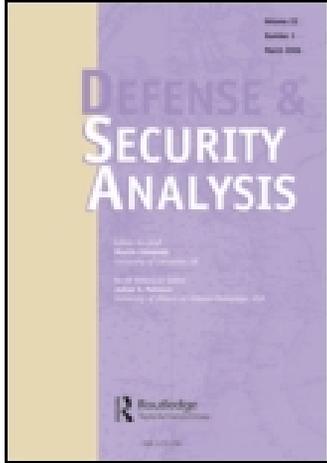


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### Silver Linings: Natural Disasters, International Relations and Political Change in South Asia, 2004-5

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# Silver Linings: Natural Disasters, International Relations and Political Change in South Asia, 2004–5<sup>1</sup>

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Disasters present unusual laboratories for the study of change and processes of transition. Disaster tends to shatter existing norms and practices among states, creating a (momentary) opportunity for fresh recognition of the fragility of life and common humanity that bond all peoples.<sup>2</sup>

Disasters always seem to strike on perfect-looking days. Violent tremors that woke us early on a cool December morning passed soon after but our Sunday morning routines were shattered when someone switched on a television set to watch the news. We had no idea until then that, as we ate breakfast, a tsunami had wrecked lives and communities around Asia, including homes less than 15 minutes away from our dining-table. As the horrible news registered, one knew intuitively that this was an historical milestone to which we would refer for the rest of our lives.

The tsunami spared the northern reaches of the South Asian subcontinent but another beautiful morning ten months later brought devastation as an earthquake turned Kashmiri towns to debris and communities to clusters of survivors on both sides of the India–Pakistan Line of Control.

There are both normative and empirical reasons why South Asians should pause to consider the relationship of disasters and conflict. The normative imperative arises when we look at the devastation around us and understand that the time we waste on armed bickering is time that could have been spent securing the people that have just been lost. Amid the rubble and ruins, there are also signs of co-operative action in the face of devastation, humanitarian responses that transcend divisions and the temporary suspension of hostilities-as-usual – and therein arises the rationale for empirical research on the impact of disasters on conflict, within and between states.

In this paper, this disaster-conflict relationship is operationalized as two questions:

1. What is the impact that disasters have on long-standing inter-state conflicts?
2. What is the impact that disasters have on internal conflicts within states?

The December 2004 tsunami affected Sri Lanka, the Maldives and insular and south India; then, in October 2005 an earthquake hit Kashmir on both sides of the inter-state border. These two disasters and their consequences for the conflict in Sri Lanka, struggle for democracy in the Maldives, the insurgency in Kashmir and the inter-state relationship between India and Pakistan make up the case studies for this paper. Since these events are relatively recent, the discussion draws primarily on media reports and scholarly and commentators' analyses of each situation as it has unfolded.

## **TWO DISASTERS REMEMBERED: THE DECEMBER 2004 TSUNAMI AND THE OCTOBER 2005 KASHMIRI EARTHQUAKE**

It is reasonable to ask what makes these two disasters singular in a region where everyday life for many continues to have a Hobbesian quality. Other terrible natural disasters have struck and continue to strike here. Two arguments can be proffered for choosing to study these 2004 and 2005 disasters. First, they struck across borders, and dramatically so. Second, they occurred in quick succession, the second reinforcing the lessons that were just beginning to be drawn from the first.

On 26 December 2004, an undersea earthquake off the coast of Sumatra generated a tsunami that traveled across the Indian Ocean devastating coastal communities in Indonesia's Sumatra and Aceh, Thailand, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, India's Andamans and southernmost states, the Maldives and Somalia. Tsunami waves also reached Kenya, Tanzania and Seychelles. Estimates vary but remain in the ballpark of 200,000. In Gareth Evans's words, the tsunami was the "first truly global catastrophe":

Cheap travel and mass tourism meant thousands of lives lost from many more countries than even the ten immediately affected; modern communications, technically advanced and unconstrained by national boundaries, meant instant saturation coverage around the world . . . and the scale and intensity of the reaction has been a moving demonstration that when people and their governments are confronted in a way they can immediately understand by human suffering, they do care, deeply, and will respond accordingly.<sup>3</sup>

Less than a year later, a major earthquake shook and devastated Kashmir on both sides of the LOC. Its epicenter was just outside the Pakistani Kashmir capital city, Muzaffarabad, which was almost completely destroyed. Although the initial death toll was lower than that of the tsunami, other factors compounded the tragedy. The Kashmir terrain was not easy for civilian relief agencies to navigate. Furthermore, the division of Kashmir meant that some places better reached from the other side of the border were left waiting for diplomatic decisions to be made. Search and rescue operations were consequently delayed. Occurring in the first week of October, the earthquake left survivors homeless and exposed in the onset of a winter in high mountainous altitudes. Death and casualty figures vary for this disaster as well. In a year that began with the tsunami, and saw the Mumbai floods and Hurricane Katrina, victims of the Kashmir earthquake were left facing what commentators called "compassion fatigue". The year 2005 in South Asia is best summed up thus:

We have learnt that nothing material is permanent. What matters most are things you can't see – like the bonds between people. Buildings don't matter anymore, they all fall down. Making money, getting a big house – what's the point? Just help people. Live for others. That's what we have learnt.<sup>4</sup>

## DISASTERS AND CONFLICT: A LITERATURE REVIEW

The two dimensions of the disaster-conflict relationship that this paper sets out to explore have been written about less than one would expect. We are accustomed to separating conflicts that occur within the state from those that occur between states; this paper follows that convention, partly to accommodate the Maldives case. The nascent “disaster diplomacy” literature has been built primarily on case studies of inter-state interaction. The choice of level of analysis is not explicated or argued, which thus leaves open the possibility either that the same ideas apply across levels of analysis or that there is another angle to the disaster-conflict relationship – that of the sub-state level of analysis. This paper accepts the possibility that “disaster diplomacy” could apply at any level of analysis, but uses two categories to broaden the scope of “conflict” to include a broader range of civil and political conflict, such as the Maldivian democratization struggle.

At each level of analysis, one case appears to have iconic potential. The accelerated normalization of Greek–Turkish relations is the first context in which the term “disaster diplomacy” was employed, and is the case most frequently cited of an example of co-operation in the aftermath of a disaster. The accord in Aceh is likely to become the classic instance of internal conflict resolution after a disaster as people write on these issues in the post-tsunami period.

### “DISASTER DIPLOMACY”

The scholars in whose work the term “disaster diplomacy” first appeared did not define the term; however, the following working definition appears to suit: “disaster diplomacy” refers to inter-state diplomatic interactions – formal and public – that follow in the immediate aftermath of a major natural disaster.<sup>5</sup> For Kelman and Koukis, it was a rubric under which they sought to understand the extent to which disasters alter equations between states, especially those with a history of hostility.

In a section of the Autumn–Winter 2000 issue of *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Kelman and Koukis brought together four essays on “disaster diplomacy”. Apart from their preface, there were three case studies – on the Greek–Turkish rapprochement by Ker-Lindsay, US–Cuban relations by Glantz, and the drought in Southern Africa by Holloway. Additionally there was an essay by Comfort in which he explored an alternative analytical framework. The central question addressed was: “Do natural disasters induce international co-operation amongst countries that have traditionally been enemies?”<sup>6</sup> The broad conclusion of these essays was that disasters do play a catalytic, not causal role, in international relations. That is, where there is a pre-existing peace process or co-operative structure, disasters encourage further co-operation. A small literature has emerged around this initial cluster of essays, as well as an electronically-linked epistemic community.

In a later work, Kelman discusses the scope of this emerging area along two analytical dimensions – nature of the disaster and the level of analysis.<sup>7</sup> Following Mark Pelling's work, he identifies two categories of disaster: the catastrophic (such as earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions) and the chronic (such as water or energy shortages).<sup>8</sup> Kelman suggests that the latter should be included in the analysis of "disaster diplomacy"; from the perspective of South Asia, however, this adds no value. Chronic shortages, lack of resources and environmental degradation are a ubiquitous part of the region's reality, even today. Not only would their inclusion make any study unwieldy, but it would also undermine the study's findings; after all, over half a century of chronic disasters has not served to improve diplomatic relations between the two largest states in the region.

The level of analysis dimension also raises questions. In Kelman's words:

Disaster diplomacy tends to privilege cross-border events above disasters located within a single nation-state . . . Society's potential unwillingness to treat both sides of a border as similar before or after a disaster often augments vulnerabilities.<sup>9</sup>

It is the level of analysis or, in his words, the "spatial scale" of the disaster that is in question, not the political relationship sought to be affected. In other words, the level of analysis is determined by the independent variable and not the dependent variable. It reflects the point of departure of much of the study of disasters, rather than of international relations! The problem with looking only at inter-state relations is that in most parts of the world internal conflicts are far more prevalent. They exact a greater toll on life and property and, consequently, more urgently need resolution.<sup>10</sup> Recently, the disaster-related interactions of small non-sovereign island governments with external sovereign and inter-governmental actors have been studied, expanding to some extent the scope of this emerging field.<sup>11</sup>

That said, how exactly does "disaster diplomacy" work?<sup>12</sup> First, the shock, shared grief and the humanitarian impulse transcend borders and jurisdictions in their impulse to reach out to others. Even the much-derided donations of heavy winter clothing to the equatorial communities affected by the tsunami came from a genuine need to share the loss felt by other human beings. In that climate, everything else seems petty and the disaster moment creates a small opening to another way of looking at an old situation. Related to this, such moments of sympathy are opportunities for making amends. Without getting into the intricate questions of notions of forgiveness, impunity and reconciliation, it can be said that catastrophic disasters offer a moment in which it is possible to set aside the cycles of blame and reach out without losing face. The Greek-Turkish rapprochement after the earthquakes of 1999 is one example. While post-disaster sentiment is a weak foundation for such a rapprochement, it affords a moment in which public support is easy to rally, and such humanitarian actions cannot easily be opposed.<sup>13</sup>

"Disaster diplomacy", then, acts a great deal like "cricket" or "baseball" diplomacy; the occasion presents a chance for informal exchange outside the formal structures, procedures and strictures of diplomatic protocol. The hope is that the non-political focus of the moment will create enough unstructured space for breakthroughs; they are

not in themselves, however, real breakthroughs.<sup>14</sup> The interaction on the ground of non-governmental organizations (NGO) and international agencies and volunteers sometimes facilitates a breakthrough, but as a form of “citizen diplomacy”.

Where writers have focused on the potential of disaster mitigation and post-disaster reconstruction and co-operation to generate a long-term interaction, they do so in line with the arguments of the integration theorists of the 1960s and 1970s or, even, with ideas of the co-operation advocated by the anarchy theorists of the 1990s. Integration theory arose as a reflection of changes in Europe in the decade after World War II. Functionalists argued that, over time, government would center around technical issues and services, and co-operation between agencies at different levels – sub-state to supra-state – were required for effectiveness.<sup>15</sup> The co-operative structures they set up would eventually dominate state-level political structures. Technical, or functional, co-operation would pave the way for integration. Thus, in theory, co-operative or regional arrangements for disaster mitigation, the joint redevelopment of ecological resources, or other reconstruction activities could facilitate better diplomatic and political relations.

Co-operation theorists wrote in the 1990s about the conditions that encourage co-operation, one of which was repeated interaction.<sup>16</sup> This leads, however, to the one drawback of taking a functionalist view of disaster diplomacy. For functional co-operation to alter the nature of a relationship, it needs to be a sustained process. As Glantz points out in his writing on the El Niño and La Niña cycles causing climate change, US–Cuban co-operation was hard to sustain, because they were not regular occurrences; any small amount of little co-operation between the two countries might only be possible in a given season.<sup>17</sup> In her work on drought in Southern Africa in the early 1990s, Holloway writes that the drought played a paradoxical role, placing the region at food security risk but then working as what she terms a “confidence-building” opportunity for regional co-operation.<sup>18</sup> The difference in the two cases is that while US policy and attitudes towards Cuba remained hostile, the states of southern Africa were already coming together in regional arrangements for co-operation. When the drought occurred, there was already a process under way that was accelerated. These states had already identified a common security future.

In the aftermath of the tsunami, there was a great deal of heartbreak over the absence of regional early warning systems. A year later, there have been reports that India is reluctant to enter into such arrangements for fear of compromising its national security. This is the second hurdle that “disaster diplomacy” has to cross before it can yield a co-operative relationship. What are India’s reasons for refusing to be involved when other Indian Ocean states together are trying to install an early warning system? Bagla identifies two related reasons: first, information about seismic and tidal parameters made available to other countries could leave India vulnerable; and, second, this information would also allow them to detect Indian submarines and underwater nuclear tests.<sup>19</sup> It is a difficult choice for India, because merely using an Indian system would not allow it enough data to predict earthquakes and tsunamis accurately when sharing data would make it vulnerable to other risks. In facing such a choice, India is not alone; this is an important hurdle in the progression from “relief diplomacy” to building longer-term co-operative relationships. Ultimately, the test of disaster diplomacy is in development rather than initiation of ties between two (or more) hitherto unfriendly governments.

## DISASTERS AND THE RESOLUTION OF CIVIL CONFLICTS

“When the bodies were counted in Sri Lanka, we found that many of the deadly wounds were inflicted by barbed wire fences put as barriers to control certain areas.”<sup>20</sup>

Jared Diamond points out that ecologists and politicians asked to produce a list of environmental and conflict hotspots would produce identical lists.<sup>21</sup> Three of the states hit by the 2004 tsunami were engaged in internal struggles for political change – Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Maldives. Kashmir is not just a contentious inter-state issue but also the location of an insurgency whose politics is intertwined with the inter-state dispute. There are two directions in which this relationship goes: the impact of conflict on natural disasters crises and the impact of the disaster on ongoing conflicts. While it is the latter in which we are essentially interested, the former merits a brief consideration.

Writing about the politics of international relief, Keith Suter identifies four ways that conflict complicates the delivery of emergency relief. First, the government and its opposition (or, parties to the conflict) could exploit the disaster by preventing aid from going to the area controlled by the other side “to starve them into submission”.<sup>22</sup> (Suter does not mention the possibility of “competitive compassion”, a term used by others writing on post-tsunami giving. This is suggested as a possible obstacle to successfully linking post-tsunami reconstruction and peacebuilding by Loganathan.<sup>23</sup>) Further, relief operations conducted by the military may be used (or construed) as a ruse to conduct military operations. Third, the use of military transport or collaborative action by military and relief personnel may result in the targeting of relief personnel as part of the ongoing conflict. The provision of protection to relief personnel becomes an additional problem at a time of crisis. Finally, Suter alludes to the presence of unexploded landmines and ordnance. In a report published around the same time, ten days after the tsunami struck, UNDP’s Crisis Prevention and Recovery unit reported from Sri Lanka that mines were not washing ashore, most coastal areas had been cleared and there were no post-tsunami mine victims. Displaced mines remained near places already known to be dangerous, however, “[M]arking and fencing of minefields throughout the coastal area of the Northeast” was destroyed by the tsunami and, furthermore, the tsunami changed the coastal landscape enough so that it would have been hard for returning civilians to know where these areas had been.<sup>24</sup>

What is the impact of natural disasters on ongoing conflicts? Natural disasters bring horror and grief that transcend and momentarily efface other divides. The question is whether this survives into the post-emergency phase. If shared trauma and emergency relief operations offer a moment of co-operation, it is possible to extend that moment through co-operative and co-ordinated reconstruction programs. The devastation of natural disasters erases old slates and it is possible to rewrite the rules that led to the conflict in the first place without losing face. Disasters also level the playing field – literally and metaphorically; the starting point for reconstruction is the same across class and ethnic group.

However, this potential for good outcomes is matched by a list of things that can go wrong: the conduct and outcomes of needs and impact assessments; the mechanisms of distribution; the discussion of who should get what and in the disparity between aid

allocation for the disaster and previous crises. “Although natural disasters are in a sense “non discriminatory”, war-affected countries have higher pre-existing levels of vulnerability, while the distribution of vulnerability tends to be geographically concentrated in the areas most affected by violence.”<sup>25</sup>

While tsunamis, earthquakes or volcanoes do not favor one community over another, the pre-existing conditions in the areas they affect vary, and therefore the impact of the disaster varies – creating new problems or compounding old ones. Writing about Aceh, Hedman states that tsunami victims faced many constraints; chief of which may have been that the term “Internally Displaced Person” (IDP) was reserved for conflict refugees, while they were by and large called the “homeless”. Not being called “IDPs” had important consequences for the rights and guarantees for protection and assistance to which the tsunami victims were entitled.<sup>26</sup>

Suter suggests that conflicts complicate the delivery of relief; however, the discussion of how to deliver relief and reconstruction resources across the lines of battle can be contentious too. The detailed discussion of the Sri Lankan case will illustrate this. In brief, however, the first problem that arose here was one of perception. Both government- and rebel-controlled areas suffered equally in the tsunami. In Jayadeva Uyangoda’s words: “While the government views itself as the undisputed representative of the nation-state and the primary driver of post-tsunami recovery, the LTTE claims to be the ‘sole representative’ of the Tamil nation.”<sup>27</sup>

It took half a year for the two parties to agree on an institutional arrangement to distribute aid and in the meantime the moment of co-operation was lost in this wrangling. Whether the government should receive aid and disburse it to the LTTE for the areas in its control, or should be given access to those areas for distribution of relief, or the LTTE should directly receive this assistance from abroad – all resonated with the conflict’s root issues and, therefore, lent force to rather than dissipated the hostile environment in which the tsunami reconstruction started.

The difference in response to one crisis and another, the disparity between aid disbursed to victims of a new crisis versus those of a pre-existing one, and the inequalities created when the purchasing power of those in refugee camps is actually higher than those whose communities host the camps – all become grievances, as we have seen in other contexts.

Almost every commentator has remarked upon the extraordinary generosity shown by people the world over in the aftermath of the tsunami. One NGO, Médecins Sans Frontières, went on the record to say they had more than enough money to use for tsunami relief and suggested that donors give to others. But in India, the tsunami followed only two years after the devastating Gujarat earthquake, and ten months later was followed by the Kashmir earthquake which reduced towns to rubble in minutes. There was no comparison, and commentators wrote about “compassion fatigue”.<sup>28</sup> In fact, one news report states that one charity raised USD 3.2 million right after the tsunami, but only USD 1.3 million after Hurricane Katrina and USD 482,000 after the Kashmir earthquake.<sup>29</sup> People and companies were “tapped out”, the same report quotes, going on to list the following factors that encourage giving: if the location of the disaster is familiar, if they feel confident that their gift will be used well, if the state of the economy looks positive and there is continued media coverage.

This is no comfort to the disaster victim. Soon after the tsunami, at a conference, someone asked me what it was about the tsunami that evoked so much generosity when the Gujarat earthquake had not. In Indian Kashmir, where the Indian Government and Army also need to win over the alienated, the fact that there was hardly any response from Indian civil society was noticed. The usual arrival of volunteers, bearing donations in cash and kind, simply did not happen. Only one neighboring state chipped in with help – Punjab.<sup>30</sup> Ahmed Rashid writes: “For Indian Kashmiris, the earthquake and New Delhi’s slow response to the tragedy is perhaps the ultimate example of Indian government neglect, perfidy and lack of concern.”<sup>31</sup> The view from the other side of the border seemed at least as bad: Aasim Sajjad writes that notwithstanding the Pakistani government’s rhetoric,

... the thousands of families that have been ravaged by the quake in the remotest parts of the Northwest Frontier Province and Kashmir have reason to disagree with the government’s claims. For days after the quake, basic help had not reached entire towns and villages that were flattened, prompting angry and frustrated backlashes from many of those affected. Looting is commonplace and when relief supplies do reach affected areas, the most deserving are usually crowded out.<sup>32</sup>

When the pre-existing crisis is a conflict, the situation becomes all the more sensitive. Those displaced, and those now doubly displaced, have already faced discrimination once. Alienation due to negligence is not conducive to conflict transformation.

... large injections of funding have the potential to adversely affect both the short-term conflict dynamics and long-term causes of conflict. A conflict sensitive approach must involve the accountable and balanced distribution of resources with the participation of affected populations.<sup>33</sup>

The presence of the international community works appears to some extent to generate some pressure to set aside differences, and Aceh and the Maldives to varying extents, illustrate this. Aceh lost most of its governmental structures to the tsunami; the scale of devastation made it imperative for Indonesia to accept outside assistance, and once the territory was opened up to the world, old forms of control were no longer possible.<sup>34</sup> A peace accord was signed in August 2005. In the Maldives, any co-operation between President Gayoom’s regime and the opposition was short lived but dependence on external relief and reconstruction assistance has allowed the world a channel through which to leverage change. The regime has adopted a rhetoric of reform, and whether one considers its proposed reforms cosmetic or not, something has changed in Maldivian politics as an aftermath of the tsunami. Further, the question of use and misappropriation of relief funds is a rallying point even for those who might find it harder to take a stand on civil rights and torture. This in turn reinforces accountability as a political value.

## THE SOUTH ASIAN EXPERIENCE 2004–05

Social and political change are best adjudged over a long time-frame. In this case, we are working with short time-frames (under 18 months in the case of the tsunami, and around eight months in the case of the earthquake) to make large historical projections. Therefore the conclusions drawn from the cases below are necessarily preliminary and contingent.

## THE SRI LANKAN CONFLICT

Writing in February 2005 about post-tsunami Sri Lanka, Kethesh Loganathan listed four reasons why post-tsunami reconstruction and peace-building may be linked: first, the groundswell of empathy on both sides of the conflict divide; second, the fact that the international community is invested in both post-tsunami reconstruction and peace-building in Sri Lanka; third, tsunami-inflicted military losses on both sides that make war less acceptable to them; fourth, the conflict and tsunami have both ravaged the same places and communities, and the sites of relief and reconstruction are the same.<sup>35</sup>

The conflict in Sri Lanka dates back to pre-independence decades, and the two parties to the conflict today are the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The issue at the heart of the conflict has changed over the decades from representation to access to identity to self-determination, and now the LTTE negotiating position hovers between agreeing to federalism and demanding sovereignty. Violence entered the conflict in the late 1970s and a ceasefire came into effect in February 2002 that remains in force, violation marking its duration better than observance. When the tsunami struck, the country was effectively divided into areas controlled by the LTTE and areas controlled by the Sri Lankan army.<sup>36</sup>

“Two decades of war has [*sic*] created an entirely different magnitude of disaster here compared to elsewhere”, *Newsweek* quoted SP Tamilselvan, the LTTE’s political head, as saying. It is generally acknowledged that the LTTE was quicker to respond to rescue and relief operations after the tsunami.<sup>37</sup> The government and army response came slowly, especially to Tamil areas, leaving themselves open to accusations of discrimination. The promptness of the LTTE response and their ability to deliver relief in their areas drew foreign governments and non-governmental organizations to channel relief supplies and aid to them for use in the north and east. However, this was not acceptable to the Sri Lankan government as it could be tantamount to recognizing the north and east as separate from Sri Lanka.

While there was some hope in the first days after the tsunami that disaster would bring unity to Sri Lanka, many issues were soon identified as posing obstacles for linking peace-building with post-tsunami reconstruction.<sup>38</sup> Access was one such issue; allowing access to camps, communities and leaders of the opposing side was one way of asserting control, and the casualties of that were relief and peace. Limiting the other’s access to areas controlled by either side was more important than allowing the opponent to score points through relief activities. On either side, emergency response included centralization and curtailment of civil rights; every suggestion made to decentralize reconstruction activities was met with objections. While the tsunami weakened

both sides militarily, the efforts of each to recuperate from those losses through acquisition of new weapons and vehicles created enough of a problem to derail other efforts.

The most important stumbling block was the question of how to channel aid. The official position was, "Sovereign donors should deal with the sovereign government of Sri Lanka."<sup>39</sup> This cuts to the issue at the heart of the conflict – is this island home to one country or two? Two decades of conflict have created a situation in which *de facto* there are two administrative zones in Sri Lanka – government-controlled areas and Tiger-controlled areas. Even in states not divided by conflict, decentralization increases efficiency in both resource allocation and distribution as local agencies are best able to identify need. In a situation like Sri Lanka's, where the writ of one side ceases to be effective where the writ of the other begins, the problem of accurate needs assessment and resource distribution is all the more acute. This is the rationalization that prompted even agencies from countries that had banned the LTTE to cautiously approach their relief wings with assistance.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, for Colombo – and for others – there can be many objections to this. First, as stated above, direct assistance could be construed as recognition, and represented to others as legitimacy. This would have undermined the government's negotiating position. Second, since the LTTE is not an elected government and there is no way of enforcing accountability, an argument could also be made that in the interests of transparency, funds should be distributed through the elected government in Colombo. There are of course those who would challenge this assertion.

The result of this was that it took almost six months for the government and LTTE to agree on a joint Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (PTOMS), an institutional mechanism for distributing tsunami aid. By this agreement, regional and district committees charged with aid distribution in the north and east would have representatives of the government, the LTTE and the Muslim community, which makes up a significant segment of the eastern population. However, the agreement satisfied no section entirely. Far from promoting peace, it appeared as if the process of trying to work together in the post-disaster context actually was a setback for the peace process.

Desperate efforts to revive the sagging peace process resulted in talks in Geneva in February 2006 at which both sides reiterated their support for the February 2002 Ceasefire Agreement. The promise of that moment too has since been lost amid escalating hostilities.

## DEMOCRATIZATION STRUGGLE IN THE MALDIVES

President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom came to power in 1978 and has been re-elected six times with support from over 90 percent of the population in Yes–No style referenda where they endorse (or not) a candidate nominated by the Maldives Parliament. While his long tenure has seen a boom in resort-driven tourism, tourism-driven economic growth and active advocacy in global environmental debates, it has also come to be identified with an autocratic style, nepotism, civil rights violations and even repression and torture. In the last few years, a democratization movement has grown in strength. Since 2003, major confrontations between the government and the opposition on the streets of Male have taken place at least three times.<sup>41</sup>

Because Maldives is a low-lying atoll-state, it is estimated that about 40 percent of the country was under water at one point.<sup>42</sup> Some islands are so small that tsunami waves washed over them, washed people and things away and then brought them back as they receded! For decades, Maldivian diplomats have spoken about the disastrous consequences of global warming and rising sea levels for their people, and the tsunami was a preview of the scenarios they have described. The result was that while the death toll was not as large as it might have been, there was extensive damage to property and many of the country's island resorts were destroyed.

As in Sri Lanka, in the immediate aftermath, political differences were set aside to focus on the provision of relief supplies. A few days after the tsunami, President Gayoom dropped treason charges against four leading dissidents and named the need for national unity in the face of the disaster as his reason. This was greeted with optimism, although government affirmations that the decision had nothing to do with needing foreign assistance were not convincing.<sup>43</sup> Dissident groups and government supporters abroad began to raise funds and goods to send home.

One of these groups was the Friends of Maldives, which had earlier been identified by the Gayoom regime as a threat to the Maldives. President Gayoom even turned away tsunami relief sent by this organization and its founder was denied entry into the country. Reports of another Friends of Maldives, registered and recognized by the regime, soon appeared in the press. The question was raised: why another organization with the same name as one discredited by the regime? Two answers were proffered: to mislead donors and to misappropriate funds.<sup>44</sup> The dialectic of blame is not uncommon; this instance is described as indicative of the deepening political divisions as a consequence of the tsunami. Who collected donations, who took them to the Maldives, who distributed them and who got assistance are all deeply political issues in any situation. Given that one of the key charges made by the opposition-in-exile against the regime was misappropriation of funds by the President and his close associates, a situation in which a large amount of money was going to be injected into the economy could only create more openings for such charges. In the words of Mohamed Nasheed, the Maldivian opposition leader:

Before bankrolling the reconstruction of the Maldives – and inadvertently propping up a crumbling dictatorship – the international community must use its newfound power as the “lender-of-last-resorts” [*sic*] in the Maldives to demand an opening up of the political system and the granting of registration to the MDP (Maldivian Democratic Party).<sup>45</sup>

The protests of 2003 and 2004 and the repression that followed them had drawn the attention of rights groups to the Maldives, but the tsunami brought the islands to the attention of the international community at large – individual donors as well as governments. In September 2004, the European Parliament resolved to urge member-states to sanction the Gayoom regime.<sup>46</sup> Maldives' need for tsunami aid was an opportunity for Europe to press their point; according to one account, they offered the Maldives ten instalments of €3 million each, each instalment contingent upon political reform.<sup>47</sup>

For both sides then, the tsunami brought a very short, transient nanosecond of

détente, which has then been followed by renewed conflict. The democratizers have capitalized on post-tsunami reconstruction failures and delays to highlight the shortcomings of the regime. The government has been forced to undertake a program of reform that has however been decried as cosmetic and inconsistent. The difference that the tsunami has made is that it has set back the Maldivian economy, and therefore the Maldivian people, by a great deal, even as their political system is in growing ferment. At the moment of writing, it seems as though another tsunami is building in the Maldives and one that will overthrow this regime. How deeply it strikes at the heart of Maldivian social relations and political culture, remains to be seen.

## THE KASHMIR INSURGENCY AND INDIA–PAKISTAN RELATIONS

“The Kashmir conflict” is shorthand for two intertwined conflicts. The first is that between India and Pakistan, rooted in the Partition of the subcontinent in 1947, and centering on their conflicting claims to sovereignty over Kashmir. The second is the insurgency – conflict between Kashmiri militant groups and the Indian state – which began in 1989 and has its roots in what might be termed both as an integrative failure on the part of the Indian nation-state and an alienation from the Indian mainstream that snowballed over four decades. The two conflicts are separate but cannot be easily separated, so in this section, they will be discussed together.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, while normalization has proceeded at a steady, if slow, pace on other dimensions of the India–Pakistan relationship, “the Kashmir conflict” has been a significant obstacle in the peace process.

The 8 October 2005 earthquake took far more lives on the Pakistani side of the border. Three factors have been identified that would affect disaster diplomacy in this context: the transborder nature of the disaster; the context of a slow but steady peace process; and the continuing militancy.<sup>49</sup> In the post-quake period, there was almost a discernible pattern that whatever one side offered spontaneously would evoke caution in the other, even if it seemed to be a well-intentioned proposition. Therefore, in the beginning India’s offers of assistance in kind and as help with search-and-rescue operations were looked at askance by Pakistan.<sup>50</sup> There was an account of Indian Army soldiers crossing the Line of Control (LOC) to help Pakistani soldiers – India confirmed the story, Pakistan denied it.<sup>51</sup> Pakistan would have liked to borrow helicopters from India but did not want Indian Air Force pilots flying in the sensitive areas that were hit by the earthquake. India did not want to throw open its borders, as President Musharraf suggested; instead, the two sides took almost a month to negotiate the opening of five points along the LOC.

In spite of this mutual trust deficit, however, we can identify some breakthroughs in this period. Immediately after the earthquake, communication links set up as part of the confidence-building apparatus for conflict resolution, such as the nuclear and LOC hotlines, were used to convey condolences and to discuss relief measures. The epicenter of the earthquake was close to the LOC where both sides have heavy deployment, and both lost soldiers in the disaster.<sup>52</sup> In spite of these losses, on both sides, the armed forces have been important in the rescue and relief phase of this crisis.<sup>53</sup> The armies

provided information, maps and logistical support, but most surprisingly, a 14 October 2005 report states that when people from Pakistani villages ran across the LOC for safety in the aftershocks, those policing the Indian border turned a blind eye on them, stating when asked about arresting one such person: “Why should we do that (*sic*). He has come to take shelter here, there has been such massive destruction.”<sup>54</sup> This culminated in President Musharraf’s suggestion that the LOC should be opened to allow Kashmiris to help each other. The opening of the LOC at five points, in spite of the Delhi blasts that took place just before the agreement was finalized, is arguably the most important diplomatic positive to follow the earthquake.<sup>55</sup>

The earthquake was also thought to have inflicted tremendous damage to militant training camps in the Muzaffarabad region. However, two other factors appear to have strengthened their hand. First, quite predictably, the weakening of border patrols due to loss of lives in the quake and their engagement with search and rescue in their surroundings, created gaps in the frontier through which militants were able to and did cross into Indian territory. Second, militants, individually or through their organizations, turned their skills to providing relief and running refugee camps with good facilities, winning or renewing support from those who benefited.<sup>56</sup> The result of this is a renewed jihadi presence on the Indian side of the LOC.<sup>57</sup>

While it may be too early to assess the long-term impact of the earthquake on “the Kashmir conflict”, some factors will clearly be significant. First, allowing Kashmiris to travel back and forth across the LOC will change preconceived notions on both sides. Second, the relief and reconstruction imperative is a fresh chance for both the states that wish to press their claims here to improve on past performance. Third, by resolutely proceeding with talks and confidence-building measures in spite of violent provocations as they did post-quake, governments can secure the peace process, both in Kashmir and across the range of issues between India and Pakistan.

### MISSING PAGES IN THIS STORY

Missing in this paper due to space and time constraints is the changing international context. Elsewhere, I have identified six significant shifts in post-tsunami international relations.<sup>58</sup> First, the transcontinental sweep of natural disasters like the tsunami and Kashmir earthquake underscore the limitations of Westphalian-style sovereignty. Second, India’s assertive regional stance was one part of its rapid and large relief assistance after the tsunami devastated its own shores and its own refusal of foreign assistance; the other part was its vastly improved capacity and influence. This signals the emergence of new players in the international system – India, Australia and Japan for instance in the Indian Ocean area after the tsunami – and potentially a reworking of relationships on the international stage. Third, individual and official humanitarian response to tragedies around the world generates its own outcomes. Desperately needed humanitarian relief can be provided contingent to certain domestic political outcomes; such changes generate their own schisms down the line. Moreover, the unevenness of these responses can also create resentment on the part of those who get less help or attention. Fourth, United Nations agencies have played an important part post-tsunami in co-ordinating relief and reconstructions operations. This serves as a

reminder of the organization's continuing relevance. Fifth, the difference between good and ineffective disaster relief and reconstruction has often been the presence of a state with strong institutions. South Asia's disasters have served as a reminder that states, as agencies for good governance, are still indispensable. Finally, amid discussion of disaster-induced displacement, disparities in aid disbursement and fears of post-disaster epidemics, both these transborder disasters point to the fact that at the end of the day, "Better human security is better global security."<sup>59</sup>

In addition to these, the role of civil society in post-disaster conflict transformation needs to be explored. There was tremendous mobilization in civil society in South Asia around the collection and distribution of relief funds and articles. In some instances, this happened where such mobilization is not allowed; in others where long-term conflict may have created a feeling of helplessness and futility. While the empowering impact of such mobilization and social activism will change politics in places like the Maldives, it will also create new actors, re-order political priorities and embolden those caught in the crossfire in conflict situations like Sri Lanka and Kashmir.

### READING THE TEA-LEAVES

The three South Asian post-disaster contexts examined here appear to support earlier research. In Sri Lanka, there was some will at the outset and a great deal of pressure from civil society and international donors that the two parties to the conflict should cooperate. However, negotiations over the mechanism of this co-operation harkened back to some of the most contentious issues fueling the conflict. In other words, where conflict structures survive the disaster, there is no real window for transforming disaster into peace opportunity. In the Maldives, the small window for co-operation and later, dialogue, closed quickly. Tsunami aid became the battleground between the government and civil society groups which were largely associated with the opposition movement, which added to its polemical arsenal the manner in which the government has handled tsunami reconstruction funds. The Kashmir earthquake occurred in the context of a shaky but determined India-Pakistan peace process. While it is still early, it appears to have the most potential for sustainable co-operation because the changes that have come have not been a break but maybe an acceleration of process.

What the case studies suggest is that disasters may in fact exacerbate conflict. First, the breakdown in administrative and security structures offers an opportunity to militant groups (violent non-state actors) to rearm and recruit. We know from these case studies that Kashmiri militants used the post-quake gaps in India's border defenses to infiltrate India and that both Kashmiri groups and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam recruited soldiers, including children, from among the disaster-displaced. Second, the Sri Lankan case shows that post-disaster co-operation can highlight the issues that underlie the conflict, obstructing co-operation and conflict transformation. Third, agenda-setting, priorities and resource allocation and disbursement are contentious in ordinary times, but for societies caught in the double-bind of disaster and conflict, they fuel hostilities, as Maldivian leaders on either side of the democratization struggle can attest. Fourth, variations in aid received, in the manner of disbursement and the differences between the quality of life of those who receive aid and those

unaffected and therefore unaided, create new resentments and alienation. The last is particularly salient in South Asia, where deprivation is not just a function of disaster. These may layer over old conflicts or cut across them, but the result in either case is division not co-operation. Finally, every conflict has its vested interests that cannot brook the emergence of habits of co-operation in conflict zones. Attempts by Kashmiri militant groups to disrupt talks between the Indian government and other Kashmiri leaders and the India–Pakistan peace process with bomb blasts and assassinations epitomize this. If disasters are to yield peace opportunities through diplomatic and non-official interaction, practitioners and observers have to guard against these political landmines.

## NOTES

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