

The “Silent Tsunami”

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When the world's most powerful earthquake in more than 40 years struck deep under the Indian Ocean on December 26, 2004, triggering a massive tsunami, a great outpouring of help from governments and people everywhere followed. The sheer magnitude of the disaster, which claimed almost 228,000 lives and left two million people destitute, galvanized aid agencies.

It was heart-breaking to see the images of bloated corpses, traumatized children, wrecked buildings, frantic rescue workers, and countless hands outstretched for food and water. A wave of compassion swept around the world and donations poured in. Water and sanitation projects for Indonesia. Hygiene kits and special counselors for India. Temporary shelters for Sri Lanka. Aid groups did an admirable job in saving as many lives as possible and providing survivors with the basic necessities – food, water, clothing, shelter, medical care. Quick action prevented major outbreaks of waterborne disease that could have doubled the death toll from the disaster. The tsunami was truly an earth-shattering experience.

What is the lesson from the tsunami? Was God sending us a message? Are we supposed to wake up to the continuing toll of human suffering?

Perhaps we all have to address these questions in our own way. For me, there have been powerful lessons.

First, governments and civil society must wake up to a “silent tsunami,” which is killing 20,000 people every day from extreme poverty. This is 7.3 million people per year. Most of them are children who die from malnutrition before their fifth birthday. More than 800 million people go to bed hungry every night. Some 2.6 billion people – 40 percent of the world’s population – do not have basic sanitation. Every minute, a woman somewhere dies in pregnancy or childbirth; this is more than half a million women per year. The “silent tsunami” of malaria kills as many people in Africa every month as died in the December 26 tsunami.

All these people die, for the most part, namelessly with no public attention. Their deaths have a common denominator: poverty, pneumonia, diarrhea, malnutrition, and malaria may be the killers, but it is persistent, deep-seated poverty that cuts short so many lives.

Poverty is not just a problem in some other part of the world. In Canada, one million children live in poverty, an increase since 1989 when Parliament vowed to end child poverty. Last year, the child poverty rate in single mother families rose 50 percent. The rates for Aboriginal, immigrant and children in visible minority groups is double the national average. Here

in Edmonton, the latest count showed 1,915 homeless persons, and the swelling numbers at food banks reflects the poverty that exists in the land of plenty. All this too is part of the “silent tsunami” right here in our midst.

Have we become so used to the effects of poverty on our society – world, national, local – that we really don’t think about it much? Have we stopped challenging governments to adopt spending priorities to promote social justice? Do we need a calamity to put a spotlight on human suffering?

These are some of the questions I am wrestling with, for the tsunami was a vivid reminder of the human security agenda.

One obvious lesson to be drawn is that governments and civil society must avert an even worse catastrophe that would be set off by a nuclear weapon attack. The result of such an act would be the destruction of the very infrastructure that is required to help survivors. Though the suffering from the tsunami was intense, at least there was a physical infrastructure remaining: planes with relief supplies could land at airports, trucks could carry foodstuffs and water along the roads, medical personnel were on hand. This kind of help would not be available to the survivors of a nuclear war.

Only the hand of God has so far spared the world a nuclear war. Is it unreasonable to think that, through the tsunami, God is sending the world a message to get rid of the 34,000 nuclear weapons still in existence, 5,000 of

them maintained on instant alert status? I recently attended a meeting at the United Nations in New York where U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan warned that the global economic consequences of a nuclear attack on a major city anywhere would drive millions of people in poor countries into deeper deprivation and suffering.

What about the message of the disproportionate amount of money the world spends on arms relative to the meager funding for development? This week the latest figures for world military spending were announced. In 2004, the world spent \$1.035 trillion on arms, a 20 percent increase in the past two years. This is a scandal, an outrage, a theft from the poor of the world. While they spend increasing amounts on weaponry, governments throughout the world are nowhere near providing the \$50 billion a year needed to achieve the U.N.'s Millennium Development Goals, designed to halve poverty by 2015.

Thirty-five years after the target of 0.7 percent of gross domestic product was set for Official Development Assistance, the 22 richest countries in the world, still average only 0.25 percent. We would have a lot more human security in the world if governments reversed their priorities and spent \$50 billion on weaponry and \$1 trillion on eliminating poverty. Unfortunately, such a reversal of priorities would be considered "pie in the

sky.” But doesn’t the tsunami at least make us think about these things and the kind of world we truly want?

What about Canada? It is sadly ironic that Canada, whose former Prime Minister, Lester B. Pearson, set the 0.7 percent standard, still languishes at only 0.3 percent. Kofi Annan has pleaded with all the developed countries to raise their aid levels to 0.7 percent by 2015. Germany, Belgium, Ireland, France, Finland, Spain and the United Kingdom have all announced a timetable to reach the goal by 2015. Denmark, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway and Sweden have already met the target. But the Canadian government refuses to set a timetable and, at the current rate of growth, Canada’s aid will only reach 0.7 percent in 2027. Is it really too much to ask Canada – a land blessed by God as hardly any other place in the world – to devote 70 cents of every \$100 of gross domestic product to the poorest of the world?

I call on the Canadian government to announce at next month’s summit of the G8 countries a firm timetable to reach the Official Development Assistance target of 0.7 percent of GDP by 2015. Canada must work with the other industrialized countries to cancel the debts of the poorest countries and construct policies on fair global trade. I ask you to

join me in this call of conscience to help stop the pernicious trend in which the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer.

The tsunami has challenged me to think about, and increase my own actions to achieve, a more human-centered world. This starts right here in our midst with the work of the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace, working to help the poor in many countries, and Catholic Social Services, working to help the most vulnerable people of all faiths, cultures and races in our own community. Our support for these organizations truly is a way for us to respond to the ongoing “silent tsunami.”

Though our times are tumultuous, and anxiety seems to be a common condition of life, some deep hope should also pervade our thinking. We have reached a new moment in history when we understand the forces of nature and the consequences of political actions as never before. We understand how the world works and how the fates of every woman, man and child are intertwined across the globe. The marvels of electronic communication and transport enable us to know and understand, as the Second Vatican Council said, “the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties” of all people. . . . Those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.”

It is hopeful to know, as Secretary-General Annan has reminded us, that we actually can halve global poverty and halt the spread of disease in the next decade. We can reduce the prevalence of violent conflict and terrorism. We can increase respect for human dignity in every land. By acting together, we can make people everywhere more secure and better able to enjoy their fundamental human rights.

Weapons or water? Guns or bread? This is the stark choice facing humanity. The tsunami woke up humanity; now we must stay awake. The “silent tsunami” needs our attention. We must feel the strength of this moment and draw from it our hope for the future. This hope is a powerful motivation for action to build a culture of peace and make our world a human-centered place.