

Tsunami Aid: How the People Scored

BY ALEXANDER COCKBURN

I made some sour comments in our last issue on the radio commentator Sean Hannity preening about America's generous disbursements to the victims of the tsunami and denouncing the Saudis as a bunch of skinflints, stinting to their Muslim brothers and sisters. On and on he went as though the entire meaning and consequence of the great tidal wave had been to advertise the innate generosity of the US government.

Shortly thereafter Rachard Itani sent us a good piece on the actual numbers, which we ran on our website. Rachard began by citing figures compiled by the London Observer, showing that Norwegians donated the most per head of population (\$13.20) followed by the Swedes (\$12.04), the Dutch (\$9.16) the Australians (\$5.23) and so on, down to the Americans with a donation of \$1.08 per head, and the Euro-swollen French, whose per head donation amounted to 80 U.S. cents.

The Observer table put Saudi Arabs in the middle of the pack, at number 6 with a donation of \$4 per head, but still outranking Canadians, Austrians, Brits, Greeks, Americans and French in their generosity.

Itani took the Observer's numbers a stage further, by comparing donations as a percentage of per-capita income, the average amount of money each head of population is theoretically supposed to

earn. This measure of generosity, Itani wrote, "showed private Saudi individuals as the most generous amongst the people of the 12 countries mentioned in the Observer article, followed in descending order by the Swedes, Dutch, Norwegians, Australians, Germans, Canadians, Greeks, Austrians, Brits, French, and in 12th and final place, Americans." In fact the Saudis were 1,617% more generous than 12th place Americans.

And since the Observer's numbers compared private, not official donations, the generosity of Saudi individuals cannot be dismissed away as resulting from their oil wealth. Indeed, Saudi per-capita income, at \$8,530, pales in comparison with American per capita income at \$37,610. "Interestingly," Itani went on, "the pattern of poorer people giving a larger percentage of their income to charity than richer people is mirrored in domestic US private charitable donation patterns: it's a well documented fact that poorer Americans donate a larger percentage of their income to charity than the richer amongst them do."

Like many communities across the country, we had a tsunami fund-raiser here in Petrolia at the Grange Hall. It raised \$2,700. I asked Margie Smith, one of the organizers, where the money was going and she said they were thinking of Oxfam or some kindred outfit. I shook my head

at this, remarking that the money would end up buying some non-profit desk officer in New York a computer. Better, I said, (repeating a thought I'd expressed here) that we get someone heading in the direction of the beleaguered region to take the money, find a village and hand it out, preferably in small bills so the local thugs wouldn't collar the lot. It now looks as though this might happen.

But surely there's a good organizing opportunity here, in the tradition of the sister city programs that became such a prominent and excellent feature of the solidarity work with Nicaragua in the 1980s and today with Palestinian towns and villages.

What better than direct contacts with towns and villages across the region, with money and work parties, prelude to long-term relations. There's nothing like a friendly person showing up, preferably with a wad of money in hand, rather than an aid bureaucrat with a hundred forms to be filled out in triplicate before you can get a dime.

I remember after the Loma Prieta earthquake in the late 1980s a couple of guys in a truck showed up in Watsonville, which had been very badly hit by the quake. "You from the government?" one of the homeless asked. "No," one of the rednecks said as he unloaded tents and stoves from his pic k-up and trailer. "We're from Benicia. This is people to people."

Disasters expose the frailties and cruelties of governments and officialdom. They offer creative political opportunity. That is a silver lining. CP

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