

What Killed Thousands of Indonesians — The Quake or the Misery?

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As I was reading, on board an Air Canada flight from Mexico City to Vancouver, The Globe and Mail coverage of the horrors that have been unraveling for several days on the island of Sulawesi, I felt two powerful and contradictory emotions: I wanted to be there, immediately, 'on the ground', in the city of Palu, filming, talking to people, doing everything possible to help... and at the same time, I sensed that I was 'already there', so many times before, whenever the nightmares like those in Sulawesi were taking place all over the Indonesian archipelago.

And I wrote about them, I documented them, I was sending warnings, but nothing was done. The government (or I'd rather call it the 'Indonesian regime'), is expert in hearing nothing and doing nothing, ignoring all frontal criticism. The same goes for the Indonesian elites. They are blind as they are deaf, as long as they can grab, steal and then, do absolutely nothing for the welfare of the Indonesian people.

Look, in 2004, I was there, right after the tsunami hit Aceh. It took me just a few days to arrive. More than 200,000 people died! The same stuff: a powerful earthquake, then tsunami. Well, nobody really knows how many vanished, but 240,000 is the absolute minimum! A quarter of a million! That is 100 times more than a number of those who died during 9-11 in New York.

In Banda Aceh, I lived in a tiny house that had been flooded just a few days earlier, in a room where two children died; two little girls. There were stuffed animals all over, wet, soaked wet, everywhere. The bodies of the children were taken away. I swear I thought I heard their voices every single night -voices talking to me, pleading with me.... After sundown, the family would lock me inside the house, simply in order to protect both me and the house, from the looters.



What was left of Banda Aceh

The Indonesian state did nothing to help the people. In Aceh, as well everywhere, where the disasters hit, the relief operations immediately become a huge commercial operation. 'Compassion'? Solidarity? Get real! Please get real. Everything became a 'commodity', even the excavation of the corpses; even burying them was done for a fee – for an incredibly high fee. After all, Indonesia is one of the most turbo-capitalist countries on Earth. Death is a good business. Everything is. The bigger the natural disaster, the more dead bodies there are – it all immediately turns into huge commerce, at least for some.

I can show you the photos, but better not, as the faint-hearted would puke, or faint. Do you know how the bodies look, if they are left rotting in a pit, in the tropical heat, for several days? Better not ask. But you know why they were there? Because the relatives could not pay bribes, to have them buried!

In Aceh, everyone was complacent, including the UN. Indonesia is hardly criticized by the West – it is Washington's, Canberra's and London's great chum, perfectly corrupt, capitalist, anti-Communist and anti-Chinese. The West does not care about the rest.

Do you know that the Indonesian police and army were going from *posko* to *posko*, from local NGO tents to others, demanding money, bribes, in order *not* to destroy drinking water deposits for the victims; water that was delivered from abroad. If bribes were not paid, they used their knives, cutting through the plastic deposits.

While people were dying from thirst and hunger.

Then the Vice-President of Indonesia, **Jusuf Kala**, to boost his popularity among the Muslim cadres, kicked out dozens of Indonesian doctors, volunteers, from the heavy Hercules transport planes. Engines were running, at Halim Airport in East Jakarta. Instead of doctors and their gear, he stuffed the aircraft with several hundred religious zealots. Later, they

landed in Banda Aceh, saw corpses, took selfies, puked, and eventually flew back to the capital.

Should I go on or are you getting the point?

Like now in Sulawesi, in Aceh, all the warning signals 'miraculously' failed. And there was never enough of the national relief supplies.

You know why? Because Indonesia is a failed state. Because nothing works there. Because nobody gives a damn about anything, except money and the religious rituals (of any denomination, to be precise).

But you will never read it in the pages of *The Globe and Mail*, or *The New York Times*.



Ruins of Aceh

I saw disasters in Indonesia, I saw 'sectarian' and religious killings, and I saw genocides, from East Timor to Aceh, Central Java, from Lombok to Ambon. And periodically, I feel that I cannot take more of the same, but the situation is so horrific, that in the end I always come, again and again, and I film, document. It is because I feel that I have to come, that it is my 'internationalist' duty; because if I don't come, then really, damn it, who will?

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But once again: why do these horrors happen?

Indonesia is, according to the UN, the most 'disaster-prone country'.

But why? Is it really because of nature, because of that proverbial 'Ring on Fire' on which it is sitting?

No, of course not!

Look, basically it is like this: no matter how the statistics are 'massaged', no matter how the UN grazes on the pathetically distorted data coming from the Indonesian authorities, the country is extremely poor. Most people there are miserably poor. And even what they call the 'middle class', or at least most of it, would hardly qualify as the middle class anywhere else.

All this is being covered up, by 5 and 4-star hotels in every provincial capital, and by monstrous luxury hotels in Jakarta and Bali. Plus, mass-produced shopping malls were constructed everywhere. And those tremendous, out of place mosques made of marble, flooded with Saudi/Wahabi money.

But Jakarta and of course every single island of Indonesia, is inhabited by the poor, extremely poor people. The great majority of the Indonesians lives in destitution, but it does not know how poor and miserable it actually is (there is no opposition mass media to inform them, and no decent school to educate them about their conditions). Everything is make-believe, or pop, or however you choose to call it.

I filmed in Borneo and in Surabaya, where people shit into the rivers, and then use the same water to brush their teeth and wash dishes (I have it all clearly documented, on film), but if you ask people about their misery, they would get offended, or even attack you, because they have been brainwashed into believing that they are living some kind of *biasa* (normal) lives. They know nothing about the surrounding world, and they have been conditioned into not being able to compare. China, Bolivia – these are different planets for them.

In Aceh, or in Sulawesi, or even in Central Java, local *kampungs* (villages in both rural and urban areas) are made like shit, and they are made of shit, and there is almost no government supervision, because everything can be simply bought, or because there is no one who would like to supervise anything (it is easier to steal money than to work).

A great majority of the dwellings in Indonesia are absolutely unfit for being inhabited by human beings!

Anyone who would like to prove it, could easily do so. Thousands of PhDs could be made on this and similar topics, but the Indonesian academia (and media) is paid and scared into being quiet, and so the 'academics' (who often happened to double, 'as government or public employees') are writing bizarre works, instead of laboring on behalf of the Indonesian people, who are thoroughly poor and hopelessly ignorant of their condition.

Such submissiveness, such cowardice, kills people.

But who cares, as long as the West says and writes that Indonesia is a 'normal' and 'democratic' country.

Indonesian elites are living from plundering the natural resources, and stealing from the poor. Indonesia used to be incredibly rich, insanely wealthy; not unlike another failed state – Saudi Arabia, which is still relatively rich (but full of social disparities and injustice), because of the oil. Indonesia used to have everything under and above its surface, but most of it is now gone! The West helped to trigger the 1965 anti-Communist coup, and since then, everything was robbed and disappeared into the deep pockets of the local gangsters – corrupt and unpatriotic new rich, foreign companies, and their servants at the top government positions.

The masses are unprotected. Communism and socialism are basically banned, and so is atheism. If someone, like the former left-leaning Governor of Jakarta, tries to improve his city and lives of the Indonesian people, he is thrown into jail, in his case, for 'insulting Islam'.

And so, whenever natural disaster strikes, all lies immediately collapse, together with the shacks and other terrible dwellings, in which most of the Indonesian people live. But they collapse only for those who are well aware of the conditions inside the country, never for the masses.

But things are never reported as such. There is always a plentitude of 'objective' or 'scientific' reasons, for the country's failure to protect its people.

Early tsunami warnings equipment? Well-planned villages that would be earthquake-resistant? The use of the high-quality design and materials, which would be fit for the seismic and geographical condition of each particular area of the country? The money that should be allocated to such 'frivolous' designs, found in such places as, most likely, in Australia, or Singapore; could be found in the huge villas of Indonesian officials and 'business people', or in the luxury vehicles shamelessly licking the edges of countless slums of Jakarta.

How many tasteless palaces were already built from the misery of the Sulawesi people? And how many of them will be built now, after this?

In Banda Aceh, recently, the city planners were seriously discussing, at a national conference, how to turn tsunami 'heritage' into a tourist attraction, not unlike that of Hiroshima or Nagasaki. They should, but it ought to be a monument to corruption, the total collapse of human decency, and greed.

Now the government of Indonesia says that it is open to receive help from abroad. What great benevolence! One does not know whether to laugh or to throw up! Does the cynicism of Indonesian regime know no bounds? All like during the Aceh disaster!

Instead of allocating state funds (there are plenty of them, especially from the plundering of natural resources or Borneo/Kalimantan, Papua, Sumatra and yes, Sulawesi itself!) that are going to buy the Prada skirts of the official's wives, or the new fake-baroque palaces, let the foreigners 'come and save the poor'.

I remember in Aceh, while the Singaporeans and Japanese and others were digging corpses out of the mud, countless local 'crews' and 'relief workers' were crouching nearby, smoking *kretek*, pointing fingers at the foreigners and laughing at them, for 'working too hard'.

But it is 'all fine'; it is *biasa*...

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And so, here is conclusion: Those thousands of people in Sulawesi who recently vanished, or who are still vanishing, did not die because of some earthquake, or tsunami. They vanished because they are poor, because their rulers have no morals, and because society abandoned them, basically already collapsed.

Indonesia is losing both its people and its resources. But the people, the majority of them

poor, have absolutely no understanding of their condition.

In Aceh, after the tsunami, some were using the fact that one big mosque survived intact, in the middle of the total desolation, as a proof that there was some kind of divine intervention. The reality was different: the mosque survived because the Gulf States pumped millions of dollars into it. It was made of marble and granite, while the 'houses' around it were made of mud and shit.

The poor died in both Aceh and Sulawesi, simply because all over Indonesia, the poor (and I have to repeat - the poor form the great majority of the citizens) were robbed of absolutely everything. Unless they learn how to fight; how to protect themselves, many more will continue to die, aimlessly.

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