

Editorial

The Tsunami Disaster and Imperialist “Humanitarianism”

The December 26 tsunami that struck Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, India and parts of eastern Africa has claimed over 160,000 lives to date. The economies of the stricken areas, already among the poorest on earth, have been devastated and millions of people have been left homeless. The world’s people have responded to this disaster with an outpouring of humanitarian assistance. Various governments have also pledged hundreds of millions of dollars in aid.

However, there is a significant difference between the donations being made by millions of ordinary people and the aid being offered by the United States, Britain, Canada and various other countries which are part of the imperialist system of states. The donations of ordinary people are offered out of a deep sense of humanitarianism, while the aid offered

by the capitalist and imperialist states first and foremost serves the interests of the donor state.

The comment by U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell to the effect that the disaster provides the U.S. with an opportunity to counter the anti-American sentiment in the Muslim countries demonstrates that the U.S. imperialists are motivated by self-interest and self-promotion. In fact, shortly after the disaster, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan pointed out that following the Iranian earthquake in 2002 just a fraction of the aid pledged by governments actually materialized. This demonstrates that many donor countries are more interested in the publicity associated with pledging huge amounts of money than in actually doing anything to assist people in distress.

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Commentary

Elections in Iraq Will Not Extricate the U.S. from its Dilemma

It appears that the U.S. and its Iraqi puppets are determined to go ahead with general elections in Iraq scheduled for January 30 in spite of the deteriorating security situation. The resistance against the U.S. occupation has now spread to every city within the so-called Sunni Triangle, with scores of attacks on American and Iraqi government forces every day. In fact, the insurgency is rapidly taking on the character of a national liberation war.

Already, most of the major Sunni political parties have announced their intention of boycotting the vote and U.S. officials admit that elections may be impossible in much of the Sunni area of the country. This means that the Sunni population, which is currently the main section fighting against the U.S.

occupation, will not be represented in the new government, so they will not have any incentive to abandon their armed struggle in favour of political means to end the American occupation.

For their part, the leading Shia parties are associated with various forces which were waging armed resistance against the Americans last spring – the Mahdi Army of Muqtada Sadr and others. While they agreed to suspend their armed struggle in return for assurances that they could participate in the elections, they have not dropped their demand that the U.S. occupation must end immediately. Therefore, if they are elected, which seems inevitable, a significant section of the new government will be

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Venezuela and Cuba Issue Important Joint Declaration

On December 14, 2004, the presidents of Venezuela and Cuba, Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro, signed a joint declaration to further the development of unity of Latin American and Caribbean countries. The declaration opposed the aims of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), pointing out that, if it were to come into effect, it would “create unprecedented levels of dependence and subordination” for all countries under its aegis. All the developments towards the implementation of the FTAA in Latin America and the Caribbean in the past five years, it points out, have created large profits for the big transnational companies involved, exacerbated the foreign debt crisis and, in general, weakened the countries of the region economically, politically and socially.

The joint declaration committed the two countries to work towards implementing the principles of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (BAA) proposed by Chavez three years ago at the Summit of Caribbean Countries. The guiding principle of the BAA is solidarity among the peoples, as envisioned by the leaders of their historic emancipation struggles – Bolivar, Marti, and many others. A further aim of the BAA, the joint declaration states, is the improvement of the lives of the peoples of Latin America through the elimination of social inequalities and their improved participation in determining their own destiny.

Articles of the joint declaration include, among others: establishment of subsidiaries of state banks in each other’s countries; exchanges of technology initiatives; and establishment of joint investment ventures, productive agreements and management projects between the two countries. The declaration also pledged the two countries to assist each other in the expansion of multi-destination tourism packages.

Immediate measures to be undertaken by Cuba include: the removal of all tariffs on goods imported from Venezuela into Cuba; a period of tax exemptions on profits made by Venezuelan state and private companies in Cuba; a guaranteed price of no less than US\$27 per barrel on imported Venezuelan oil; the provision of 2,000 scholarships to Venezuelan

students in any area of interest to Venezuela; the continued services of 15,000 doctors in Venezuela, who have already been working there to provide medical services in remote areas and to train Venezuelan medical professionals.

Specific measures to be undertaken by Venezuela include: similar removal of tariffs and tax exemptions for Cuba; financing for productive and infrastructure projects in many sectors, such as energy, electricity, roads and highways, ports, aqueducts and sewage systems; and the service of Venezuela’s air and maritime transportation infrastructure and equipment on a preferential basis, among others.

The joint declaration also included a major initiative to eradicate illiteracy in third countries using methods which have been effective in Cuba and Venezuela.

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demanding that the Americans leave. This will exacerbate the political crisis facing the U.S. in Iraq and further undermine U.S. prestige internationally. Furthermore, if the new government does ask the Americans to leave and they refuse, then it could very well bring the Shia population back into the anti-occupation struggle.

The U.S. is desperate to hold the election in order to provide its occupation with a façade of legitimacy and the ability to withdraw some of its troops. However, for that to occur, not only must the elections appear to be fair, but the resulting government must also be pliable and accommodating to the demands of the U.S. imperialist occupiers. It is difficult to see how any election held under conditions of foreign occupation can be seen as fair and legitimate by anyone, least of all by the people of the occupied country. Furthermore, it is not at all clear that the new Iraqi government will be as accommodating as the handful of American-picked puppets that it will replace. Therefore, it is quite possible that, far from extricating the U.S. from its dilemma in Iraq, the elections will backfire on the Americans and make their situation even more untenable than it currently is.

An Election Under Occupation

The first of two scheduled elections under occupation in the Middle East this month took place in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and parts of Jerusalem on January 9, with elections in Iraq scheduled for later this month.

Mahmoud Abbas, the candidate for Fatah, was elected chairman of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in elections that were marred by low voter turnout and the inability of candidates other than Abbas to campaign effectively.

Abbas assumed interim chairmanship of the PA after the death of Yasser Arafat on November 11, 2004, and was immediately hailed as a “genuine partner for peace” by the Sharon and Bush governments, both of whom had refused to deal with Arafat. Abbas, viewed by the Americans and the Israelis as a moderate and a pragmatist, was one of the architects of the Oslo peace accords. The accords, which emerged following the success of the first Palestinian *intifada* in putting the demand for Palestinian statehood back on the international agenda, failed largely because of the Israeli refusal to implement even the most minor concessions called for under the accords.

Undeterred by Israeli intransigence, however, Abbas co-authored another accord with former Israeli Justice Minister Yossi Beilin in 1995; from this document have stemmed all recent Israeli and American peace proposals. Under the terms of the Beilin-Abbas document, over 130 Israeli settlements would remain in the occupied territories, with Israeli Defence Forces remaining active within and around the West Bank and Gaza. The agreement also abrogated the Palestinian claim to Jerusalem, designating instead the Palestinian village of Abu Dis as the capital of a Palestinian state. While the peace talks broke down and have not yet resumed, it was at this point that Israel and the U.S. took serious note of Abbas.

Abbas campaigned for the chairmanship of the PA on a platform of renewing the stalled peace agreements. He also repeatedly called on Palestinian militants to give up their armed struggle against Israel. His candidacy received tacit support from the Israelis and he was the only candidate allowed to travel freely through the checkpoints throughout the Gaza Strip,

West Bank and Jerusalem. His campaign literature was also widely distributed without any intervention.

Voting Under Occupation

While Sharon, Bush and most Western observers hailed the elections as a victory for Palestinian democracy, in reality the elections were mainly an exercise in futility.

According to a report published in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* the day before voting began, the Israeli government had still not complied with its commitment to ease restrictions on Palestinian movements. According to an Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) spokesperson, 14 roadblocks were removed in the West Bank in advance of election day, and “an effort is being made to speed up passage through roadblocks, but security remains [the IDF’s] top priority.” On election day itself, at the two main checkpoints leading into Nablus, for example, those under 25 were barred from entering, while checkpoints throughout the Gaza Strip continued unchanged. It was Israeli commentator Gila Svirsky description of voting in Jerusalem that captured best the absurdity of the day. Determined that the elections would not be used to affirm the Palestinian claim to the city, she notes, Israel allowed only 6,000 of the over 100,000 Palestinian residents of Jerusalem to actually vote there, requiring all others to get through checkpoints to vote in stations in the West Bank. Those who were allowed to cast their vote in Jerusalem had to do so at post offices, with voters handing over their ballots to postal clerks who deposited them into boxes to be “mailed” to Palestine. “Special attention was given to the location of the slot,” Svirsky, wrote in *Ha'aretz*, noting “the Israeli authorities felt strongly that a slot on the top of the box would give the appearance of a real ballot box. Therefore, these mailboxes had slots on the side.”

In the weeks before the election, several candidates were detained by the IDF, with international media showing footage of one candidate for chairman of the Palestinian Authority and his entourage being beaten. A teenager in Gaza was shot while putting up a campaign poster, with another 20 Palestinians killed in the final week of campaigning alone.

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Furthermore, most of the aid that does materialize amounts to government handouts to various monopoly capitalist corporations. For example, huge amounts of food are currently being transported to Sri Lanka, which already has a surplus of available food. It would make much more sense to buy the food locally. This would not only be quicker and provide foods to which the people are accustomed, but would also assist the local economy to recover from the disaster. However, most countries, including Canada, stipulate that the vast majority of aid money must be spent at home and the resulting donations of free food from abroad mean that local farmers cannot sell their produce. Thus, far from assisting the Sri Lankans to get their economy running again, the donated food actually further suppresses the badly damaged agricultural economy of Sri Lanka and makes it more difficult for the people there to rebuild their lives.

Furthermore, the U.S., European Union and others have geopolitical interests in this disaster. Southeast Asia is a strategic area where contention between the imperialist powers is particularly acute. The U.S. has taken advantage of this natural disaster to concentrate a military force in the region, especially in those areas such as Aceh where an armed insurgency has been going on for some time against the Indonesian government. The Bush administration has stated that these forces will be withdrawn within six months, but the U.S. has a habit of turning temporary military assistance into permanent occupations. Other imperialists are also attempting to exploit the disaster to increase their influence in the region.

The imperialist media is also making much of the declaration by various countries of a moratorium on debt payments by the affected countries. Since insisting on those payments being made would have amounted to the aid money being immediately returned to the donor countries, this is a politically expedient decision. However, little is said about who is responsible for the endemic poverty in the region which has undoubtedly had an effect on the massive loss of life. In fact, the imperialists and their neo-liberal policies have not only impoverished the vast majority of the people of the region, but those policies actually result in far greater loss of life than the tsunami.

During the past year, over 1.5 million people, mostly infants, have died from malaria, a disease which is easily prevented. Another 3 million have died

of AIDS, which can also be controlled with proper medication. However, most of the people of the region cannot afford the exorbitant prices charged by the pharmaceutical companies for the medicines they need. A few years ago the U.S. government threatened trade sanctions against South Africa for producing cheap AIDS medications and providing them free to people with AIDS because that action reduced the profits of the drug companies. Brazil faced similar threats.

Not only does the U.S. block the ability of the countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America to take measures to solve these serious health problems, but it routinely withholds money from UN humanitarian agencies which are trying to assist. The U.S. currently owes billions of dollars in dues to the UN, which, if paid, would go a long way towards alleviating the suffering of millions of people. The fact that the U.S. refuses to do so demonstrates that it is not motivated by humanitarianism, but by naked self-interest.

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The absurdity of holding a so-called free and democratic election under military occupation was not lost on Palestinians: less than half of the 1.8 million eligible voters took part, down substantially from voter turnout in the first ever PA elections in 1996, when over 80 per cent of Palestinians cast their ballots.

Abbas, who western commentators have described as having a strong mandate, was elected with just 493,039 votes, or with the support of less than 30 per cent of eligible Palestinian voters.

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