

FOCUS ON TRADE

June 2006

NUMBER 119

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Focus on the Global South is an autonomous programme of policy research and action of the Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute (CUSRI) based in Bangkok.

TAKE THE IMF OFF LIFE SUPPORT

Soren Ambrose and Walden Bello *

As economists and politicians debate what to do about the latest challenges facing the IMF, civil society groups have a straightforward answer: take the IMF off life support.

For over 25 years the world has had one answer for countries that find themselves in a financial crisis: take the IMF policy medicine and get on the debt treadmill that comes with IMF and World Bank loans. This path has worked very well – for big corporations in wealthy countries which walk into countries through the doors opened by the IMF's policies and walk out with massive profits.

But for the people the IMF and World Bank say they are trying to help – the poor – the results have been very different, in fact, downright disastrous. The IMF has tremendous power – it can tell all other creditors to cut a country off if its orders are disobeyed – so it is no surprise that governments comply with its demands.

Neither should it be surprising that when a government lays off workers, sells off companies to foreigners, cuts spending on nurses and teachers, cuts the subsidies poor farmers and consumers rely on, privatizes essential services like healthcare and water provision, and makes credit unavailable to small businesses – in other words, following IMF instructions – the result is deeper poverty, worsening health indicators, growing illiteracy, and an economy reduced to providing raw materials and cheap labor to multinational corporations.

The IMF's commitment to market fundamentalism – the conviction that the solution to every problem is to open up to the forces of supply and demand – is so extreme that it ordered Malawi to “commercialize” its grain reserve agency in 2001. If you are puzzled by why an agency devoted to preventing famine would submit itself to market forces, imagine how the families of the thousand people who died later that year feel. They were left without access to food after the agency was forced to sell its existing reserves in order to “capitalize” itself; before it could replenish, shortages set in and prices shot up, leaving it, and poor Malawians, defenseless.

The governments that control the IMF – the US, the European Union, Canada, and Japan – met in Wash-

ington in April amid growing signs that the IMF's borrowers have had enough of these one-sided, catastrophic poli-

cy demands. While the poorest countries, mostly in Africa, remain locked in the grip of the IMF, those countries that can afford to do so – Brazil, Argentina, Indonesia, Uruguay, Turkey – are either paying off their IMF debts ahead of schedule or seriously discussing the option. All of them say they will take no more IMF loans. That these are also some of the IMF's biggest debtors has given its bosses serious pause, since it might mean shrinking or even closing the IMF.

The assembled finance ministers and central bank governors – several of whom had been making loud noises of concern in the weeks leading up to the IMF meeting – pronounced themselves satisfied with the solution they had mapped out.

What is the new approach for the IMF? That's not entirely clear – mostly they talked about giving the institution more power to convene mini-summits of countries facing possible economic problems. But if the relieved expressions on the delegates' faces mean that they feel they have saved the IMF by increasing its role in the global economy, we could all be in trouble.

Since the end of the “Bretton Woods” currency arrangements in the early 1970s, the IMF has had virtually no influence over wealthy governments that do not require its loans. If what emerges from the latest crisis of confidence about the institution's role is an agency newly-emboldened to impose its constricted brand of economic orthodoxy – the same one that exacerbated the Asian financial crisis by ordering layoffs and increased interest rates, moves the IMF itself now admits might not have been very wise – then the notoriety that the IMF has earned in Latin America, Asia, and Africa could spread quickly in the richer parts of the world.

Global economic governance is not a bad idea. But the IMF is not the agency to carry it out. It is thoroughly discredited in developing countries and “emerging economies” after 25 years of abuse. Its attempts to impose its solutions on governments and citizens accustomed to making their own decisions is not likely to get very far. Indeed, the only solution to the continuing crises in Africa and other impoverished parts of the world is a restoration of policy sovereignty to people and governments.

The IMF's obsolescence is showing; rather than trying to put it on life-support by supplying it with new power, it should be allowed to die a natural death.

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THE IRAN ISSUE: BACKGROUNDER

Prabir Purkayastha

The Iran issue is now reaching a flash point with a number of reports coming out of the Bush administration of a military strike and even the possible use of nuclear “bunker” bombs to “destroy” Iran’s nuclear capabilities. Even if the nuclear scenario is discounted, the move to bring Iran under Chapter VII in the Security Council and then legitimise future unilateral US military action under the fig leaf of a UN resolution brings a sense of déjà vu to the whole issue. Once again we have unsubstantiated reports of weapons of mass destruction and ratcheting up of war hysteria on a future threat to the “civilised world” from a nuclear-armed Iran, followed by another possible US military misadventure in West Asia.

Such a military strike is unlikely to be a one-of affair as was Israel’s strike on Iraq’s Osirak plant. A simple war game would show that such a strike must be followed up by continuous aerial bombardment of the type we saw in Yugoslavia and a complete destruction of Iran’s industrial and military capabilities. Otherwise, Iran could inflict heavy damage to the US interests in West Asia and on Israel.

For the sane, this is a horrifying scenario. The world is already dealing with the collapse of Iraq as a country, a major humanitarian disaster, along with the loss of oil that it used to supply to the world economy. An attack on Iran could conceivably lead to Iran blocking the straits of Hormuz through which 70 per cent of world’s oil passes. At the very least, it will mean Iran’s supply dwindling for the foreseeable future and oil prices climbing well beyond US\$100 per barrel. The global economy, already on a knife-edge, could go into a catastrophic tailspin causing untold miseries to people all over the world. In all such economic downturn, the poorer countries and the global poor would be hit the hardest.

The case against Iran is that it has installed a cascade of 164 centrifuges in Natanz for enrichment of uranium, which opens the way for an Iranian bomb. The argument that the US and the European Union has been advancing for some time is that by enriching uranium, Iran will acquire bomb making capability, which they cannot accept.. What they do not say is that Iran has the right to enrich uranium for their nuclear power program under the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Even if we accept that Iran may have long-term plans for the production of nuclear weapons using the nuclear power program as a cover, the number of centrifuges it has installed currently is too insignificant

to be a real threat. Iran needs at least 1,500-2,000 to make enough weapons grade uranium for a couple of bombs per year. By all accounts, they are at least 5–10 years away from such a scenario. Iran has repeatedly stated that it is willing to give up uranium enrichment except for laboratory scale and to have their supply enriched uranium for the nuclear power program come out of Russia. Instead of negotiating on this, the US is attempting – in collusion with the Europeans – to push them to a position where they either walk out of the NPT or state that they will go ahead with full-scale enrichment. In either case, the US could use this as a justification for a military strike claiming future security risks.

If we look at the last three years of manufactured crisis on Iran, it will become clear that it has little to do with the actual violations that Iran might have committed, but to use such allegations to deny Iran its right under NPT to the nuclear fuel cycle. Since such a denial would be patently illegal under the NPT, the case put before the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is that Iran did not make full disclosure earlier about its nuclear program and therefore the onus of proving that there is no continuing clandestine program is on Iran and till that time, it should be denied this right. Even though after investigations, IAEA has accepted that the violations are procedural and reporting violations and not one of Iran carrying out activities in violation of NPT.

PROVING THE IMPOSSIBLE

It is important to register here that what the US and its European allies are asking Iran to prove is impossible. To prove you have done something is simple; you can always show the evidence of what you have done. But if you are asked to provide evidence that you have not done something, this is impossible. How do you furnish a negative proof? What kind of proof will suffice? This is exactly the strategy that the US had adopted in Iraq too. Day in and day out, the demand was that Iraq should disclose where it had hidden its weapons of mass destruction. Denying this itself constituted proof that Iraq was not co-operating with the weapon inspectors. In other words, whether in Iraq earlier or Iran now, the only proof that will satisfy the US is proof they are guilty. Otherwise, it only shows that Iran is not willing to make full disclosure. This is what lies behind the US and its insistence that Iran must prove that it is not in violation of NPT.

Before the IAEA resolution referring Iran to the Security Council, the IAEA inspectors had unfettered access to Iran's nuclear facilities. Instead of continuing with the inspections, which would have made more and more certain that Iran was not hiding anything, the US and its European allies precipitated a referral

to the Security Council. The provision for such a referral is finding some evidence of clandestine activity. IAEA chief, El Baredi, instead of presenting such evidence, issued a report that though such evidence had not been found, Iran had not been able to prove the impossible negative that it had disclosed everything. This is in line with the series of reports that IAEA has produced on Iran earlier that the IAEA is “unable to confirm the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities inside Iran”. On the basis of this negative finding, the matter was referred to the Security Council, with the Indian Government also conniving with what was patently an illegal move.

Here again the parallel to Iraq is striking. Contrary to the myth that the western media has propagated, it is not Saddam who asked the weapon inspectors to leave. The IAEA inspectors withdrew when the UK and US had decided on a prolonged bombing campaign in Iraq and explicitly at their request. In Iran also, Iran had agreed to suspend enrichment and voluntarily accepted the much more intrusive regime of inspections under Additional Protocol of NPT while negotiating with the EU on the future course of its nuclear program. Iran had also made clear that any referral to the Security Council would mean that Iran would walk out of this self-imposed restraint regime it was accepting. It was only after being referred to the Security Council that Iran resumed enrichment and pulled out of the Additional Protocol obligations.

If we look at what the US has done, it will become clear that its intention was always to push Iran beyond the brink. It had no intention in a negotiated settlement in which Iran gives up certain rights it currently has under NPT for security guarantees as well as assured supply of enriched uranium fuel. From the beginning, the attempt was to force Iran into a path of confrontation, after which the US could declare, “All options including the nuclear option are on the table”.

LONG TERM AGENDA TO RECONFIGURE NPT

While agenda is obviously one of regime change in Iran, there is also another longer term US agenda. This is that the current NPT regime should itself be reconfigured to deny a number of countries their right to the nuclear fuel cycle.

The non-proliferation compact was simple; all countries that had yet not produced the bomb would give it up in lieu of unfettered access to scientific knowledge, technology and materials for the nuclear energy program. The only agreement that they had to make was that they would not make the bomb. This is the compact that the US and other nuclear weapons states now would like to change.

What the US and its allies are now asking is despite their not fulfilling their part of the nuclear bargain that they would negotiate in good faith for nuclear disarmament, the non nuclear weapon countries should give up their right also to the nuclear fuel cycle. Only a few countries defined as advanced countries should have this right. To quote George Perkovich, one of the leading US non-proliferation ideologues, “The Nonproliferation Treaty’s vague Article IV right ‘to develop research, production, and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes’ should not be interpreted to endorse additional states’ acquiring uranium enrichment or plutonium separation facilities.” (Yale Global, March 21, 2005). This is what underlies the proposal that Iran give up enrichment completely and rely on Russia to enrich uranium for its nuclear power program.

The US believes that it can continue to keep nuclear weapons for itself in perpetuity, threaten other countries with pre-emptive nuclear strikes, build new generation of nuclear weapons and then deny other countries the right to even manufacture its own fuel. It is currently spending more than 6.5 billion dollars for nuclear weapons – 50 per cent more than it did on the average during the cold war. The new generation of nuclear weapons include low-yield bunker busters, precisely the kind of weapons being proposed to be used in Natanz.

It is comparatively easy today to start manufacturing nuclear fuel. Once a country has this capability, going the extra distance to convert this to nuclear weapons is not a major technical challenge. Thus, it is easy for countries to build nuclear bomb making capability under the guise of a nuclear energy program. The process of enrichment is same whether a country wants to make Low Enriched Uranium (LEU) or Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU). Uranium Hexafluoride gas is passed through a set of centrifuges in a cascade, each of which produces a higher concentration of the fissile Uranium 235 isotope. While the power program requires enrichment to about 3-5 per cent, the bomb program demands an enrichment level of 90 per cent. As the number of stages that the material undergoes in this concentration process decides the level of enrichment, once the requisite number of centrifuges is in place, it is only a matter of time before a country – if it wants – can acquire weapons grade fissile material. However, running a large cascade of centrifuges is a complex operation and Iran will take some time to master this technology, if it wants to use its enrichment facility to develop the bomb.

The strategic shift that the US wants in the NPT regime was that the earlier NPT was a voluntary giving up of the bomb by the non nuclear weapons countries; it was a matter of political will. The new NPT regime

contemplated would add a highly coercive regime to it by which either the technology or the knowledge to make the bomb would be denied to most of the countries. This also explains the far more intrusive inspection regime that the Additional Protocols in IAEA call for, which is now sought to be made mandatory, as also the desire to add clauses by which NPT signatories cannot walk out of NPT. Ring fencing the fuel cycle is another element in this new NPT scenario. In lieu of giving up the right to enrich uranium, these countries then would get the assurance of a supply of nuclear fuel from the same countries that have not kept their earlier promise to introduce nuclear disarmament. Interestingly, the interlocutors in the earlier negotiations with Iran, the E 3, consisting of France, Germany and UK would all be a part of this new nuclear fuel cartel.

In the US scheme, the nuclear weapon states plus Japan, Germany and Netherlands, the three other countries who also have uranium enrichment facilities, would become the new OPEC with complete monopoly of all nuclear fuel. If nuclear energy does become more popular, and there is evidence that it is becoming more attractive with the rise in oil prices and global warming from the greenhouse gases produced from fossil fuel, then these countries could dictate to the rest of the world their price for nuclear fuel. This has already made even countries such as Brazil and South Africa, who have given up nuclear weapons, quite uncomfortable, a discomfort that India also should share if it were not so enamoured of a strategic alliance with the US.

IMMORAL, AND DOOMED

The problem with such a duplicitous policy is that not only is it immoral – you cannot tell the rest of the world to give up nuclear weapons while keeping them for yourself – but also it is foredoomed to failure. Year by year, the technology of producing centrifuges and other supportive technologies are becoming easier and more accessible. As the technologies become easier to acquire and their costs also drop, ring fencing the nuclear fuel cycle, as a part of a new NPT regime is unlikely to succeed.

The unfortunate part of the current Iran crisis is that IAEA and the UN are implicitly accepting elements of the new NPT scenario as legitimate objectives even if they are not in the NPT. The Iran case can then be used as the new international standard by which all non-nuclear weapon countries would be held to in the future. This is why most of the non-aligned countries in the IAEA have opposed the attempt to deny Iran the nuclear fuel cycle, with India proving the dishonourable exception.

the non-proliferation agenda is that it does not address the reason why non-nuclear weapon states are attracted to nuclear weapons in the first place. If Israel has a monopoly of nuclear weapons in West Asia and the US demands the right to use nuclear weapons in “preventive” wars even against countries that do not have nuclear weapons, it should not surprise any one that nuclear weapons start to look more and more attractive. With the enormous superiority in conventional arms resting with the US and its ability to punch through conventional defences in any future conflict, weaker countries also look to nuclear weapons as “equalisers”. We may condemn them for doing so, but cannot deny that it is a response to what they perceive as threats of war. Condemning them is not enough; we need also to address their legitimate security concerns.

Any attempt to impose a long-term non-proliferation regime on others without the nuclear powers disarming themselves is unlikely to hold indefinitely. It is a matter of time before nuclear weapons technology will be within the reach of any nation willing to go this route. Armed interventions by the US and local bullyboys such as Israel will only help to tip the world into the hot bed of nuclear weapons and make this world an infinitely more dangerous place.

India's record on the Iran issue has been one of hypocrisy and subservience to the US. Already, the Indian Government is visibly dragging its feet over the Iran pipeline, while jumping on to the US initiative over a new pipeline through Afghanistan. The Indo-US nuclear deal also seeks to tie India permanently to the US strategic interests. There is real threat that if there are military strikes on Iran, the Indian Government will be seen to be complicit in such an attack, with long-term consequences for India. Even now it is not too late. India must join other non-aligned countries to stop this madness of military action that the US is contemplating. It must intervene positively so that Iran's slide towards nuclear weapons is stopped as well as its rights to security and the nuclear fuel cycle retained. It is not only a moral necessity but in our national interest that such a confrontation and possible military action are averted.

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THE RISE OF THE RELIEF-AND RECONSTRUCTION COMPLEX

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(This article first appeared in the Journal of International Affairs, Spring/Summer 2006, vol. 59, no. 2. It is published here with permission.)

Massive infrastructure damage and great social dislocation have been common consequences of natural disasters and social disasters like wars. Up until a few years ago, the aims of relief and reconstruction efforts were fairly simple: immediate physical relief of victims, reduction of social dislocation, restoration of a functioning social organization and reparation of physical infrastructure. In major disasters or wars, international actors were central players—most prominently United Nations agencies and the Red Cross Movement.

In recent years, however, the objectives of both disaster relief and post-conflict reconstruction have become more complex. Strategic considerations have become more prevalent in military-led disaster relief operations. Post-disaster and post-conflict reconstruction planning and implementation are increasingly influenced by neoliberal market economics. A new militant humanitarianism infuses not only post-conflict reconstruction work but, in a number of cases, has itself helped to precipitate conflicts.

Disaster relief and post-conflict reconstruction have thus become increasingly intertwined, so that it is difficult to understand the dynamics of one arena without looking at the other. This is all the more true since the same set of actors now dominate both arenas: the U.S. military-political command, the World Bank, corporate contractors and humanitarian and development non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Humanitarian missions led by the United Nations and Red Cross are a thing of the past, though these players continue to participate in relief and reconstruction work along, of course, with national governments. The new establishment in post-disaster and post-conflict reconstruction is what will be termed here the “relief and reconstruction complex” (RRC). Power structures develop legitimating ideologies, and accompanying the rise of the RRC is a formulaic discourse that is built on appeals to national and international security, neoliberal economics and a burgeoning, militant “rights-based humanitarianism.”

THE TSUNAMI AS OPPORTUNITY I: THE PENTAGON

Within hours after the massive tsunami that hit at least eleven countries bordering the Indian Ocean on 26 December 2004, U.S. Navy Orion

reconnaissance aircraft began flying over the affected areas to deliver emergency relief and to assess the damage. This was the prelude to a massive expedition that eventually came to encompass more than twenty-four U.S. warships, over 100 aircraft and some 16,000 military personnel—the largest U.S. military concentration in Asia since the end of the Vietnam War. (1)

It was not a disinterested peacetime military mission. One immediate sign of this was the deliberate U.S. effort to marginalize the United Nations, which was expected by many to coordinate, at least at the formal level, the relief effort. Instead, Washington sought to bypass the United Nations by setting up a separate assistance “consortium” with India, Australia, Japan, Canada and several other governments, with the U.S. military task force’s Combined Coordination Center at U Tapao, Thailand, effectively serving as the axis of the whole relief operation. (2) Showing the flag was seen by the Bush administration as an important objective in light of the low point in the relations between the United States and many communities in the Southeast Asian region owing to the War on Terror, which many Muslims, who were in the majority in the most devastated country, Indonesia, had seen as being directed against them. The War on Iraq was also universally unpopular throughout the area, yet here was an opportunity to show a different face of the U.S. military than that of a force imposing a harsh military occupation on that Middle Eastern country.

However, there were more immediate military objectives as well. The Indonesian military had been subject to a ban on U.S. arms sales as well as restrictions on U.S. led military training for close to a decade owing to the successful campaign of human rights groups during the 1990s to expose the systematic oppression carried out by the Indonesian Army, the TNI. The tsunami relief effort became an opportunity for the Pentagon to push for dropping those restrictions. As then-Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz put it during a visit to Jakarta a few weeks after the disaster, “the more we can cooperate on a peaceful basis with militaries in this region in normal times [the more we can increase] our capacity to respond to disasters.”

He then went on to say,

“Everybody loses a great deal when a long period of time goes by with severe limitations on the ability of our military...when you cut off their contact with a military, whether it be in Pakistan...or here, as we’ve done to a lesser extent but continue. I think it is not supportive of the very goals that these restrictions

are meant to achieve.” (3)

The military-to-military cooperation during the tsunami relief became an important step in a process of the Wolfowitz-led effort to restore military aid to Indonesia.

In January 2005, Washington, citing the tsunami, allowed commercial sales of “nonlethal” defense items, including spare parts for military transport planes. In February 2005, the ban on military training was lifted, followed that May by the lifting on government sale of non-lethal defense equipment. Finally, in November 2005, despite Congress voting to maintain the ban two weeks earlier, the State Department, exploiting a national security waiver provision, resumed unrestricted military and training aid, citing among other reasons, the objective of strengthening the Indonesian military’s capability for “disaster relief.” (4)

Dealing with two active insurgencies, in Aceh and West Papua, the TNI would find U.S. military aid very useful, especially if the tenuous post-tsunami ceasefire that it has entered into with GAM, the Acehnese independence movement, gives way again to open hostilities.

Strategic maneuvering using the tsunami as a platform was not limited to Southeast Asia. In South Asia, Pentagon relief efforts were poised to move into areas in Sri Lanka controlled by the Tamil Tigers (LTTE), a group that the State Department includes in its list of terrorist organizations. Several hundred U.S. Marines from the Navy assault ship Bonhomme Richard were set to be deployed to Galle, on the west coast, to provide “limited engineering capability” for repairing roads and other damaged infrastructure. Given the fact that a few days before, the Tigers and the Sri Lankan army were on the brink of renewed hostilities, one military expert noted, the use of U.S. troops and ships for the relief effort had strategic implications:

“[I]f there is a showdown, the presence of foreign troop – particularly from the U.S. and India - involved in relief work could make a world of difference... In case of a military operation, additional airlift capability now available to Sri Lanka from the foreign helicopters employed in relief work would be formidable. These forces have also added to infrastructure restoration and repair capability. Similarly the foreign naval ships can create a strong cordon to prevent external access to the LTTE.” (5)

While it is doubtful that the United States had any intention to actively intervene in an open conflict, its nearby

presence would serve as a strong psychological deterrent to the Tigers. Moreover, Washington was anxious to reassert influence in an area where it had been sidelined by the successful Norwegian government initiative to broker a truce between the Sri Lankan government and the Tigers.

Aware of the strategic disadvantage at which they were placed, the Tigers objected strongly to the U.S. military presence, prompting Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga to scale down her request for U.S. aid. As a result only U.S. naval helicopters were eventually involved in the relief effort. (6)

The U.S. military-led relief effort contributed to saving lives, alleviating the misery of tsunami survivors and repairing infrastructure. Nevertheless, it went hand-in-hand with strategic and propaganda objectives. While it is doubtful that it was able to repair the tattered image of the United States among Indonesian Muslims, this initiative scored a stunning success in creating the climate for the lifting of restrictions on military aid to the TNI, which the Pentagon had long considered its most strategic ally in Southeast Asia.

THE TSUNAMI AS OPPORTUNITY II: THE WORLD BANK

While the U.S. military spearheaded the immediate relief effort, the World Bank assumed the dominant role in the reconstruction arena, and here, as in the former scenario, the United Nations was placed in a subordinate role. In the first next six months after the tsunami, the World Bank committed \$835 million to tsunami-devastated countries. Of equally importance, it became the manager of a Multi-Donor Trust Fund for Aceh and North Sumatra to handle some \$500 million in aid from the European Commission, the Netherlands, United Kingdom, Canada, Sweden and other contributors.

A cynical view might be that the World Bank needed the tsunami to refurbish its image as a disaster-management agency. At the time, it was still dogged by its record following the devastating Hurricane Mitch, when of the \$8.7 billion that the World Bank and Western governments promised to raise as aid for the affected Central American countries, less than a third materialized. (7) World Bank officials were also bothered by the belief of many Hondurans that it had imposed a “permanent hurricane” on their country.

To satisfy the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Honduran Congress had passed a comprehensive set of laws allowing privatiza-

tion of airports, seaports and highways, and fast-tracked plans to privatize the national electric utility, telephone company and parts of the water sector while

the country was “still knee deep in rubble, corpses, and mud,” as Naomi Klein described it. During that same period, Guatemala and Nicaragua announced plans to sell off their telephone systems, with Nicaragua also throwing in its electric company and petroleum sector. (8)

Indeed, as the World Bank waded into the post-tsunami reconstruction arena, some of the same criticism resurfaced. To be sure, no one was accusing the World Bank of using the disaster as an opportunity to push through a privatization program as it did in the post-Hurricane Mitch situation. However, it was criticized, along with governments, for placing emphasis on the rehabilitation of commercial enterprises such as prawn farms and tourist resorts. (9) Indeed, a February 2005 report on its post-tsunami operations noted that the International Finance Corporation, the World Bank’s financing arm, was “considering financing facilities that will rapidly mobilize long-term debt financing for the recovery of the tourism operations in the affected areas.” (10)

Whether supported by World Bank aid or not, rehabilitation of tourism did receive special treatment in a number of countries. In Sri Lanka, according to a Red Cross report, “The government is intent on maintaining a shoreline exclusion zone in which private residential buildings will not be permitted and in which tourist/holiday commercial property development is to be exclusively permitted.” (11) In Thailand, many tourist resorts had been completely rebuilt and were, after one year, welcoming a steady stream of visitors. However, according to one report, this “speedy construction has created its own problems; local Thai villagers accuse developers of expanding their beach-front holdings illegally. More than two-thirds of the forty-seven Thai villages destroyed by the tsunami are currently embroiled in land-title disputes.” (12)

In response to critics, the World Bank contended that its performance in the post-tsunami recovery and reconstruction was nothing short of sterling. Its report to donor governments over a month after the tsunami amounted to a strong pat on the back:

“The disaster brought out the best in World Bank staff and demonstrated the effectiveness of decentralization. The [World] Bank moved quickly to a) provide assistance on the ground in affected countries for expedited recovery planning; b) mobilize its financial support; and c) help coordinate rehabilitation and recovery support... The [World] Bank was able to use its comparative advantage—in-house expertise on recovery and reconstruction, knowledge of the overall economies of these countries, sectoral knowledge from operations and analytic work, procurement and financial management skills, and experience with

donor coordination and reconstruction financing—in assisting countries in formulating their recovery plans.” (13)

One might note here that it is this same argument—the alleged “comparative advantage” it possesses due to its comprehensive knowledge of the institutions of natural disaster-hit countries—that the World Bank deployed to justify its leading role in post-conflict reconstruction. (14)

The World Bank’s defensiveness during the tsunami relief stemmed not only from its poor performance in Hurricane Mitch. Over the previous decade, it had received tremendous criticism from a variety of influential quarters. In 2000, it was pilloried by a U.S. Congress-appointed body, the Meltzer Commission, which came up with a number of devastating findings, among them that 70 percent of the Bank’s non-aid lending was concentrated in eleven member countries, with 145 other members left to scramble for the remaining 30 percent; 80 percent of the Bank’s resources were devoted not to the poorest countries but to the better-off ones that enjoyed positive credit ratings; and that the failure rate for World Bank projects was 65-70 percent in the poorest societies and 55-60 percent in all developing countries. These numbers, according to the commission, meant that the World Bank had become irrelevant to its avowed mission: alleviating global poverty. (15)

Moreover, the structural adjustment programs that the World Bank and the IMF had administered in over ninety developing and transition economies had mostly failed in terms of meeting their declared goals of promoting sustained growth, poverty reduction and mitigating inequality, prompting the renaming of these programs as the “Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers.”

The World Bank also had to deal with accusations that it had tolerated corruption, contrary to its propaganda that it was promoting “good governance.” For instance, of the \$30 billion that it had funneled to the Suharto government in Indonesia for over thirty years, about 30 percent, admitted one World Bank official, had been pocketed by Indonesian government officials. (16)

POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION : THE WORLD BANK’S NEW FRONTIER

Perhaps partly because of its poor record in development work, the World Bank began to devote more and more of its resources to disaster and reconstruction work, including in post-conflict societies. While the World Bank could be faulted for its development work, nothing could substitute for its reconstruction efforts. This was, in a sense, a return to its origins,

since it began its existence in the mid-1940s as a key agency in the post-war reconstruction of Europe.

Even as it intensified its post-disaster work in the 1990s, the World Bank moved into post-conflict reconstruction. In 1997, it established the Post Conflict Fund to “enhance the World Bank’s ability to support countries in transition from conflict to sustainable peace and economic growth.” (17) Post-conflict countries now receive 2025 percent of the World Bank’s total lending, according to Klein, up from 16 percent in 1998, which in turn was up 800 percent since 1980.¹⁸ It also now has a special unit to develop programs for conflict-affected countries, the Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction Unit. (19)

According to Focus on the Global South’s Shalmali Guttal:

“What is remarkable about the [World] Bank’s involvement in post-conflict reconstruction is the breadth and size of its operations, and the ease with which it repackages its usual programs into reconstruction mode. The World Bank’s reconstruction activities span a wide spectrum, from giving policy “advice” and commissioning studies, to financing in-country activities and managing the donor funds channeled to a war-torn or conflict-ridden country for reconstruction.

“Through various mechanisms, such as the management of joint donor trust funds or “transitional support strategy” schemes, the World Bank now plays “a significant role in shaping the economic, social, and political climates in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Africa’s Great Lakes region, the Balkans, Liberia, Nepal, Sierra Leone, Timor Leste, Sri Lanka, the West Bank and Gaza, and other areas torn by war, conflicts, and disasters.” (20)

Post-conflict reconstruction has enmeshed the World Bank more closely with the foreign policy and security objectives of its dominant member and donor, the United States. Indeed, the appointment of Paul Wolfowitz to serve as World Bank president was seen by many as confirmation of the Bush Administration’s drive to mesh the World Bank’s development, disaster relief and post-conflict reconstruction work more tightly with its strategic objectives. (21) This is most clearly seen in Afghanistan and Iraq, where the Bush administration’s twin objectives – pacification and privatization – have also become the key goals of the World Bank.

In Afghanistan, the World Bank is at the center of reconstruction activity, committing as of January 2006 some \$973 million for eighteen projects, as well as administering six grants totaling \$1.31 billion from the Afghani-

stan Reconstruction Trust Fund. The World Bank states that it is channeling supporting investments “aligned with national priorities.” (22) Privatization, writes Naomi Klein, is clearly one of these priorities:

“In Afghanistan, where the World Bank administers the country’s aid through a trust fund, it has already managed to privatize healthcare by refusing to give funds to the Ministry of Health to build hospital... [and] mandated “an increased role for the private sector” in the water system, telecommunications, oil, gas and mining and directed the government to “withdraw” from the electricity sector and leave it to “foreign private investors.” These profound transformations of Afghan society were never debated or reported on, because few outside the bank know they took place: The changes were buried deep in a “technical annex” attached to a grant providing “emergency” aid to Afghanistan’s war-torn infrastructure—two years before the country had an elected government.” (23)

In this regard, the World Bank considers especially critical the participation of foreign investors in the privatization process, as evidenced by the fact that its Afghanistan Investment Guarantee Facility for foreign investors emphasizes coverage for “acquisitions that involve the privatization of state enterprises.” (24)

In Iraq, one of the first acts of the U.S. authorities upon the overthrow of Saddam Hussein was to have the World Bank finance reconstruction. Then-World Bank President James Wolfensohn promised to raise \$3 to \$5 billion, and the World Bank went on to set up the Iraq Trust Fund, a multi-donor agency, that would funnel money into economic reconstruction. In announcing the creation of the Trust Fund, the World Bank identified Iraq’s “centralized command economy” as one of the factors that had stifled growth and development and indicated that one of the key objectives of the fund’s interim strategy for Iraq would be to “provide policy advice and analytical work that will pave the transition to a market-based economy.” (25)

The World Bank, of course, was just one of a number of actors coordinated by Washington to radically transform Iraq into a market nirvana protected by U.S. troops. Along with the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) brought in contractors to “establish the basic legal framework for a functioning market economy,” as one USAID directive put it.²⁶ Among the priorities was the creation of a legal regime for foreign investment. In this regard, the World Bank declared its support for the CPA’s radical effort to rewrite Iraq’s foreign investment law without a sovereign regime in place, as it had also done in the case of Afghanistan. A World Bank/United

Nations Joint Needs Assessment report, Kathy Hoang explained, positively cited CPA Order 39 which, it noted:

“...would make the country one of the most open in the world. The law permits full foreign ownership of businesses in all sectors (with the exception of natural resources [e.g., oil]), permits foreign firms to enter Iraq as direct owners of branches or through joint ventures, provides for national treatment of foreign firms and permits the full and immediate repatriation of profits.” (27)

As the Financial Times noted at the time, these changes “make Iraq one of the most liberalized economies in the developing world and go beyond even the laws in many rich countries.” (28)

The World Bank’s endorsement of the CPA decree, which would later be enshrined along with other radical pro-market decrees in the Iraqi constitution “the final draft of which appeared in the summer of 2005” was not surprising. A World Bank working paper, citing the lessons of an earlier war, asserted:

“One of the main lessons of BiH’s [Bosnia and Herzegovina’s] experience is the need to press for investment-related policy reforms as early as feasible...[T]here is no doubt that earlier reform would have been desirable, and this is one of the most important lessons for other post-conflict environments.” (29)

Along with foreign investment, a key World Bank concern was privatization and the dismantling of state enterprises. As the World Bank’s interim strategy notes, “An open economy and an enabling environment for private investment are essential for growth. Iraq also needs to establish a sound regulatory framework, and to reform and privatize SOE’s [state-owned enterprises] and banks.” (30)

While clearly following the U.S. agenda, the World Bank was also trying to carve out a unique role in Iraqi reconstruction by stressing its superiority over other institutions, including U.S. government agencies such as USAID, in managing comprehensive economic transformation:

“The Bank’s comparative advantage is to build Iraqi institutional capacity, by implementing operators using Iraqi institutions and by emphasizing Iraqi ownership, sector-wide approaches and coherent expenditure frameworks. In contrast, many other external partners channel assistance to particular projects through private contractors, external agencies, or nongovernmental organizations. Another important comparative advantage is to ensure consideration of international experience and best practice.” (31)

As noted earlier, this was, almost word-for-word, the same rationale that the World Bank deployed to legitimize its leading role in disaster relief efforts.

CORPORATE CONTRACTORS, HARD AND SOFT : A SHORT NOTE

Corporations “and U.S. corporate contractors in particular, such as Halliburton and Bechtel “have been key actors in the reconstruction process, prompting Naomi Klein to coin the felicitous term “disaster capitalism.” These infrastructure builders have been the recipients of hundreds of millions of dollars in bilateral and multilateral aid. One key study claims, for instance:

“The vast bulk of the \$3.9 billion Halliburton received from the Pentagon in FY 2003 went for the company’s work in and around Iraq and Afghanistan, including everything from building military bases, to providing meals, to doing the laundry, to maintaining military vehicles, to rebuilding Iraq’s oil infrastructure. The \$3.9 billion the company earned in 2003 doesn’t include billions in new contracts that have been issued since that time for rebuilding oil infrastructure in southern Iraq or for work in other parts of the world.

Halliburton has also built bases in Uzbekistan and prison camps in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. “Anywhere you go where the U.S. Army has to deploy on short notice, Halliburton is there, working on a cost-plus contract,” notes Frida Berrigan, Deputy Director of the Institute’s Arms Project and a co-author of the new analysis. “The billions they have earned thus far are just the tip of the iceberg.” (32)

While “hard” infrastructure contractors like Bechtel and Halliburton have been the focus of much attention, “soft” infrastructure agents have also played a critical role in the reconstruction process. In Iraq, for instance, USAID has brought in Research Triangle Institute to manage the restructuring of local government, Creative Associates to work on “public-private partnerships,” Abt Associates to reform the public health system, Development Alternatives Inc. to manage the rural poor’s transition towards a market-led economy, and Bearing Point to create the legal regulatory framework for a free-market economy. (33)

Many of the same contractors operate in Afghanistan, where the U.S.-installed President Hamid Karzai felt obliged to condemn “corrupt, wasteful, and unaccountable” foreign contractors for “squandering the precious resources that Afghanistan received in aid.” (34)

It is not surprising that with their close links to Washington, the overall managers of reconstruction in

Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the post-Katrina relief work in Louisiana, were some of the same faces – including Bechtel, Halliburton, the notorious Blackwater and DynCorp private security agencies—that showed up in devastated New Orleans.³⁵ One significant byproduct of this process, says one analyst, is that many of the questionable practices used in the reconstruction of Iraq are now being implemented in this largest effort at reconstruction in the history of the U.S. “which could total several hundred billion dollars” including non-competitive contracts and cost-plus provisions that guarantee profit regardless of the amount a firm spends, with contracts going to many politically well-connected companies. (36)

NGOS AND THE NEW , MILITANT HUMANITARIANISM

The role of foreign contractors has been much publicized and analyzed, but the role of the fourth member of the Relief-and-Reconstruction Complex—NGOs or civil society organizations (CSOs – is less well understood. NGOs are a central part of the disaster and reconstruction effort. For instance, NGOs have been so prominent in countries affected by the tsunami that there is a widespread perception that “relief and rehabilitation has been purely NGO-driven.” (37) Indeed, in many areas NGOs have practically supplanted the government in the provision of emergency services.

The record has been mixed. While the work of the NGOs has generally been appreciated, there has been skepticism in some quarters about their being loaded with money, their outsider perspectives and their modus operandi. In some areas, such as the Kanyakumari district, Tamil Nadu, India, according to a Frontline correspondent, reconstruction “has gone awry with the genuinely needy groups caught in a crossfire between competing NGO and Church interests.” (38) Lack of a long-term strategy beyond the immediate relief phase into the reconstruction phase was another common complaint in many areas. Still another was the consequence of the state’s abdication of its responsibilities. As one community in Tamil Nadu’s hard-hit Cuddalore district saw it, aside from the disruptive consequences of “easy money” flowing in from NGOs, a greater worry was that the dependence on NGOs for housing had drastically reduced the State’s duty as a provider of basic infrastructure.

This “government-less approach,” he warned, “could lead to significant disempowerment of the community.” (39)

The agility of NGOs compared to a lumbering state was not, however, the only reason for the prominence of NGOs. In fact, the prevailing neoliberal atmosphere has brought its basic perspective that government is ineffi-

cient and private organizations are efficient from the economic to the social sphere. Having been criticized by the right in the U.S. for funneling its aid through governments, which it sees as “socialism”, the World Bank is channeling more and more of its support to private entities like NGOs. In Thailand, for instance, the World Bank plans to partner with such NGOs as the Population and Community Development Association, World Vision and the Local Development Institute to provide assistance in a number of provinces. In Aceh, the World Bank was looking to finance not the government but a U.S.-based NGO, Catholic Relief Services, to repair the temporary road along the western coast. The government was also shut out of the land rights project, which would enable people to identify their properties after the tsunami wiped away property boundaries. Instead, according to a World Bank news release, “A number of CSOs (big international organizations as well as Aceh-based ones) have been trained by this World Bank-administered program to conduct Community Mapping and Community Driven Adjudication.” (40)

NGOs have not, of course, been passive actors; they have actively lobbied the World Bank and governments to more actively manage the delivery of assistance. They have not been pawns in post-conflict reconstruction. In the last fifteen years, some NGOs have become partisans of military intervention in their humanitarian interventions. In the Balkan crisis of the 1990s, for instance, Medicins Sans Frontieres, the Peace Prize Winner for 1999, was an active proponent of NATO military intervention in the Bosnian crisis and again during the Kosovo crisis to protect Muslim and Albanian Kosovars from Serb repression. Many had agitated informally and quietly for international action against the Taliban prior to the U.S. invasion, and when the invasion did take place, they flooded into Afghanistan. Less than two years later, in June 2003, seventy-nine NGOs demanded that the international community accord NATO a “robust stabilization mandate” in the country. In a manifesto entitled “Call for Security,” they elaborated on this demand:

“This mandate should include the expansion of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to key locations and major transport routes outside of Kabul and the active support for a comprehensive program of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of all militia forces outside the control of the central government.” (41)

This meant that the signatories—which included CARE International, Catholic Relief Services, Caritas International, Human Rights Watch, World Vision US, Save the Children UK and Oxfam International—were quite consciously taking sides in an ongoing civil war.

According to David Chandler, this transformation of humanitarian philosophy from “needs-based” to “rights-based” humanitarianism has involved both advocacy of setting aside the principle of national sovereignty during humanitarian crises as well as an abandonment of the traditional neutrality of the Red Cross, meaning actively siding with those parts of the population seen as “oppressed” against those seen as “oppressors”. As expressed by Geoffrey Robinson, one advocate of this new, muscular humanitarianism, sanctions on post-war Serbia were justified because “most of Serbia’s eight million citizens were guilty of indifference towards atrocities in Kosovo.” (42)

Many of the influential NGOs have steered clear from making major commitments to Iraq, partly because of the controversy over a war that could not be justified on grounds of either humanitarianism or self-defense, and partly because the security situation could never be stabilized enough to assure NGO personnel that they could move around in relative safety. Civil society organizations were present nevertheless. Aside from a handful of anti-war NGOs determined to extend symbolic people-to-people support to Iraqis, most of the key NGOs present were conservative U.S. organizations that functioned as semi-official bodies working closely with the occupation authorities on “democracy promotion.” These included the U.S. Congress-funded National Endowment for Democracy (NED), National Democratic Institute, International Republican Institute and the International Foundation of Election Systems, which had earlier funded pro-U.S. parties in critical hot spots such as Venezuela, Nicaragua, Haiti, Ukraine and El Salvador. (43) Often, as in the case of NED, these bodies worked closely with the contractors specializing in social management hired by the government such as Development Alternatives Inc., and Abt Associates. (44) All were virtual appendages of the CAP, which ruled Iraq until June 2004.

It is in Afghanistan that the role of NGOs in the reconstruction effort has become truly central. The marriage of strategic rationale, neo-liberal suspicion towards the state and the aggressive humanitarianism of the NGOs produced contemporary Afghanistan’s current mode of governance, where NGOs have assumed many of the functions of government while the government itself has been deliberately starved of funds to support itself and carry out what have traditionally been seen as state functions.

According to one insightful account, the collapse of the Taliban government opened up a vacuum that Afghan NGOs relocating from Pakistan or newly founded NGOs rushed to fill:

“Consequently, a high percentage of the newly established Afghan NGOs began to take on the role of

sub-contractor or according to the donor community “implementing partners.” As a result, these Afghan NGOs began to carve their own niche in delivering the very much needed humanitarian aid throughout the country in line with the donor community policy and guidelines. Overall, this was easy to do (donor agencies were eagerly seeking partners), easy to implement (mostly in their own villages and regions), there was some capacity within the organizations (mostly returning refugees that were educated in their host countries) and there was a desire to attract funding. A fluid and undefined civil society sector began to emerge in response to large sums of money being available for quick infrastructure and aid distribution projects.” (45)

Soon, according to the former planning minister of the Karzai government, Dr. Ramazan Bashar Dost, a full third of the \$4.5 billion pledged to Afghanistan at the Tokyo Conference in 2003 went to NGOs, a third went to the government and a third to the United Nations.⁴⁶ He went on to say that the NGO sector was also raiding the government of its best people owing to the much higher salaries it offered. (47)

The sequel to Dost’s criticism confirmed his accusation about the power of NGOs in Afghanistan: He was forced to resign. (48)

With NGOs available to take on tasks, the multilateral donors found a convenient channel for their aid—one that was more pliable than the government and accorded with their ideological redirection for slim states. Thus, when it came to rescuing the country’s health system, the World Bank has managed to privatize health care by refusing to give funds to the Ministry of Health to build hospitals and channeling money instead to NGOs to run their own private health clinics on three-year contracts.(49) Indeed, in many instances, the NGOs became more influential than either the government or the private sector. (50)

Supportive of the occupation, dependent on foreign military support and performing the functions of government in many parts of the country, it is no wonder that NGO workers, including highly visible foreigners, have become targets of the insurgents; over forty NGO workers have been killed since the U.S. invasion. The insurgents, in short, simply know where the power lies. Perhaps the best description of the status of NGOs in contemporary Afghanistan was presciently provided by then-Secretary of State Colin Powell in a speech to American NGOs when Operation Enduring Freedom—the invasion of Afghanistan—began in October 2001: “NGOs are such a force multiplier for us, such an important part of our combat team.” (51)

TOWARDS A NEW RELIEF AND RECONSTRUCTION PARADIGM

A number of steps can be taken to reverse the descent into a blurring of disaster relief and reconstruction aid. First, in a major regional disaster it is important to immediately establish a rescue and recovery command center under the auspices of the United Nations, Red Cross and affected governments that will supervise relief efforts, including those of participating foreign military units such as U.S. forces. The unilateral establishment of a U.S.-dominated command center such as that set up at the former U.S. air base in Utapao, Thailand, during the post-tsunami relief operations must not be repeated.

Second, direct military-to-military entanglements must be discouraged except for operational purposes. Key decisions for relief activities within a country should be cleared and approved by local civilian authorities. Also, foreign military units participating in a relief effort should be integrated into operations led and managed by the affected government’s civilian disaster agencies.

Third, medium-term and long-term relief and recovery aid should be managed by a consortium led by UN agencies, with the role and programs of the World Bank set by this grouping. Affected governments, other multilateral bodies and international NGOs should be included in this aid consortium, which would take the lead in terms of determining priorities from the governments.

Fourth, when it comes to post-conflict reconstruction, participation in such efforts should be undertaken only when no violation of the principles of national sovereignty have taken place. In situations where these principles have been observed, the role of external participants should fall under a reconstruction consortium led by the United Nations and the affected government.

While there should be sufficient flexibility, NGO efforts should be coordinated with the host government and NGO support must not lead to activities that displace government services. If anything, these efforts should facilitate the development and independence of local service providers.

Finally, participants in post-conflict reconstruction must scrupulously observe neutrality when it comes to dealing with target groups and political groupings within the country. This does not mean a head-in-the-sand type of neutrality but an activist one that strives for impartiality – though that will always be an ideal – not only in the allocation of resources but also in documenting and calling attention to violations of human rights and agreements. Perceived non-partisanship is,

in fact, likely to make aid and reconstruction agents more valuable on the ground to all parties to a conflict and thus increase their leverage in mediation efforts.

CONCLUSION

In sum, a sea change has occurred in disaster relief and post-conflict reconstruction work. The old image of the United Nations raising the funds and managing the aid effort while the Red Cross tended to the hurt and the sick with studied neutrality no longer reflects contemporary realities. Disaster relief and post-conflict reconstruction are increasingly driven by the same dynamics, reflecting the intersection of strategic interest, ideologically motivated economics and muscular humanitarianism. The new RRC establishment has as its central players the U.S. military and political command, the World Bank and NGOs. An ideological melange of national and international security, neoliberal economics and partisan, military humanitarianism advances the institutional interests of these groups. Whether in disasters or in wars, the same key actors emerge to take over the post-disaster or post-war situation. With its volatile mixture of strategic concerns, bureaucratic imperatives, profitmaking and partisan humanitarianism, it is questionable that this new paradigm of relief and reconstruction is superior to the traditional arrangements.

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