

DISASTER DIPLOMACY IN ASIA – AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Exordium

Natural disasters have become all too common in today's world. When they do occur, these now inflict more damage and destruction due to increased human activity, such as dams, weak building construction, destruction of water bodies and swamps and defoliation. Besides natural disasters are now on the increase.¹ Unfortunately, in recent years southern and eastern Asia have become even more vulnerable to these threats than before. Five major disasters in the last four years were particularly noteworthy and are important because they also led to considerable diplomatic activity in matters of relief and aid. These disasters were; the Tsunami in the Indian Ocean on December 26, 2004, the earthquake in Jammu & Kashmir (on both sides of the line of control) on August 8, 2005, cyclone Sidr in Bangladesh in November 2007, and the earthquake in China and cyclone Nargis in Burma both in May 2008. All were among the most devastating natural disasters of our times and required external help and support to relieve distress. Response to these disasters varied depending on the nature and success of diplomacy in each case.

The Tsunami in the Indian Ocean severely affected India and other adjoining countries. India announced that it will not seek international help and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated that though, "several countries had offered assistance, but [...] we have enough resources and would be happy to receive assistance when needed." This gesture though magnanimous in its intent came in for some criticism internationally. It was felt by some that help from outside may have prevented the sufferings of the people more speedily. But, India's decision needs to be seen in the perspective that the developing world has often been portrayed in the west as one needing constant support and as unable to look after its own people. India's position was a statement of its emergence as a self confident nation and a desire to be removed from this perception of a poor aid recipient country. Instead India made extensive efforts to provide immediate and substantial humanitarian support to all other countries affected by the tsunami as well as provided comprehensive support to its own people. This then became the official policy of the Indian government in matters of aid in natural disasters. Thus when hurricane Katrina struck the USA,

and when the Sichuan earthquake took place in China in 2008, New Delhi responded by providing immediate help even though both countries were richer than India.

An earthquake struck Jammu & Kashmir in August 2005 on both sides astride the Line of Control (LoC) that separate the disputed province, affecting Pakistan much more than India. Once again India did not ask or accept international help and suggested that instead Pakistan should be the sole recipient from the international community. Pakistan was unfortunately reluctant to accept help from India across the LoC initially which delayed assistance in areas where it was more difficult for Pakistan to reach. This possibly led to avoidable loss of life in that country, but which Islamabad was ready to bear in the interest of its perceived sense of security. Later it was the NATO that would provide the bulk of the assistance to Pakistan, even though working out the modalities of providing this help required considerably diplomacy.

Bangladesh is singularly unfortunate to be visited most often by devastating cyclones and flooding and cyclone Sidr in Nov 2007 was a more calamitous one. Yet, the country was prepared for this cyclone and the military which was then in effective power in the country was better prepared to respond immediately. Efforts at constructing shelters and provide early warning over the preceding years and developing a response mechanism in the country helped. As a result the damage and devastation was much less than was the case in similar circumstances earlier. Yet, it too needed considerable help from the international community.

The two natural disasters in 2008 in China and Burma provide an example in contrast. The only common factor was the enormous destruction and loss of life caused by these two disasters, where thousands of people died and enormous damage was caused to both countries. But, where Burma's isolated and xenophobic military leadership initially refused international help which its people so desperately needed, China was contrastingly different. Its hithertofore closed society was ready and willing to accept international help, even as its government and people responded magnificently to the crisis.

These disasters reflected the importance of diplomacy in bringing aid and sustenance to countries and people affected by natural catastrophes. This paper will examine the role that diplomacy played in providing aid and assistance taking the example of India and its assistance provided in all these situations.

The Indian Ocean Tsunami - December 2004

A massive earthquake struck under the Indian Ocean off the coast of Sumatra, Indonesia on 26 Dec 2004 measuring 9.3 on the Richter scale. This developed into one of the largest tsunamis ever experienced in the world. The UN later listed a total of 229,866 people lost, including 186,983 dead and 42,883 missing. Countries most affected were Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, and Thailand with others affected being, Maldives, Bangladesh and Burma. Relief agencies reported that about one-third of the dead appeared to be children. This is a result of the high proportion of children in the populations of many of the affected regions and because children were the least able to resist being overcome by the surging waters. In addition to the large number of local residents, up to 9,000 foreign tourists (mostly Europeans) enjoying the peak holiday travel season were among the dead or missing, especially people from the Nordic countries. The European nation hardest hit may have been Sweden, whose death toll was 543 the largest from any other disaster or war since the eighteenth century. Nations all over the world provided over US\$ 7 billion in aid for the affected countries less India who did not accept any aid.

Indian Help

Before dusk on the day of the tsunami, December 26, the first Indian Navy aircraft touched down in Sri Lanka with aid. Operation Rainbow was launched for Sri Lanka, which was followed by Operation Casta in the Maldives and Operation Gambhir in Indonesia. The idea reflected India's determination to be the first to mount rescue efforts in all southeast Asian countries.

One thousand Indian relief personnel and five naval ships were dispatched to Trincomalee, Galle and Colombo with medical teams and relief material. Indian Air Force and naval helicopters ferried provisions like packed food, medicines and drinking water to remote areas and undertook rescue operations in Sri Lanka. Two field hospitals were also established in Galle and Colombo. The Government of India provided an immediate assistance of Rs. 100 crores (\$25 million). India was successful in generating enormous goodwill for itself in Sri Lanka by sending help days before any other assistance reached the island country. A Rs 5 crore

(US \$ one million) relief package was provided to the Maldives. Apart from conducting aerial surveys to search for the survivors, India also provided relief materials.

In Indonesia, Indian ships offloaded emergency rations, medicines, tents and first-aid kits worth \$1 million and established two field hospitals in the worst hit area of Aceh. New Delhi also proposed extending “concessional lines of credit” to Indonesia for the “ reconstruction of roads, buildings and harbors” in Aceh province. India offered a similar aid package to Thailand of “assistance in kind” of the order of \$500,000 to supplement the kingdom’s ongoing relief efforts in the tsunami-hit areas.

Taking note of these developments, the United States Secretary of State Colin Powell rang up Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh inviting India to join a four-nation “core group” along with United States, Japan and Australia. This gave rise to speculation that India had been co-opted into an “aid coalition” that attempted to usurp the leadership of the United Nations in disaster relief in favor of the U.S. By this time India had already taken the lead and had reached out to all the affected states ahead of any other nation. This was clearly a recognition of India’s humanitarian capability in the region. However, in a rare display of statesmanship, New Delhi suggested to the U.S. that the “core group” could supplement Indian initiatives as of then, but later this effort should be dovetailed to those of the UN to ensure smooth and unhindered supply of international assistance on a sustained basis.

Indian diplomacy clearly bore fruit and the UN role of directing and coordinating relief and reconstruction efforts was recognized. India was invited by the ASEAN for the Jakarta donors’ meet on January 6, 2005 and the U.N. sponsored international donors’ conference in Geneva on January 11. Very clearly India emerged as a compassionate regional power through its spontaneous and generous efforts at providing international relief without being a recipient country itself.

In what emerged later as the most significant positive result of the tsunami, the widespread devastation in the region led the main rebel group GAM in Aceh to declare a cease-fire on December 28, 2004, followed by a similar declaration by the Indonesian government. The two groups resumed long-stalled peace talks, which resulted in a peace agreement signed on

August 15, 2005. The agreement explicitly cites the tsunami as a justification for ending the long running ethnic conflict.

In the case of India it reinforced New Delhi's friendship with all the affected countries, which in any case had been good. But, it particularly generated goodwill in Sri Lanka where the earlier intervention in 1987 by its peacekeeping force had failed to maintain peace in the island.

The Kashmir Earthquake in 2005

A major earthquake with an intensity of 7.7 on the Richter scale with its epicentre just inside Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) struck in the morning of 8 October 2005. As a result about 79,000 people died in POK, Pakistan's North West Frontier Province and the state of Punjab. About 1400 died in Indian J&K. POK also suffered very heavy infrastructure damage, particularly to its roads, which prevented and delayed evacuation of casualties and provision of aid. This left an estimated 3.3 million homeless in Pakistan, while even more were indirectly affected. Total damages were over US \$ 5 billion.

The international community responded immediately and on 19 Nov 2005 promised US \$ 5.8 billion as aid in cash and kind to Pakistan. Over the next few months aid did materialize substantially ameliorating the difficulties of the people. But, it was realized that due to the nature of the terrain and the requirement of massive helicopter and air lift support the NATO alone would be able to muster the requisite effort under the overall guidance of the UN Humanitarian agencies to ensure that the relief actually reached the affected people. As the winter was to set in soon help had to reach very urgently. This caused some anxiety as even though the need for aid was immense, there were concerns in Pakistan of NATO presence on its soil and it needed considerable diplomacy for this to be agreed to eventually. Finally, on 21 October terms were agreed and NATO troops were allowed by Pakistan but strictly for three months. These forces eventually included engineers and medical units from NATO's Response Force and were of course entirely unarmed. However, as the 90-day period ended the mission had to be called off on 1 Feb 2006, even though its presence was still urgently required. In total, some 168 NATO flights delivered almost 3,500 tons of very urgent relief supplies and its forces provided great support in other areas.

India offered immediate help and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh called up the Pakistani President to convey this. However, mutual suspicions delayed the opening of border routes and Pakistan agreed to this only ten days later on 18 October. India subsequently sent 25 tonnes of relief material to Pakistan including food, blankets and medicine across the land routes. Big Indian companies such as Infosys offered aid up to \$226,000. On October 12, an Ilyushin - 76 cargo plane ferried seven truckloads (about 82 tons of stores) of army medicines, 15,000 blankets and 50 tents and returned to New Delhi. On October 14, India dispatched the second consignment of relief material to Pakistan, this time by train through the Wagah Border as Pakistan refused to allow another cargo flight. This consignment included 5,000 blankets, 370 tents, 5 tons of plastic sheets and 12 tons of medicine. A third consignment of medicine and relief material was sent again by train later. India also pledged another \$25 million as aid to Pakistan.

This aid effort by India failed to improve relations between the two countries. A comprehensive peace dialogue had already commenced the previous year, but disaster relief cooperation made no additional difference. Within POK it was the Islamic militant organizations that assumed control of much of the relief effort particularly in the initial period and provided much of the relief assistance to the affected people. This was with the aim of strengthening and consolidating their position within the state. Terrorist strikes in Indian Kashmir and in the rest of the country continued. On 18 October 2005 the education minister of the state of Kashmir was assassinated, probably by terrorists from across the border. On 29 October 2005, bombs in New Delhi killed more than 50 people and on 2 November 2005 a suicide bomber targeted a senior leader of Kashmir. Meanwhile on 16 Nov a fifth crossing point between the two parts of Kashmir was opened and at last on 19 November civilians were permitted to cross.

Diplomacy did not have much chance of success just as in the case of the tsunami in Sri Lanka between the Sri Lankan Government and the LTTE. Though the NATO was allowed to operate after much discussion and negotiations their stay was not extended thus preventing substantial help from reaching the people. A composite peace dialogue process had already commenced between the two countries the previous year. Any expectation that the common disaster would hasten the process was belied as was depicted by the great reluctance on the part of Pakistan to accept help from India.

Cyclone Sidr – Bangladesh November 2007

Cyclone Sidr, a category 4 earthquake, made landfall over Bangladesh on 15 November 2007. Fortunately warning was received from India of the cyclone about a week in advance and the government responded speedily. The country had a disaster relief plan in place and mobilized its resources speedily. With the military in charge of the government during this period the response was quick. Over the years Bangladesh has had time to prepare against cyclones and floods and shelters and emergency schemes exist. Some 600,000 people were evacuated by volunteers just before the cyclone struck and hence were saved. Yet, the cyclone took a very heavy toll; some 3,447 were confirmed dead though some estimates suggest it could have been as high as 10,000. Some 27 million people were said to have been affected and the estimate of the damage was about US \$ 1.97 billion. International agencies responded to the cyclone generously. Though Bangladesh was somewhat late in asking for international support, eventually it received adequate aid.

Indian Help

Operation Sahayata was launched to provide relief material worth Rs 3 crore (Tk 5.2 crore) (US \$ 750 million) to the cyclone victims in Bangladesh. The material sent included medical equipment, 20,000 packs of ready-to-eat food, 10,000 blankets, 400 tents and 24,00 kg of medicines. The first of three Il-76 aircraft carrying relief materials under the programme arrived at Zia International Airport at 1:30pm on 18 November. Two more aircraft flights landed in the next two days. Additional relief material worth of US \$ 22 million and 40,000 metric tons of rice, 10,000 metric tons of wheat and 1000 metric tons of milk powder were also sent.

Cyclone Nargis in Burma – May 2008

Cyclone Nargis made landfall in Burma on May 2, 2008, causing catastrophic destruction and at least 146,000 fatalities with thousands more missing. India's meteorological services had warned the Burmese authorities of the cyclone at least 48 hours in advance, but it is not known as to what precautions were actually taken for evacuation and relief. As Burma was suffering from a severe food shortage apparently orders had been issued by the military junta to the farmers to quickly harvest the paddy crop, thus delaying evacuation. The total damage is

estimated at over US \$10 billion, which made it the most damaging cyclone ever recorded in the Bay of Bengal and also the third category 4 earthquake in consecutive years, an unprecedented event. The complete number of casualties from this disaster is likely to eventually reach perhaps even a million and more through disease and other natural causes due to late and inadequate relief.

It was only on 6 May 2008 that the Burmese government representative in New York formally ask the United Nations for help. Even then aid was delayed by the difficulties of aid workers being granted visas to enter Burma. The US President and Laura Bush led the international community in condemning the military junta's response. Burma's ruling party finally relented only after India's request for providing aid was first accepted. Unfortunately the world was distracted for a while at this time by the massive Sichuan earthquake that struck China barely ten days later.

India's traditional good relations with Burma paid off. It launched *Operation Sahayata (help)* under which two Indian navy ships and two Indian Air Force (IAF) aircraft supplied the first international relief material to the country. The two aircraft carried 4 tonnes of relief supplies each while the Indian Navy transported more than 100 tonnes of relief material. On May 8, the IAF dispatched a third air consignment carrying over 32 tonnes of relief material including tents, blankets and medicines. In a separate development, Burma denied Indian search and rescue teams and media access to critical cyclone-hit areas. India released a statement saying it had requested Burma to accept international aid especially that from the United States, to which Burma ultimately agreed. India later set up a hospital with a team of 50 medical personnel in Burma.

It was only on May 23 after negotiations between UN Secretary General Ban ki Moon and Burmese President Than Shwe that Burma allowed in aid workers, regardless of nationality. Even then on June 5, that the USS Essex led carrier group full of aid left the Burmese coast after being denied entry, taking its aid back undelivered as Burma would not allow military personnel from the US to set foot on its territory.

The Sichuan Earthquake in China in May 2008

A massive earthquake struck the Sichuan province of China in the southeast in the early afternoon of 12 May. The epicenter was about 100 kms north of Chengdu the capital of the province and measured 8.0 on the Richter scale. Tremors were felt as far as Shanghai and Beijing. After shocks were felt in the region for several weeks afterwards. Official figures (as of July 21) state that 69,197 were confirmed dead, including 68,636 in Sichuan province, and 374,176 injured, with 18,222 listed as missing. The earthquake left about 4.8 million people homeless, though the number could be as high as 11 million.

The whole nation responded brilliantly. The Peoples Liberation Army mobilized its total resources. Citizens from across the country donated aid generously and thousands went to the region to volunteer their assistance as well as donate blood to collection centres. Yao Min, the national basketball hero gave nearly US \$ 300,000. Common people donated as much as they could and the ten richest men in China together donated some US \$ 4.6 million. The total domestic donation reached \$ 1.5 billion in two days by May 14, with much more to follow over the next few days.

One negative feature that came to light was the damage to school buildings constructed in recent years by the Government. The central government estimates that over 7,000 schoolrooms collapsed in the earthquake. This was attributed to the lack of funds available in rural areas, corruption and negligent construction. Due to PRC's one child policy, many families lost an only child causing enormous resentment among the people.

Indian Help

India immediately responded to the disaster with statements of help from its top leadership. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said that "India stands ready to offer any assistance that may be needed at this difficult time." The President of India announced that, "I join the people of India in offering heartfelt condolences and sympathies to the people of China at this tragic event. We are confident that the people of China will overcome this adversity with fortitude and courage. We are willing to make a contribution to your efforts to mitigate the sufferings of the friendly people of China."

These statements were followed with immediate help. The first plane-load of relief supplies was ferried to Chengdu in an Indian Air Force flight from Guwahati in northeastern India, barely three hours away in terms of flying time, on the afternoon of May 17. subsequent flights by the Indian Air Force on the 19, 21, 22, 23, 24 and 28, brought urgently needed items like tents, sleeping bags, blankets, ready to eat meals, and medicines, among other items. The supplies were handed over immediately on arrival at Chengdu to officials of the Sichuan Civil Affairs Bureau who were engaged in the relief efforts, and transported to the affected counties. In addition to this the Indian government contributed US \$ 5 million in immediate assistance in cash.

Numerous Indian companies functioning within China also contributed generously. The major ones include, Ranbaxy, the pharmaceutical company, the National Institute of Information Technology (NIIT), Suzlon, the wind energy company, and Larsen & Toubro, the construction company. Companies like the Tata Group, Berger Asian Paints and Dr Reddy's also made major contributions. The Indian community in Beijing held a fund-raising evening in June for the earthquake victims. The Indian community in Hong Kong made an initial donation of 700,000 HK dollars. These generous efforts earned India enormous goodwill and ensured that the high level of friendship reached between the two countries in recent years were taken up a few notches higher through these generous contributions and support.

Diplomatic Efforts and their Impact

Do natural disasters really open up opportunities for diplomacy and through these address outstanding problems in the region? The answer would remain mixed. Where the outstanding difficulties are not major or can be termed as intractable, common disasters can sometimes help unite people in their times of trouble and lead to a process of resolution. Yet, where there are long standing disputes, entrenched positions, strong ethnic or religious barriers and insecurity among regimes, natural disasters it would seem are not sufficient cause for bringing about a change.

The negative dimension of this was depicted in Sri Lanka in the case of the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. A mechanism to transfer the fairly large quantity of aid that Sri

Lanka ultimately received could not be actually transferred to the parts of the Island controlled by the LTTE. The UN Secretary General could not actually even visit the LTTE areas to monitor the relief effort. Actually soon afterwards the cease fire between the government and the LTTE ended and armed fighting intensified and continues. On the other hand India's spontaneous and generous relief effort was highly appreciated and led to a very substantive improvement in the already good bilateral relations between the two countries. The most positive final outcome of the post tsunami period was the peace that came about in Aceh, Indonesia. Several reasons may have led to the positive outcome. One, that the conflict had already exhausted itself. With a democratic government in place in the country remaining differences were not major. Two, the enormous destruction and death proved to be a traumatic experience for the entire province, which virtually left no option. Three, the very extensive international support and facilitation that followed to negotiate the peace also ensured a positive final outcome.

In Jammu & Kashmir again the results of diplomacy proved ineffective. Pakistan spurned Indian effort at assistance across the LoC, which might have led to a genuine rapprochement. Preventing cross border movement destroyed any possibility of substantive effort from the other side. Of course it can be claimed that the subsequent opening of the border for movement of people and trade may have been possible later due to the earlier unsuccessful attempt. Even the ongoing composite dialogue process between the two countries was not given an additional incentive to speed up their work. The reluctance and delay of the induction of NATO forces and their early withdrawal can also be termed as a possible failure.

Bangladesh earthquake again provided a good opportunity to improve and strengthen India- Bangladesh cooperation. It is indeed a pity that in spite of very substantial and timely help from India this did not actually materialize. This may have been due to the fact that no representative government existed in Bangladesh at the time. Nevertheless this was an opportunity missed.

The case of Burma and China in May 2005 provide a case in contrast. While China strengthened its image as a compassionate and caring state deeply interested in looking after the interests of its people, the opposite was the case with the military junta in Burma. As a consequence China earned enormous goodwill, the Olympics were conducted soon afterwards

with this feeling in the world's consciousness and its brilliant conduct subsequently was applauded around the world. On the other hand Burma remains a pariah state with its regime reviled around the world.

Disaster diplomacy has emerged as a new social science with possibilities for the future. Not only should the mechanisms of providing relief and aid be strengthened in Asia and the world, with stockpile reserves, trained personnel and procedures worked out and practiced in advance, but the aspect of disaster diplomacy should also receive greater attention. It is perhaps time that regional organizations as well as the United Nations devote some attention to this issue.

^{1 1} Even as this paper was being finalized, news came of a major earthquake in western Pakistan causing the death of at least (at the time of writing) 160 persons.