

The Tsunami Disaster: When The Media Moves On

New World Asian Newspaper Column, March 2005

Claude Moraes MEP

If there ever was proof that what is important is what the media chooses to focus on, then it must surely be evident in the way the truly awful and unprecedented Tsunami disaster first received saturation coverage, but as the media spotlight fades, the concern is that the long term agony of the affected areas will also be forgotten only a few weeks after the disaster gripped the world.

After an estimated 6 billion dollars of aid from individuals, governments, the UN and Asian diaspora around the world, and significant self-help in India – why the deepening concern over the long term?

The much feared “second wave” of deaths is happening but often hidden and more difficult to define than many expected. An assessment mission led by the UN’s World Health Organisation for example found along Aceh’s ravaged west coast a glut of antibiotics but soap and bandages virtually non-existent. Handouts of food contain too little protein; officials in the Maldives complain that when the media reported relatively few deaths the world aid agencies turned away. In Sri Lanka, they found the 180 aid organisations perversely were making coordination hard. The number of people unable to feed themselves continues to rise as food stocks and savings run out and as villages spared from the waves are engulfed by the economic turmoil that has followed.

Politics and poor coordination has left much of the affected area in continuing turmoil. Examples abound – like the way Sri Lanka exported labour to the tourist resorts of the south and are now beginning to feel the pain that “aid” cannot touch. Or the accusations that Dalits in India receive derisory aid.

The moral of the story is that the Tsunami undoubtedly produced countless individual acts of generosity, but has the rich world’s response changed fundamentally? With the UK holding both the presidencies of the G8 and the EU in the coming weeks it is a question which should be directed to our own government and the richest countries on the Earth. Their response this year will reveal if anything has really changed as regards global poverty when the media move on.