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Political Consequences of the Tidal Wave in Indonesia and Sri Lanka

Kay Möller / Christian Wagner

The tidal wave that originated near Indonesia's Sumatra island on 26 December 2004 killed more than 170,000 people in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, India, and the Maldives. International pledges to generously contribute to the reconstruction effort have inspired new hopes for a settlement of decades-old civil wars in Indonesia and Sri Lanka. Whereas positive developments in both states cannot be ruled out, it remains doubtful whether international aid can provide a basis for lasting conflict solutions.

While Indonesia accounts for the greatest number of victims, Sri Lanka, in terms of its size, stands among the most afflicted countries. In contrast to Indonesia, long-term economic losses will be considerable here. These losses will undoubtedly have a negative influence on the island's overall development.

National and international aid efforts have been viewed as possible catalysts for reconciliation processes in the civil war regions of Aceh and in the north and northeast of Sri Lanka. At the same time, historical precedence inspires little optimism in this respect: a 1970 typhoon in what was then East Pakistan did not end the smouldering conflict with the western part of the country. On the contrary, grass-root protests against the slow arrival of help further contributed to the subsequent escalation.

Indonesia

Since the 1950s, Aceh has been a scene of unrest. Since the late 1970s, guerillas have been fighting for the province's independence from Indonesia. The conflict escalated following East Timor's separation from Indonesia in 1999; an agreement on the cessation of hostilities signed in December 2002 failed shortly afterwards. In May 2003, Jakarta declared martial law in the province and dispatched some 30,000 soldiers and 10,000 policemen to eliminate the 2,000 independence fighters that had withdrawn to central mountain areas. In the course of the campaign, several hundred rebels were killed and several thousand civilians were displaced. In May 2004, martial law was replaced with a "civilian state of emergency." However, both armed conflict and repression of the civilian population continued.

After the December 26 tidal wave had devastated large parts of Aceh, three days went by before the government allowed international aid organizations to access afflicted areas. Even after that date, there were instances of the Indonesian military hindering these organizations from performing their tasks. The military itself dispatched 15,000 troops to assist flood victims. The state of emergency was officially lifted, and the guerillas accepted the offer of a "limited armistice." At the same time, however, the armed forces continued their operations against independence fighters.

If the catastrophe still inspires some hope of a reconciliation process in Aceh, then it is because the Indonesian military now finds itself confronted with a massive foreign presence. It is particularly the new freedom of movement for journalists in the province that could moderate the army's behavior. Furthermore, representatives of Aceh's civil society who had left the province after the proclamation of martial law have returned.

When Indonesia's vice president, Yusuf Kalla, announced that foreign-aid workers would not be permitted to stay in the crisis region for more than three months, this showed that, aside from restrictions on the latter's freedom of movement, the military was still harboring reservations about these developments. (Events in Aceh seem to have motivated the Burmese junta to play down the number of victims in their own country and to only selectively accept foreign assistance.)

The international community's criticism of the restrictions, as well as an announcement made by Indonesia's foreign minister and aid coordinator, Hassan Wirajuda, that the government would seek further talks with the guerillas, could signal the resumption of dialogue. Even in that case, however, it remains uncertain how sustainable a new negotiation process would be once foreign-aid organizations have left the country.

Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, the "Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam" (LTTE) have been fighting for an independent state since 1983. Their opponent is a Colombo government dominated by parties of the Sinhalese majority. At the time of writing, the conflict has claimed more than 60,000 lives. In 2002, an armistice supervised by Scandinavian observers was signed under Norwegian mediation. In the summer of 2003, the international community pledged US\$4.5 billion for the reconstruction of regions destroyed by the civil war in exchange for progress in the peace process. This offer, however, was insufficient to prevent an erosion of the latter. In December 2004, even Norway considered withdrawing from Sri Lanka.

The tidal wave not only afflicted southern tourist areas but also northern and eastern war zones. In their first statements, both President Kumaratunga and the LTTE leadership launched appeals for solidarity among different ethnic groups. The press called for a "considerate" reconstruction that would breathe new life into the peace process.

However, government assistance took a long time to reach areas controlled by the LTTE, a fact that inspired Tamil civilians to protest Prime Minister Rajapaksa's visit to Jaffna. The LTTE insisted on controlling the distribution of aid and limited the freedom of movement of foreign-aid organizations.

It is still too early to assess the consequences of the tidal wave for the peace process. First of all, it remains unclear how much damage the LTTE military infrastructure—and especially "Sea Tiger" naval units—has suffered. Even after the catastrophe, the LTTE seem to have continued their much criticized policy of forcedly recruiting children and adolescents, many of whom had lost their parents in the flood. In the eastern province, which has been the site of intense struggle, reconstruction could weaken the LTTE's position. It was here that in the spring of 2003, former LTTE commander, Karuna, renounced the northern-based guerilla leadership while

calling for a greater involvement of the eastern province in the peace process. He engaged the Tigers in skirmishes and signaled his readiness to compromise on negotiations with the Colombo government. The Karuna faction could receive an additional boost in the context of reconstruction activities. This would constitute an important setback for the LTTE which would lose further support in the eastern province.

Secondly, India's presence in Sri Lanka is likely to further grow due to the considerable amount of assistance granted as well as the involvement of Indian firms in reconstruction activities in the north and east. Delhi's increasing role has not been appreciated by the LTTE; for the time being, however, the Indian Union has abstained from contributing to the peace process.

Thirdly, possible political consequences in the Sinhalese south cannot be confidently predicted either. Here the Buddhist-nationalist People's Liberation Front (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, JVP) the most important single member of the ruling coalition, had increasingly criticized foreign mediation, thus confronting the president as well. On the one hand, international aid in the JVP's southern strongholds could lessen the aversion to outside involvement. On the other hand, the JVP has been benefiting from problems related to reconstruction and has offered the victims important assistance of its own, a move that could further strengthen its influence.

Fourthly, historical experience does not suggest a rapprochement. The assistance provided in the summer of 2003 hardly contributed to progress in the peace process. It is difficult to imagine that new international aid pledges would at this point encourage greater flexibility in negotiations between the government and the LTTE.

Perspectives

Given the different nature of the conflicts examined here, the question as to whether the impact of the tidal wave will moderate conflict behavior cannot be unequivocally answered for the time being. Over the short term, the victims' suffering and the losses registered by combatants, too, would seem to have contributed to a certain restraint.

In Indonesia, there is the possibility of new negotiations for a political settlement in Aceh. This does not mean that talks will continue once the international attention has abated. In Sri Lanka, the LTTE may have been weakened. However, should Sinhalese hard-liners, such as the members of the JVP, benefit from the event, this would hardly constitute a new lease on life for the peace process. It is still hoped that the present armistice can at least be maintained and that international observers can continue their work.

At the same time, new tensions cannot be ruled out once reconstruction seriously starts and is accompanied by a massive inflow of international funds. Socioeconomic inequality and a lack of autonomy for national minorities have been among the root causes of the conflicts in question. Apart from widespread corruption and the existence of far-reaching networks of patronage, one would also expect aid to be instrumental in benefiting political agendas. As a matter of principle, international donors will have to deal with central governments. It remains doubtful whether they will be able to influence the distribution of aid, especially as far as different ethnicities are concerned.

Consequences for German and European Policy

Given a lack of common concepts and instruments, Germany and Europe so far have not played a role in the South and Southeast Asian power dynamics. For this reason, a long-term involvement in civil war situations such as the ones in Indonesia and Sri Lanka has not materialized.

Due to the great amount of assistance promised by both Germany and Europe, however, a higher level of engagement would appear to be unavoidable in the future. Active contributions toward the solution of such conflicts become mandatory if one does not want aid to be misused as a resource for the continuation of struggle. Therefore, representatives of local civil societies should be tied into the reconstruction effort. Furthermore, continued violations of armistices should be addressed with those responsible and, if necessary, in connection with pledges made.

Lastly, both Germany and Europe should consider the possibility of an active mediation in Aceh and northeastern Sri Lanka. In both cases, mediation should aim for the consolidation of armistices as well as the granting of comprehensive autonomies along the lines of earlier agreements.

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