

The Tsunami, God and a Nuclear Catastrophe

By Douglas Roche

Wrenching as the scenes of the tsunami devastation in Asia are, there is an even deeper calamity awaiting humanity if the world does not wake up to nuclear dangers.

It is heart-breaking to see the images of bloated corpses, traumatized children, wrecked buildings, frantic rescue-workers, and countless hands outstretched for food and water. The scale of the disaster in the countries around the Bay of Bengal is overpowering. Nations around the world, slow at first to respond, are now pouring aid into the stricken areas.

This is, as U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan has said, “an unprecedented global catastrophe” and it has reached into our hearts and souls.

One wonders what God’s role is in this. After all, the earthquake happened far beneath the surface of the earth. While tsunami-warning devices were sadly lacking in that part of the world, the primary cause of the suffering appears to be an act of nature, far beyond human ability to control.

Earthquakes, avalanches, floods, hurricanes – all these terrors seem part of our planetary system. But on the human journey through time, we have learned to some degree to cope with the ravages of nature.

In this instance, with millions made homeless and desperate for life-sustaining materials, the suffering of the survivors seems immense. Yet there is a physical infrastructure remaining from the tsunami: planes with relief supplies can land at airports, trucks can carry foodstuffs and water along roads, medical personnel are on hand. It is terrible, but survival is possible.

The lesson we ought to draw from this experience is that governments and civil society must avert an even worse catastrophe that would be set off by a nuclear weapons attack. For the result of such an act would be the destruction of the very infrastructure that is required to help survivors.

So many people think the nuclear weapons problem has gone away. It hasn’t. There are some 34,000 nuclear weapons in existence, and the United States and Russia keep about 5,000 on hair-trigger alert in which they could be fired on 15 minutes’ notice. Terrorists are trying to acquire nuclear weapons materials; if they had used a nuclear device at Ground Zero in New York on September 11, hundreds of thousands of people would have died immediately with millions of survivors left in a radiation-poisoned atmosphere and health, food and transportation services broken down.

Twenty years ago, the distinguished scientist Carl Sagan did a study, “Nuclear Winter,” in which he explored the unforeseen and devastating physical and chemical effects of even a small-scale nuclear war on the earth’s biosphere and

life on earth.

A more or less typical strategic warhead has a yield of 2 megatons, the explosive equivalent of 2 million tons of TNT. In a 2-megaton explosion over a city, buildings would be vaporized, people reduced to atoms and shadows, outlying structures blown down like matchsticks and raging fires ignited. Nuclear explosions and ground bursts would cut off sunlight, temperatures would plunge, crops and farm animals would be destroyed, and the poisonous effects of radiation would sweep across hundreds of miles. Epidemics and pandemics would be rampant. The threshold for nuclear winter, Sagan said, is very low. Parallel studies by the United Nations showed that indirect effects of nuclear winter could kill millions more through the breakdown of communications, transportation and financial systems.

It is nearly 60 years since the first use of the atomic bomb. Far from getting rid of them, the major nations are now embedding nuclear weapons into their war-fighting nuclear doctrines. Only through luck – or is it the hand of God? – have we been able to escape a nuclear explosion through design or accident.

Is God now speaking to us through the tsunami disaster? Is God saying: look at the terrible problems you have dealing with the effects of a natural disaster, but at least you have the infrastructure to enable the survivors to be helped? Why don't you wake up to the total calamity of a nuclear weapon explosion and realize you won't be able to cope with such a human-made disaster?

I don't know if God is so speaking. What I do know is that every day humanity tolerates the continuance of nuclear weapons, we are one day closer to the ultimate disaster for humanity.

Douglas Roche is a former Senator from Alberta and author of "The Human Right to Peace."