of political unrest that follows (Albala-Bertrand 1993a; Drury and Olson 1998). However, other studies suggest that natural disasters can promote cooperation between groups (Quarantelli and Dynes 1976; Blocker, Rochford, and Sherkat 1991; Kelman and Koukis 2000; Evin 2004).

Contributing to this ambivalence is the inadequate specification of the mechanism through which disasters might lead to either conflict or cooperation (Drury and Olson 1998). Only very recently has this begun

to be rectified. A number of recent studies focus on the negative consequences that disasters have for the political economies of affected states. In this context, variables such as economic development (Ember and Ember 1992) and resource scarcity both before (Miguel, Satyanath, and Sergenti 2004) and after the disaster (Brancati 2007) become important indicators of whether the disaster will lead to conflict or cooperation. Other studies attempt to comparatively assess the multiple mechanisms or pathways that could promote effective disaster diplomacy (Kelman 2006).

However, these explanations do not fully account for the different outcomes in Indonesia and Sri Lanka. As the narratives below demonstrate, the relative capabilities and resulting strategic interaction between rebel groups and the governments are critical components of the different outcomes. The literature on international crises has acknowledged the iterative nature of crisis bargaining (Huth and Russett 1984, 1988; Huth 1988; Fearon 1994, 1997, 1998; Huth 1999). In these games one party to the crisis is keenly aware of, not only its own capabilities, but the relative capabilities of its opponent and thus makes a judgment of the opponent's likely reaction to any move or sequence of moves taken.

The literature on civil wars has begun to incorporate these strategic concerns (Walter 2006a, 2006b). Both governments and separatists act based on perceptions of what the other party has done in the past and what it is likely to do in the future. On the one hand, governments tend to think more about the future than current theories might anticipate, and they are careful to build the anticipated risks and costs of future challenges into their calculations of how they deal with insurgencies (Walter 2006a). On the other hand, the insurgents' calculations are the result of "a complex strategic interaction where governments are actively seeking to deter separatists, and separatists are carefully seeking to uncover if and when the government will grant concessions" (Walter 2006b, 106).

Signaling by the respective parties to the conflict or crisis has long been recognized as an important component of this strategic interaction (Fearon 1994, 1997, 1998). In particular, signals sent by either party provide the other side with information about relative strengths in capabilities or interests, and this information can influence strategic decision-making. In the literature on civil wars, several studies focus on the motivations underpinning particular ethnic groups seeking self-determination. These motivations include the extent to which the group feels relatively disadvantaged within a country compared to other ethnic groups (Gurr 2000; Marshall and Gurr 2003), the extent to which it feels incapable of achieving its particular economic goals (Gurr 2000), and/or the extent to which it

perceives the ruling government's central authority to be in decline (Bartkus 1999). Governments, from their perspective, may be more or less willing to fight against the insurgency on the basis of their relative capabilities. The government's choice to fight the insurgency as opposed to ignoring it is likely based on the economic, political and/or psychological value of the territory in question (Diehl 1999; Toft 2003).

Building on several of these insights, this article argues that the period of time after the tsunami provided a crucible in which a very particular and intense form of signaling about capabilities and interests took place. This, in turn, affected the strategic interactions of the parties to the conflict. Following the disaster, separatists had an opportunity in which they could assert their ability to perform the services of government – that is, deliver aid, provide for the displaced, engage in reconstruction, provide public goods more generally, etc. – within their relevant territories. Their relative ability to perform these tasks reflected their functional ability to self-govern. Successful provision of services sent a powerful signal both to the government and to the interested parties in the international community, lending further legitimacy to their separatist claim. Additionally, success allowed separatists to become more emboldened in their search for autonomy.

The governments, on the other hand, were concerned about future separatist challenges to their respective authority. Their goals in the face of separatist challenges were to send signals to other would-be separatist groups and citizens that the government alone has the functional capability to provide for the citizens in a time of crisis. Thus, governments have an incentive to deter the separatists in their attempt to engage in relief-oriented governmental activities. If successful at deterring, and possibly discrediting or reframing the separatist efforts, the government can gain a bargaining advantage. This stronger government position places the separatists in a relatively weaker position. Under these conditions, the separatist groups are more likely to make concessions in an attempt to end their dispute.

A two-case comparison can not, by itself, provide a sufficient test of the above hypothesis, and no attempt is made herein to do so. However, the comparison does present an interesting opportunity to identify a possible thesis regarding the way in which disasters impact the bargaining dynamics of groups in conflict. The extent of the thesis' preliminary validity might suggest possible refinements that can be tested using other cases (George and Bennett 2005). In addition, this comparison is likely to highlight a number of important policy implications. Again, although the results will be preliminary, the comparison provides a firmer foundation than one could get through the study of any single case.

ACEH AND THE 2004 TSUNAMI – DECREASING CONFLICT

Most estimates suggest that by 2004 almost 15,000 people had been killed, since 1976, in the conflict between the GAM rebels in Aceh and the Indonesian government. In the two years prior to the tsunami, tensions between the groups were particularly high and there was little negotiation or peaceful diplomacy of any kind. The rebels had long retreated to the mountains surrounding the provincial capital, Banda Aceh, and many of the key GAM leaders had been living in exile in Sweden since the 1970s. In 2002, a tentative truce was reached between the two sides; however, in 2003, the truce broke down when both sides complained about how the other was interpreting the terms of the agreement. In May 2003, the Indonesian government imposed a state of emergency in Aceh, which resulted in a blockade preventing entry into Aceh by almost all outsiders, including diplomats, journalists, and humanitarian groups. It is estimated that 2,000 people were killed between May 2003 and when the tsunami occurred in December 2004 (From the Ruins 2005). During this time, there was very little diplomatic interaction at all between GAM and the Indonesian government.

On the morning of December 26, 2004, a 9.3 magnitude earthquake occurred in the middle of the Indian Ocean about 150 miles off the north-west coast of Sumatra. The massive tsunami generated by the earthquake ravaged the coastlines of some thirteen countries and is estimated to have killed close to 300,000 people. The estimates regarding the number of dead in Indonesia vary, but the best guess is that 130,000 people were killed in the province of Aceh alone. Another 400,000 found themselves homeless.

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, both GAM and the Indonesian government made conciliatory gestures toward one another. Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono lifted the state of emergency in Aceh in order to facilitate the flow of aid and relief workers into the area. Rebel leaders from GAM offered a tentative unilateral ceasefire. This rebel ceasefire was not matched by the Indonesian military. Within a week, it appeared that events in the aftermath of the tsunami would increase conflict between the Indonesian government and GAM. The army's presence in Aceh was based on conflicting roles: the provision of disaster relief aid and the simultaneous pursuit of the Acehnese guerrillas. The Indonesian government felt it was important for the military to control the flow of aid to ensure that it not fall into the hands of the rebel leaders.

During the following weeks, the rebels were never able to gain control of any of the aid distribution. The Indonesian government, the military, and the GAM rebels all had radically different interpretations of what was happening on the ground. Toward the middle of January, the chief of the Indonesian Army, Ryamizard Ryucudu, announced that 208 rebels had been killed by the military in the three weeks following the tsunami. Since May 2003, the rate at which GAM rebels were being killed had been about 115 per month; 208 in three weeks represented a significant increase (Powell 2005). The military argued that the rebels had been armed; the GAM countered that most of those killed were not rebels at all but unarmed civilians. The military claimed that rebels had been attacking aid supply convoys; the GAM rebels claimed that this was not the case and that the military had been attacking indiscriminately (Powell 2005).

In late January, the Indonesian government announced that it would be willing to talk to the Acehese leaders exiled in Sweden. Shortly before the scheduled meeting, Indonesian President Yudhoyono offered GAM rebels amnesty and greater autonomy in exchange for a ceasefire. A presidential spokesperson was quoted as saying, "We are coming with an olive branch... Let's move forward to rebuilding Aceh within the framework of the Republic of Indonesia" (Nakashima 2005a, A12).

The government's offer fell short of the rebel goal of full independence for the province of Aceh. The two sides had been stuck at this point before. While campaigning for election in September 2004, President Yudhoyono had visited Aceh and offered the rebels amnesty for all those who would surrender, special autonomy for the province of Aceh, and a variety of economic concessions. At the time, the rebels rejected the offer, and instead demanded Yudhoyono begin to withdraw the 40,000 troops stationed in the province as a show of good faith. It was a demand that was not met (Powell 2005).

In spite of this history, by the end of the January meetings, GAM leaders had relaxed of their previous insistence on complete Acehese independence. While laying the groundwork for future talks, the GAM leaders stated that they were ready to accept an agreement that would not provide Aceh's complete independence (see Donnan and Bergstrom 2005). Despite this progress, the meetings between GAM and the Indonesian government continued in July 2005. In moving towards a more specific agreement, a number of key issues continued to divide the two sides. The GAM initially proposed that in return for its giving up on Acehese independence, it be allowed to become an official political party. The government initially resisted this request, fearing that allowing GAM to run in local elections

might lead to a referendum such as the one that ended Indonesian rule in East Timor in 1999. At issue was the specific way in which demilitarization would take place.

Eventually, an agreement was reached. The government agreed to allow GAM to form a political party as long as it would do so within bounds of Indonesia election laws. Such laws only allow for the existence of nationally based political parties for fear that parties operating only within a particular locality could stimulate separatism. As for demilitarization, both sides agreed that an international mission made up of two hundred European and one hundred ASEAN observers would be allowed to oversee a process in which amnesty would be offered to all rebels who would lay down their arms. In addition, seventy percent of revenues generated from the oil-rich province would go directly to the provincial government. Finally, both sides agreed to establish a Human Rights Court and Truth and Reconciliation commission so that all aspects of the thirty-year conflict could be uncovered and grievances addressed. The agreement was officially signed on August 15, 2005, and by the middle of September, GAM rebels had begun to turn in their weapons.

In this case, the tsunami offered the opportunity for both sides to signal future capabilities with respect to the conflict. Initially, there were anecdotal reports of small acts of cooperation between individuals from GAM and the government. It was reported that some prison wardens freed guerrilla inmates from a flooded prison. Later, when a call was made for these guerrillas to return to help with relief efforts, almost all of them did (From the Ruins 2005). However, these initial, individual signs of cooperation were not matched at the group level and did not gain traction as the early days after the tsunami passed. The GAM rebels made an attempt to demonstrate their ability to autonomously perform many of the functions of government post-tsunami. The Indonesian government and military tried to thwart and re-characterize these efforts at every turn. Each side attempted to swing public opinion – both the Acehnese public and the international public – for its own political gain (Huxley 2005).

For example, in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, GAM rebels came down from their mountain hideouts and offered supplies to the local Acehnese villagers. They assisted in burying the dead. They brought aid and whatever medical supplies they could to assist the survivors; they built shelters and first aid stations (Nakashima 2005b). From the beginning, the Indonesian military countered these efforts by issuing reports that GAM rebels were actually attacking supply lines and attempting to replenish their own supplies, which had been severely diminished in the two years

that Aceh had been under a military state of emergency. Additionally, the military argued that any good done by the GAM rebels was done only in attempt to shift public opinion toward their side. The argument was that the rebels wanted to place themselves in the best light with regards to the Acehnese people and the international aid workers with whom they were in contact (Nakashima 2005b). The rebels knew that international pressure would be necessary for GAM to be able to force the Indonesian government to accept their demands of independence.

The Indonesian government, particularly the military, had its own agenda as well. In the immediate aftermath of the crisis, the government poured troops into Aceh in the name of security. The military claimed that international aid workers were in danger of attacks by GAM rebels. However, GAM countered that the military was using the opportunity to seize further control of the province and was mixing aid missions with an agenda of rooting out – and often killing – any GAM rebels they encountered. In addition, the rebels argued that many of the military members were using the opportunity to line their own pockets with the money flowing into the province in the name of disaster relief. Thus, rather than taking the opportunity presented by the disaster to forge a common ground on an issue apart from their own conflict, both the GAM rebels and the Indonesian government and military appeared to use the conflict to further their own respective agendas.

In the end, it appears that the Indonesian government, but particularly the military, was successful in preventing the GAM rebels from establishing any ability to autonomously provide services to the people of Aceh. In this case, the rebels realized that their bargaining position vis-à-vis the government had shifted quite dramatically. No longer was it feasible to insist on complete autonomy for the province, as the reality on the ground – as well as both international and domestic public opinion about that reality – had shifted in the months following the tsunami. The government realized GAM's inability to govern Aceh autonomously following the crisis – or more accurately, its own ability to prevent GAM from doing so. The effect of this was a signal that GAM was nothing more than a guerrilla movement and could be taken less seriously. It created a context in which the government could take a hard line in peace negotiations. The overall effect was to bring the bargaining positions of the two sides closer together. In this context, a deal was reached.

SRI LANKA AND THE 2004 TSUNAMI – INCREASING CONFLICT

In Sri Lanka, the years preceding the 2004 tsunami were quite similar to those in Indonesia. A twenty-year civil war between the Sinhalese-speaking and largely Buddhist majority Sri Lankan government and the Tamil-speaking and largely Hindu minority Tamil Tiger rebels had resulted in approximately 60,000 deaths. Although the Sinhalese majority controlled the Sri Lankan capital and national government in Colombo, the Tamil Tigers controlled a 30 square mile patch of land in the northeast corner of the island. In fighting to extend their autonomous rule to other parts of the northeast where Tamils resided, the rebels had perfected the tactic of suicide bombing. Throughout the war, they carried out many successful attacks on Sinhalese politicians and civilians as well as more moderate Tamils. In 2002, a Norwegian-brokered ceasefire put a tentative end to much of the killing. However, in May 2003, talks between the two parties broke down and in the months leading up to the tsunami, the tensions between the two parties seemed to be steadily increasing.

The successive waves of the tsunami on December 26, 2004 killed approximately 31,000 Sri Lankan citizens and left approximately 700,000 homeless. In one highly publicized story, a train traveling along the Sri Lankan coast was literally swept off the tracks by one of the waves, and over one thousand people perished. In the Tiger-controlled areas in the north and east parts of the island, the tsunami is estimated to have killed over 9,000 people.

Almost immediately following the disaster, the Tamil Tigers began to complain that the government was discriminately distributing aid and purposefully keeping it from the largely Tamil areas of the country. The government quickly sought to provide assurances that there was no discrimination. Sri Lanka's president, Chandrika Kumaratunga, attempted to send an immediate message on this point, pointing out in a speech at a national mourning service: "Nature has treated us all equally. Can't we treat each other likewise?" (Steele 2005b, 2). However, LTTE forces continued to complain. One negotiator for the Tamil Tigers, who was having little success in coming to an agreement with the Sri Lankan government on aid management, stated: "We're two-thirds of the casualties and damage, but the government is creating roadblocks to us receiving aid" (Pocha 2005c, A12).

This debate continued in the early months following the tsunami. The Sri Lankan government continued to insist that it was doing everything

in its power to ensure that relief aid reached the Tamil-controlled areas of the country. Any problems, according to the government, were the result of the Tigers mismanaging the relief aid. The LTTE on the other hand, rejected this claim, arguing that the Sinhalese government was doing everything in its power to discredit them (Pocha 2005b). The Sri Lankan government attempted to end the war of words between the two sides and President Kumaratunga extended an invitation to the LTTE to participate in a multi-party disaster management task force. However, the Tigers rejected this offer. The political head of LTTE argued, "Since no constructive steps have been taken to help the north, we believe it is a propaganda trick... We think she wants the international community to believe that she is not discriminating against the north. Only a small amount of aid has started arriving here compared to the relief pouring into Colombo airport" (Steele 2005c, 4).

In keeping with their core demands that they be treated as an autonomous region, the rebels continued to insist that international relief aid earmarked for Tamil regions of Sri Lanka be allowed to be delivered directly to those regions, rather than get filtered through the national government in Colombo. However, as several key countries in the international community – including the United States and the United Kingdom – currently consider the Tamil Tigers a terrorist organization, the Sri Lankan government found it politically impossible to meet that demand or any other which would appear to give the Tigers any autonomous legitimacy. These tensions played out symbolically when the Sri Lankan government refused to let Kofi Annan, the Secretary General of the United Nations, visit any of the areas in the northeast part of the country in the days following the disaster (Pocha 2005a).

However, as time passed, it became clearer to the Sri Lankan government that the LTTE had established itself as more than just a guerrilla movement. The Tigers had instituted a taxation system and used the revenue it generated as well as donations from Tamils abroad to establish both a police force and a legal system. This budding political and economic infrastructure allowed the LTTE to begin to effectively cooperate with international aid agencies such as the United Nations Human Rights Commission (Pocha 2005a). As the government came to terms with this reality, it became more flexible in its stance on the possibility of sharing the distributional responsibilities with respect to international aid.

By May 2005, the government showed a willingness to sign off on a plan to allow the Tigers to control much more of its own aid distribution. At the end of June, the two sides reached an agreement that allowed the

LTTE a greater role in the distribution of over \$3 billion in aid. According to the aid-sharing agreement, known as the Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structures (P-TOMS), review committees formed of rebels, government officials and Muslims would be allowed to recommend and monitor projects in areas hit by the tsunami. Many in the Sri Lankan parliament were opposed to the concession based on the idea that the pact threatened the country's sovereignty by legitimizing the Tiger rebels. President Kumaratunga attempted to counter these objections, telling an assembly of Buddhist monks: "Some sections question how a sovereign government could have dealings with a terrorist organization ... but why can't we give them [Tigers] an opportunity to reform themselves? Peace is right before us to see. It will be a major blunder if we don't take this opportunity just because a few oppose it" (Bedi 2005, 014).

The agreement, however, was short-lived. In early July 2005, the Sri Lankan Supreme Court issued an injunction on the agreement, following a petition by a Sinhalese nationalist party that had criticized the aid-sharing deal with the rebels as unconstitutional. The basis for their argument was that the Tamil Tigers are a terrorist organization that do not possess any legal legitimacy. In protest, the nationalist party had pulled out of the coalition government (Sengupta 2005b). In the weeks following the injunction, the Sri Lankan government did little to resurrect the deal. As a result, by August, the tensions between the government and the rebels had resurfaced.

Then, on August 15, 2005, the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister, Lakshman Kadirgamar, was assassinated at his home while getting out of his swimming pool. Immediately, the Sri Lankan government accused the LTTE of being responsible for the killing. The Tigers denied any involvement, pointing the blame instead at a faction within the Sri Lankan establishment that wanted the 2002 ceasefire to fail. However, it is clear that Kadirgamar presented an opportune target for the Tigers. Supporters of the LTTE had denounced Kadirgamar, the highest-ranking ethnic Tamil in the government, as a traitor. It was largely his international campaigning that had led to the Tigers being labeled as a terrorist organization in the United States, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere (Huggler 2005).

As Sri Lanka moved toward national elections in November 2005, the violence increased. Violations of the ceasefire agreement were commonplace, and assassinations became an almost daily occurrence (see McDougall 2005; Sengupta 2005a). Norwegian officials monitoring ceasefire violations documented 190 killings between February 2005 and the end of October 2005, an average of more than five a week. By comparison, during all of

2004, they counted sixty killings (Sengupta 2005a). The elections came and went without the explosion of violence that was anticipated; however, the results of the elections created even more tension and a wider sense of discouragement within the country.

In the days following the election, the new Sri Lankan president, Mahinda Rajapakse, expressed a much firmer stance on the LTTE key demand for independence. Whereas past talks between the government and the Tigers had focused on giving the group some autonomy within their region – a type of federalism as a possible compromise solution – Mr. Rajapakse insisted that former governmental negotiators had ceded too much to the rebels. In an angry response after the presidential election, Velupillai Prabhakaran, the Tigers' leader, threatened a return to war if no political settlement emerged within the next year. The LTTE reinforced its position with a show of power that included the orchestration of an election boycott in November, and a walk-out by government employees, students, and shopkeepers in December 2005 (Steele 2005a).

As opposed to the case of Indonesia, in the case of Sri Lanka, the rebels were effectively able to function autonomously in the aftermath of the tsunami. Leading up the negotiations over aid sharing, the Sri Lankan government began to change its view that the rebels were merely a guerrilla outfit. The government's willingness to compromise seems due, in part, to the LTTE's utilization of the aftermath of the tsunami to successfully signal that it possessed the necessary political infrastructure available to serve its constituency.

However, when the concluded agreement broke down in the Sri Lankan Supreme Court, the Tigers became emboldened and began to harden their position with an ultimatum. The government's willingness to concede on the aid issue had sent a signal to the LTTE that the government might be willing to bend in the future and that pushing harder for an autonomous Tamil state would be an effective negotiating strategy. With the election of a new president in November 2005 and his reversal of the government's position, the tension between the two parties increased and violence, not peace, has been the outcome. The devastation of the tsunami, in effect, created a situation in which the LTTE was able to signal its ability to effectively manage the Tamil-majority areas of Sri Lanka. This signal provided a functional basis that served to enhance their belief in their separatist cause. Peace at the cost of concessions to the government seemed even more out of the question.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The comparison between Indonesia and Sri Lanka provides some insight into the effect that natural disasters have on conflict. In the case of Indonesia, the Indonesian government and military were sufficiently able to deter and discredit the efforts of the GAM rebels to perform the functions of government in the aftermath of the tsunami. This effectively eliminated any functional basis for the rebels' argument for autonomous governance in Aceh. As a result, their bargaining position was severely weakened, and they were forced to approach negotiations with a less radical goal – the establishment of a GAM political party. The government accepted this position, and a peace treaty was negotiated.

In the case of Sri Lanka, however, the Tamil Tiger rebels were effectively able to perform many of the services of government, a reality that eventually forced the national government in Colombo to accept that this was no longer merely a guerrilla movement but one with at least functional legitimacy. When the aid-sharing agreement broke down in the summer of 2005, the rebels were in a much stronger position, allowing them to refuse anything less than full recognition of Tamil autonomy by the Sri Lankan government. This intransigence created the conditions for a hardening of the conflict, and led the country back down the path toward civil war.

Future work must go beyond these cases, which are of course limited to internal, separatist-type conflicts. Natural disasters have often occurred in areas that affect two neighboring countries that have a preexisting rivalry. Often they occur in one country that finds itself in conflict or rivalry with a country or countries that is not necessarily a neighbor. Although the aspect of the hypothesis that deals with rebels' functional ability to govern disputed territory may not translate to international issues, the aspect of signaling as it pertains to the bargaining relationship between two or more parties in conflict could certainly be assessed.

To the extent that the preliminary hypothesis suggested by these cases holds up to further comparative testing, several policy implications are clear. First, neither group should assume that the period after a disaster is one in which the prior conflict should be put completely out of the minds of policy makers. The period after a disaster allows an opportunity for a great deal of repositioning given the importance of signaling in conflict bargaining, and each party to the conflict should take care to view it as such.

The second, related policy implication of the different outcomes in Sri Lanka and Indonesia is that parties should not assume that the opponent

in the conflict is ignoring the conflict issue in order to focus on relief and reconstruction. Strategically, one must assume that the opponent party has similar information about the possibilities that exist for strengthening relative bargaining positions following disasters. Despite any rhetoric about “putting aside differences in order to focus on the disaster at hand,” all parties must be aware that opposing parties have incentives to engage in activities that provide relief and reconstruction *as well as* strengthen their relative bargaining positions in any ongoing conflicts. Any one party’s decision-making calculus must include an awareness that all parties face these incentives.

The United States-Iranian interaction in the midst of the 2003 Iranian earthquake in the city of Bam is instructive on both of these policy points. Even though the earthquake killed over 25,000 Iranian citizens and left over 75,000 homeless, the contentious nature of the relationship between Iran and the United States created serious doubt that U.S. relief assistance would be forthcoming. Both parties to the ongoing conflict seemed to be aware that the disaster presented particular opportunities to gain bargaining leverage (Enia 2006). Iran, in particular, seemed to have this logic in mind when it rejected the offer for a U.S. humanitarian relief mission led by senator and former head of the American Red Cross Elizabeth Dole. The leadership in Iran argued “it was too preoccupied in dealing with the aftermath of the devastating Bam earthquake and it would have been inappropriate at that time to confuse it with another issue” (BBC, 2004). This logic seemed to be based on the suspicion that despite U.S. rhetoric of solely humanitarian motives, there could be other results of the interaction that might affect Iran’s bargaining power. Iranian President Khatami stated in an interview with the BBC, “Basically, you must not link the issue of the earthquake with chronic and deeply-rooted political issues” (Khatami, 2003).


Finally, those outside the conflict should also be aware that any actions they take to assist in the post-disaster relief and reconstruction may have important consequences for the relative bargaining strength of one or more parties to the conflict. Any action taken to assist a disaster-stricken region may send powerful signals to the opposing side of the preexisting conflict that may affect relative bargaining strength. One state assisting another may, for example, give the appearance of an alliance between the two that could extend beyond the disaster relief issue. In other circumstances, a state or other external actor working with separatist groups in a disaster-stricken region may send a signal that it considers the separatist group’s claim to regional sovereignty somewhat valid. Many other examples seem possible

in this regard. In this sense, the goal of maintaining complete neutrality with respect to the conflict while providing outside relief and reconstruction assistance seems to be naïve.

In this regard, the United States needs to think carefully about its disaster relief and reconstruction policies. Much of the global scientific community is predicting that weather-related natural events will increase because of the current pace of global climate change (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2007). In addition, despite the fact that the global rate of earthquakes has been reasonably constant, scientists are predicting that pace could increase as a result of the melting of the polar ice caps (e.g., Ekstrom, Nettles, and Tsai 2006).

Some of the world's major geographic fault lines run through countries like Pakistan – which experienced an earthquake in 2005 that killed at least 30,000 people – and these areas are likely to fall victim to earthquakes again. Given Pakistan's current level of domestic political unrest, particularly linked to the public's general distrust of the Musharraf regime, another major natural disaster could have severe consequences for conflict in that country. In fact, the 2005 earthquake and the slow pace of organized relief assistance generated a great deal of domestic hostility (Coll 2005). The United States would be wise to think through the consequences that the provision of external disaster relief may have in similar situations. How would, for example, the Pakistani people view international aid that is funneled through the Pakistani government? In what ways would such relief assistance change the relative bargaining power of either the Musharraf government or any of the number of groups that would like to see him removed from power? Might these changes lead to the collapse of the government, or is there a way to provide external relief assistance without contributing to further instability?

It seems imperative that diplomats, academics, and journalists be more careful with the way they use the term disaster diplomacy. Too often, the hope has been expressed as if peaceful interaction will simply materialize out of the sheer scope or intensity of the destruction. This article suggests that the forces at work – although intimately related to the specific context presented by the disaster – are indeed, much more complicated. Even so, if there is any possibility that some peaceful diplomacy can arise from these dire situations, it is critical that the policy-making community has a clear and well-informed understanding of both the context and the mechanisms through which this process works. In this spirit, more comparative research is needed.



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