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## **Disaster Relief Gets Undeserved Bad Reputation**

By Zack Gross

It is just over two years since the Boxing Day tsunami that devastated South Asia, killing a quarter of a million people and destroying billions of dollars worth of property in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and other countries around the Indian Ocean. As a frightening reminder, a much smaller version of that tidal wave struck Indonesia again on Boxing Day last week, killing people in the hundreds.

When the tsunami struck two years ago, Canadians and others around the world donated millions of dollars to support relief and reconstruction operations. Canadian branches of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Red Cross, Oxfam, World Vision and the Mennonite Central Committee were flooded by our generosity, just as the seashore had been flooded by the tidal wave generated by the 9-point Richter Scale sea-bottom earthquake on the other side of the world.

What made us so generous at that time might have been the time of year during which it happened, the “live” round-the-clock coverage we had on television, or the fact that many foreign lives were lost, by Europeans, North Americans and Australians who we could easily relate to. South Asia has also become one of our playgrounds, so many of us have been to the places that were destroyed.

At least one organization, Doctors Without Borders, stated on its web site, at the time, that it would accept no further support for South Asia as it had received enough money for what it was undertaking. Any further donations, it said, would be given over to other vital relief efforts it was involved in.

Indeed, maybe too much money came too quickly with too many expectations, as the perception at least is that much of the money has not been spent, much of the damage has not been corrected and many organizations are sitting on funds and, possibly, have benefited more than victims have. This perception may damage aid efforts in the future.

In December 2004 and January 2005, both the federal and our provincial government added to the aid total for that particular disaster. Subsequent crises caused by earthquakes, typhoons and mudslides – in Pakistan, the Philippines and Indonesia – have brought in less in the way of public donations, but continued support from governments. In Manitoba, non-profits such as church groups, the Foster Parents Plan, HOPE International and CUSO have raised funds and also applied for provincial Relief & Rehabilitation Funds through the Manitoba Council for International Co-operation (MCIC).

Relief funds are also available for conflict situations, such as in Darfur where UN officials accuse the government of sponsoring genocide of its black population, and the

Congo, where civil war waged until a recent national election, or the West Bank in Palestine. When conflict arises in any poor region of the globe, it serves to worsen hunger and disease, put an end to children's education, and usually causes a major refugee situation, taxing the limited resources of the country or region in conflict. Again, mostly Western donors "move in" with relief dollars that pay for temporary shelter, food aid, sanitation, medical support, blankets and clothing.

A realistic look at these situations will balance the perception that relief funds from public donations and government grants are lost in inefficient programs and local corruption, that disaster areas often remain in crisis despite our generosity, and that our donated dollars are not fully spent and sit idly in NGO bank accounts. No doubt, there are some inefficiencies and corruption in some otherwise worthwhile programs.

Taking the South Asian tsunami as an example, look at all the challenges that relief agencies had to overcome. The affected areas of Indonesia and Sri Lanka were both conflict zones where government troops and separatist forces were battling. Thus, aid-givers had to negotiate co-operation among warring factions. As well, the vast majority of disaster victims, as is usual, were the poorest of the poor, with few resources to counter what had befallen them. With so many dead (only a relative few were tourists) there was also a psychological crisis to overcome.

Many of these challenges take years to overcome – to rebuild homes, schools and hospitals, to deal with physical and psychological trauma, to reinvigorate the tourism and fishing industries that supported this region. Ultimately, as well, resources are needed to create early warning systems and re-think and re-do communities to make them less vulnerable to natural disasters. These will not be accomplished in just the first two years after a disaster.

As no one expects most disasters before they happen, the planning and implementation of disaster programs must happen quickly. This, in itself, works against aid-givers. Often, to be seen to be doing something, we might offer a service that is not necessarily the most appropriate. This concern was raised when Canada sent an elite military squad to the tsunami region to purify water. At the same time, the South Asian tsunami has initiated a new era of multi-party co-operation where NGOs, affected governments and Western governments co-operate in delivering disaster relief, from the fundraising stage in the West to the implementation phase overseas.

Relief work is also a roller coaster ride for NGOs. One month, the phone is ringing off the hook, money is pouring in, and new staff is being hired. The next, things quiet down, lay-offs take place, programming gets back to "normal". Then, another disaster occurs, but donations are small as people "burned out" on the last one. Organizations often suffer the same down time as occurs when an adrenaline rush is over.

Aid giving organizations, like people, have distinct personalities. While you may not like every relief agency, it is true that those that are best known are sincere and honest in the desire they feel, and programs they run, to better the world. NGOs often get a bad

rap from the media in relief situations. Before you donate, check out the web sites and annual reports of aid groups and choose the one that best suits you. You must remember that NGOs are staffed by people facing immensely challenging work.

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