

WARNING SIGN

NICK SHINN

The South East Asian tsunami is an unusual disaster. Krakatau, in 1883, was the last time that a tsunami was this devastating, and it was caused by a volcanic eruption, not an earthquake. Since then there have been at least a dozen earthquakes or floods with over 100,000 deaths, but the modern world has never seen a natural disaster remotely like that of Dec. 26, 2004. ¶ While previously even the largest quakes and floods have been in a single country, this is international, with casualties occurring in twelve countries spread around the Indian Ocean. The grief has penetrated beyond the disaster zone, to Europe for instance, which lost thousands of vacationers, and around the world wherever there are immigrant Asian communities -- and there are many who have fled the longstanding ethnic and religious violence which divides Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Indonesia, the three nations hardest hit. ¶ Viewed from the air shortly after the event, the flattened towns of North West Sumatra, with every inhabitant and all but the occasional building scoured away, resembled nothing so much as Hiroshima after the bomb. The moment of impact, recorded on dozens of camcorders throughout the disaster zone, has surprised observers. We are familiar with violent images of palm trees lashed by hurricanes, of buildings and cars swept away by raging rivers, of boats tossed by mountainous ocean storms, and of computer-generated waters crashing through American city centres; yet on an otherwise pleasant day the surge of the tsunami at first seemed stunted and underpowered, nothing like the curl-crested wall of water one would have expected. In a few of the videos, a major wave is shown smashing onto the shore, but it seems that in most places the tsunami had already broken offshore, or would not break at all. The majority of videos show a succession of frothing wave fronts invading the land, building up the level of water behind them into an enormous debris-laden flow. The video from a government official's house in Banda Aceh shows the tsunami at its most awful, water about 8-10 feet deep far into the distance, an ocean sweeping relentlessly through a town, razing the majority of houses. Off

camera, a woman wails. So this is how a tsunami does its damage: more dirty massive cluttered abrasive rolling inundation than clean and violent strike. ¶ The day after Dec. 26, the tsunami was front-page news in most of the world, as large natural disasters usually are. Typically, it was the main story covering at least three-quarters of the page, with estimates of the number of victims at about 15,000. With each succeeding day, headlines, photos, maps, diagrams and infographics detailed a scale of destruction rarely seen outside war. Within a week, the death-toll estimates were approaching 150,000 people. ¶ TV brought home the devastation with an unprecedented intimacy, showing amateur videos of the impact, survivors describing their escape or searching for missing family members, and interviews at home with relatives of tourists in the zone. It was eerily surreal to see, in smooth, sharp, full screen video, a smartly dressed BBC reporter, first into an otherwise deserted area of the disaster, clambering over piles of debris and pointing to the protruding arm of a corpse, all the while talking live with the newscaster back in the London studio. Until recently, this kind of satellite communication would have been in a small window on the screen, and the video jerky. ¶ While the news media probed, gathered, analyzed and interpreted, a different purpose and structure of information emerged on the internet, fed by mobiles (cell phones). Sanjay, aka "Morquendi", a Sri Lankan, was one of many eyewitness bloggers. Throughout the night of the 26th, working in emergency rescue and relief efforts, he text-messaged live observations to his co-editors at the collaborative blog ChienSansFrontieres. Snip: # I'm standing on the Galle road in Aluthgama and looking at 5 ton trawlers tossed onto the road. Scary shit. # Found 5 of my friends, 2 dead. Of the 5, 4 are back in Colombo. The last one is stranded because of a broken bridge. Broken his leg. But he's alive. Made... # ...contact. He got swept away but swam ashore. Said he's been burying people all day. Just dragging them off the beach and digging holes with his



hands. Go... ¶ This is grassroots media, raw, spontaneous, and brought together in the common tongue of English. Web sites and blogs sprang up, their practical focus on immediate human need, to help locate missing persons and organize support and relief. Spurred by the immediacy and engagement of the new media, donations grew at a record rate, shaming governments into upping their outpaced pledges.

So by its nature, and in the way that it was experienced and understood, and in the reactions to it, the South East Asian tsunami was a significantly novel disaster, its cultural impact beyond simplistic measures of relative importance such as the number killed or financial damage. This is not to downgrade the trauma, loss and suffering of its victims, nor to belittle the efforts of donors and volunteers; it is a recognition that on top of all that there is a wider resonance, and the potential for a great change in the world. New meanings, new priorities and politics, as with 9/11. ¶ But the issue is not friction between peoples, it's between people and the planet. Set against the reality of climate change, the tsunami brings environmental folly and dilemma into focus. ¶ There is nothing man-made about this disaster; but there is no doubt that the damage has been exacerbated by overdevelopment in many of the worst affected areas, and by the flimsiness of so many buildings. On parts of the Indian coast, building regulations prohibit permanent structures within a certain distance of the shore, to preserve a somewhat natural coastline, but that hasn't stopped people living there, and being killed, in shanties. On the Sri Lankan coast, a man whose home was destroyed on December 26th spoke of how it had been built progressively further inland twice before, as each previous location was overcome by encroaching waters. ¶ The tsunami disaster is a warning to the rest of the world on the effects of climate change: rising seas, massive catastrophe. The situation faced in the poor Indian Ocean countries is no different in kind than the one faced in the wealthy

West: where do you make a stand; where can you afford to build substantial buildings to resist floods, and walls and dykes to hold back rising sea levels; where do you leave people to their own devices; and where do you let nature take its course? The rich have more options. ¶ Thinking beyond national boundaries, there is an alternative policy, which is to address climate change head-on by taming energy-extravagant consumerism. It's the only way to achieve the almost immediate 60 percent worldwide reduction in emissions that is required to stabilize greenhouse gas levels. Given the half-hearted efforts of an international community dominated by the gas-guzzling US, typified by spotty implementation of the Kyoto Protocol, the prospects aren't good. As US vice-president Dick Cheney said of his energy plan in 2001, to the despair of environmentalists, "Conservation may be a sign of personal virtue, but it is not a sufficient basis for a sound, comprehensive energy policy". ¶ While it's possible to be optimistic about relief efforts in South East Asia, rebuilding will take decades, and doing it to a standard that will withstand future damage from rising high tides and tsunamis is impossible in poor, polarized countries. The Armenian city of Spitak was destroyed by an earthquake in 1988; shortly afterwards the Soviet Union collapsed and Armenia suffered de-industrialization and appalling social and economic difficulties. Shit happens; they are still rehousing earthquake survivors. ¶ Just suppose, against all odds, that the civil wars cease, that international debts are cancelled and pledges fulfilled, that aid money doesn't vanish into corrupt pockets, that the devastated coastal towns are rebuilt with proper infrastructure and solid buildings, that the millions of homeless are rehoused, and homes are found for tens of thousands of orphans. How long will all that take to achieve? Not before another disaster elsewhere comes along and steals the public's heart and purse. ¶ Realistically, aid is needed now for the immediate trauma in South East Asia. Later, when the tsunami has slipped from the media and the funding drops off, established NGOs, whether



M. K. DIARY DOCUMENTS

BANGKOK, THAILAND
DECEMBER 1991 – JANUARY 1992

MAX KISMAN

they are overarching corporate concerns like The Global Fund for AIDS, TB and Malaria or small outfits such as FreePlay Foundation (supported by Building Letters), will soldier on. ¶ Strategic planning for humanitarian aid involves positioning choices within a time-frame to deal with 1: sudden catastrophe, 2: rebuilding, 3: chronic conditions, and 4: prevention. For instance, The Global Fund has diverted funds originally committed to fighting disease (choice 3) in countries hit by the tsunami, towards immediate relief (choice 1). Under the threat of ecological meltdown, there is an urgent need to reduce future humanitarian disaster by prevention (choice 4), with a political push against climate change. An environmental movement not just to preserve the wilderness from development, but to preserve a habitable planet. ¶ Preventing runaway climate change requires draconian legislation (on a par with recent curtailments of civil liberties) that will drastically alter the way we live, and might require a drop in economic output and individual incomes, with taxes, regulations and subsidies designed to prevent unnecessary travel, while promoting local products and in-country holidays. ¶ The trend in holidays is towards far-flung destinations, which is why there were so many Scandinavian tourists in the disaster area. Plane travel is booming, with the world's airlines carrying a record 1.8 billion passengers in 2004. Nonetheless, they lost £3bn doing so. But there's too much momentum, too many subsidies and vested interests for that to slow it down, and on Jan. 18th Airbus unveiled the next big thing, the A380 superjumbo, in Toulouse, France. It was an Orwellian moment to see British prime minister Tony Blair crowing about this monstrous achievement of (partly) British engineering, the same Blair who has promised to make climate control the central thrust of his chairmanship of the G8. Flying is one of the most climate-changing decisions anyone can make. A return flight from Europe to South East Asia emits, per person, as much carbon dioxide as that person produces in an entire year through all other activities. The A380 is, bizarrely, touted as a greener way to travel, as

its per person emissions are lower than for smaller planes. However, any saving will be completely outweighed by added emissions from the overall increase in air traffic. ¶ In his recent book "Collapses: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive", Jared Diamond offers some explanations for collapses and near-collapses: a failure to anticipate future consequences; an inability to read trends or see beyond creeping normalcy, with things getting a little bit worse all the time but no one really noticing; the disproportionate power of detached elites, particularly when they condone or promote bad behavior on the part of those who manage or use natural resources; the lack of a sense of intergenerational justice towards future generations; and, when substantial change is required to a society's core values, the ease of a dodgy denial. The final chapter is titled "The World as Polder", praising the Dutch achievement and holding it up as an example. One-fifth of the land mass of the Netherlands is below sea level -- reclaimed lands called "polders", the result of smart engineering and solidarity. ¶ Jonathon Porritt, chairman of the UK Sustainable Development Commission, sees a similar attitude in the extraordinary response of the rich world to those countries shattered by the South East Asian tsunami "... precisely the kind of empathy and engagement on which our ability to avoid ecological collapse will surely depend". ¶ That's inspirational, but wishful thinking. There are many who will make an occasional contribution, and only ever a few who are prepared to make a major commitment. Thank goodness for them all, but it's not enough. Individual initiatives, or free market strategies such as carbon taxes, won't slow climate change. Fuel rationing will. ≈



AFTER THE LANDING OF THE GIANT AEROFLOT TUPOLEV AIRLINER AT BANGKOK INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, WE'RE MOVING DOWNTOWN BANGKOK IN A MASSIVE FLOW OF TRAFFIC. I AM IMPRESSED WITH THE BUSY, LIVELY STREETS. PEOPLE ARE EATING EVERYWHERE. MANY CAB'S AND TUK TUK'S NAVIGATING CHAOTICALLY. OUR HOST'S APARTMENT IS A BEAUTIFUL PLACE ON A QUIET DEAD END SIDE STREET IN CENTRAL BANGKOK.

Unless being somehow physically involved, a disaster doesn't mean that much, I guess. Of course I will be touched and shocked by news reports, images and stories. But still, the distance doesn't involve me completely. Yet the awareness of any great event that triggers a huge change in the lives of so many people, whether from a natural disaster or human violence, stimulates my imagination to find a way to relate to or deal with it. ¶ I have been fortunate to visit the beautiful country of Thailand twice. And Bangkok made a huge, overwhelming impression. The pure scale of it, its massive traffic, the noisy main streets, the gentle people and the silence of the side streets and alleys, the sun rise and the sun set, the beautiful

temples and shrines, the energy and ambition, the large crowds, the Buddhist monks, the riverboats, rides in the Tuk Tuk taxis, the contrast of the old and the new, people living anywhere possible, the labyrinth of the orchid farms, the many markets, the small food stands everywhere. Nothing like I've ever seen before. ¶ Asking a few friends, present in Thailand at the time of the tsunami disaster, about its effect on their lives, they told me that people were either too occupied with their own lives to care about it, or, because of their outdoor lives, were less taken by media coverage than us in the west, where we always are stuck in front of our TV sets in our cosy living rooms.