

Disaster Diplomacy: Sri Lanka following the Tsunami Devastation

The extent of the destruction caused by the Tsunami which struck Sri Lanka on the Boxing Day of 2004 was unimaginable. The Tsunami waves came menacingly from the ocean, into the land and took back with them the lives of, young and old, rich and poor, of different ethnicities, and destroyed homes, caused colossal damage to infrastructure and left hundreds of thousands of people destitute.

The eastern, southern and south-western coast of Sri Lanka were the hard hit areas although the extent of impact were different from place to place. Overall, the tsunami affected two-thirds of the coastline of Sri Lanka, over 1,000 kilometres in total. Seawater penetrated from tens to hundreds of metres inland, in places thousands of metres, and typically drained away within 30 minutes.

As the days rolled by the magnitude of the disaster became more and more evident. Between 31,000 and 37,000 people were killed by drowning or debris impact, and nearly 100,000 houses were destroyed along with tens of thousands of vehicles and much infrastructure. About 27,000 fatalities were fishermen, and two-thirds of the nation's fishing boats were wrecked, destroying many jobs. Farming was affected by the incursion of large amounts of salt water and marine sediment to fields and wells.

People were missing. Roads and bridges in the affected areas were destroyed completely or damaged extensively. The main economic infrastructure facilities were affected.

Tourism was suspended in the middle of its peak season, and many coastal hotel rooms were destroyed or damaged, incurring an additional loss of employment opportunities.

Relief and assistance were required on a short term basis, in the immediate aftermath of the disaster to bring relief to the destitute and attend to the dead bodies. Food, shelter, medicine, clothes, bedding, and other day to day necessities had to be provided, in particular, water purification and pure drinking water.

In the medium term, the requirement was for repairs to roads, bridges, resumption of electricity, provision of temporary houses to the homeless and providing them with dry rations with cooking utensils. Children's schooling had to be resumed and in place of damaged school buildings alternative locations had to be arranged.

In the long term, the requirement of providing permanent housing, major infrastructure renovation projects, major repairs to hospitals, schools had to be addressed.

The Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) took immediate steps and declared a state of emergency in all 12 of the affected coastal districts, and deployed the national emergency and security services rapidly.

The members of the international community came forward in solidarity instantaneously. Sri Lanka's neighbours in South Asia, India and Pakistan were among the first. It was an extremely generous gesture on the part of India, as the southern coast of India was also affected by the same Tsunami waves.

Indian and Pakistan ships brought immediate assistance to the destitute. Other South Asian countries too came forward with their quantum of relief assistance.

USA, also one of the first countries to come forward with assistance, sent US Marines who were deployed in the Southern Province for clearance and light construction work. They cleared the debris caused by the damage from roads and other public service areas and made those areas usable.

USAID, with 40 years of expertise with disaster assistance, and a solid working relationship with the government of Sri Lanka responded immediately, providing life-saving food, water, medical care and shelter to these areas. Together with the survivors it helped to rebuild communities and lives. The cash-for-work programs gave families incomes. Loans, business advice and training in job skills and helped develop new businesses and sources of income. Longer-term projects to reconstruct water systems, roads and other critical systems were conducted. The success of the USAID work is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit, learning from experience and the power of partnerships between nations.

In May 2005 former U.S. Presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton announced tsunami reconstruction projects in Indonesia, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Thailand that will receive financial support from the Bush-Clinton Houston Tsunami Fund. More than 4,000 contributors attended the event, including 2,000 young students from area schools.

Of the contributions made to the Bush-Clinton Fund projects In Sri Lanka, funds were allocated to build 100 children's playgrounds in tsunami-affected areas.

DART, came from Canada. A massive outfit of personnel and equipment, water purification equipment particularly, intending to help in providing pure drinking water in the affected areas where the drinking water was contaminated. DART chose Amparai, the worst affected area as

their centre of operations. While providing pure drinking water was their primary responsibility, the DART also provided medical assistance as a means of augmenting the existing arrangements and conducted minor engineering work, such as repairs to roads and bridges. In that time of despair, they made effort to lift up the spirits of the people by extending their friendship to men, women and children who were trying to rebuild their lives.

More expression of concern and solidarity came in the way of words and deeds from the international community. Considering the numbers who suffered injury field hospitals were provided by members of the international community. Psychiatric treatment and counselling was offered to those suffering from trauma.

United Nations Agencies and other international organizations came forward, foremost were UNDP, FAO, WHO, UNEP and UNICEF. They effectively co-coordinated the relief efforts with the Government of Sri Lanka.

The President of Sri Lanka moved swiftly to appoint three national task forces to lead and coordinate the response of the line agencies. The Task Force for Rescue and Relief (TAFRER) to attend to the immediate relief requirements, the Task Force for Logistics and Law and Order (TAFLOL) to provide equipment necessary and maintain law and order during the time of restoring normalcy, and the Task Force for Rebuilding the Nation (TAFREN), to attend to the long term requirements.

The donor community and the government reacted quickly to the tsunami disaster and deployed many teams to assess the various dimensions of damage, the need for restoration and recovery, and opportunities to improve the circumstances of affected people.

The International Red Cross, Save the Children Fund, Oxfam, etc. launched fundraising campaigns. Members of the international community initiated numerous relief providing measures, in cash and by other means. Canada for example in addition to the cash donations, offered to provide matching funds in respect of the funds collected by recognized INGO's operating in Canada.

The solidarity of the international community was not confined to their donations, material assistance and expertise assistance in the form of man power. Many leaders of countries across the world endeavoured to make visits personally, to Sri Lanka as an expression of solidarity and to ascertain for themselves the extent of damage. As a result Sri Lanka received dignitaries ranging from Ministers to Prime Ministers of donor countries, former US Presidents Bill Clinton and George Bush, Parliamentarians, key figures from international

organizations culminating in a visit by the then United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan. Needless to say all the dignitaries were shocked at the devastation caused by the Tsunami, they expressed their solidarity with the government and people of Sri Lanka, and offered their whole hearted assistance towards the nation's effort in rehabilitation and reconstruction. These visits did give a boost to the morale of the nation shattered by the traumatic experience it had just gone through and gave hope to a renewed life with the support of the helping hands extended.

Foreign governments, international organizations, international NGO's and others provided immediate assistance in the form of food, medicine, drinking water, clothing, other personal requirements and shelter, for the medium term tents, dry rations, cooking utensils, bedding, mosquito nets, cash donations, other equipment and manpower and expertise.

GOSL galvanized its Missions abroad into action to approach the host governments, international organizations, INGO's in the respective countries of accreditation as well as the diaspora. Media in the relevant countries was used extensively by the Sri Lanka's Ambassadors and High Commissioners to get their message across, both vertically and horizontally. In some situations the Sri Lankan HOM were able, together with the media to build up an opinion across these countries appealing to official sources for particular means of help.

A significant feature in the entire process of the Tsunami and the recovery was the divergent roles played by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the terrorist group in Sri Lanka fighting for a separate state. When the Tsunami hit Sri Lanka it swept the entire coast of the east, the south and the south-west of the island. The Eastern Province was the worst affected and Mulalthivu, the LTTE stronghold where its sea power was concentrated is in the Eastern Province and is one of the areas very badly damaged. During the immediate aftermath of the devastation the LTTE cadres willingly participated in the overall relief work, working together with the local government officials. This rare phenomenon brought much hope to the people of Sri Lanka and Sri Lanka's friends in the international community, that the tsunami had brought forth at least one positive outcome and that the nation could look forward to an era of peace.

However this expectation was short lived. LTTE cadres withdrew from joint relief work and recommenced their propaganda against the GOSL blaming the govt of not sending relief assistance to affected LTTE areas. The government then had to respond to this allegation and enter into a media campaign on this matter in addition to the Tsunami related work.

An important development regarding Tsunami relief work related to the Eastern Province was the MOU signed in June 2005 by GOSL and LTTE for the Establishment of a Post Tsunami Operational Management Structure, for the GOSL and LTTE to work together to provide relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction and development to the affected coastal communities in the affected districts in the North and the East for the rebuilding of the affected areas. According to the MOU, Committees for reconstruction were to be established in five districts in the Northern and Eastern provinces comprising members from all ethnic communities, However following a change of government in Sri Lanka the MOU became nonfunctional.

There have been instances when the situation vis-à-vis the LTTE in Sri Lanka has been compared with the Aceh situation in Indonesia where a peace agreement was signed between the Aceh rebels and the govt. of Indonesia. Aceh became a success story as the mood was correct, Aceh rebels were prepared for peace negotiations and ready for laying down of arms. In the case of Sri Lanka, the correct mood conducive towards entering into peace talks was not present; LTTE was not ready to lay down arms nor to talk peace. Therefore another opportunity which could have been made use of was lost in Sri Lanka.