

# When “Security” Looms Larger Than Tsunami

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To some, this may sound like just the kind of drivel to be expected of a cranky peace activist. But, believe me, I am not the one to be talking of “security concerns” making it impossible for India to cooperate in an essential disaster prevention project for the Indian Ocean region.

Come December 26, it will be a year since the unforgettable tsunami disaster that hit India and ten other countries of the region. On the eve of the anniversary, India’s rulers have announced their resolve not to share seismic data with other countries in order to facilitate the installation of a tsunami warning system in the Indian Ocean.

The seismic data had “security implications, as seabed terrain could be mapped, possibly helping others learn about the nation’s submarines and warships.” This was reportedly the argument of Indian seismologists at a United Nations tsunami conference on Friday in Hyderabad, India.

The statement, which caused unconcealed resentment among other countries represented at the conference, has gone almost unnoticed in the Indian media. No one has asked whether this will set back action on New Delhi’s promise of September to put a warning system in place in less than a year at the remarkably low cost of 1.25 billion Indian rupees.

“Security concerns,” again, have apparently prevented even official consideration of another major issue raised by the tsunami. In these columns, at that time, we had talked about the double peril that India had survived - the tidal havoc and a nuclear holocaust. The anti-nuclear movement raised several uncomfortable questions about the damage done to a nuclear complex in Kalpakkam, close to Chennai (formerly Madras). The main question posed was whether it was not time to consider re-location of India’s nuclear plants in coastal areas vulnerable to such calamities.

The questions have been treated with contempt that they did not deserve in a democracy. The only token action taken to date was to raise the raft of the under-construction fast breeder reactor at the complex by a height of 1.4 meters, so that the fast breeder plant has now been elevated five meters “above the water level encountered at site during the tsunami.” As though the giant waves, which varied from 15 to 40 meters in height last year, can never climb higher!

No “security concerns” have been cited as the reason for the

extreme official reluctance to act on the most important environmental lesson from the disaster. The country's "defense" would not have been at stake in a program to undo the serious damage done to India's coastline over the years.

Experts were quick to point out, in the wake of the tsunami, the deep coastal erosion caused by a political-corporate nexus of corruption and a callous disregard for the lives and livelihoods of the coastal communities. But for the "development" of the coastline with a concrete chain of posh residential colonies, star hotels and holiday resorts, accompanied by a destruction of natural barriers like mangroves and reefs, the tsunami disaster would have acquired less dire proportions.

The inaction on this count, however, illustrates a "development strategy" that has very little place for people's concerns, such as public health, but a prominent one for cash-spinning coastal industries and shiny nuclear reactors of hushed secrecy and holy "strategic" importance.

Neither would "security concerns" seem to be linked to the major disasters that hit two metropolitan cities in a calamity-filled year. After unprecedented heavy rains, Mumbai (formerly Bombay, India's financial capital) went under floods in August. So did Chennai in November, and it is yet to recover fully from the fury of the waters. In both cases, the disasters would not have acquired the dimensions they did, had the cities been equipped with elementary civic infrastructure, including drainage.

Floods recede, but the fact remains that damage they wreak is also related to a "development strategy" that stints no money for "defense" and "security" purposes, but gives a very low priority to the living needs of citizens, especially in the ghettos of India's ever-growing cities.

The country's defense budget for 2004-2005 amounted to 770 billion Indian rupees, or almost 15 per cent of the total budgetary outlay. Among other major headings of expenditure, the share of education for the whole country, in contrast, hovered above two per cent. Not hard to imagine is the insignificant place of basic amenities like drainage in such a scheme of things.

The latest of the disasters to visit India and (Pakistan) was the terrible Kashmir earthquake of October. "Security concerns," once again, prevented the governments of both the countries, supposed to be engaged in a "peace process," from cooperating in relief and rehabilitation efforts. The quake victims, as noted in these columns before, also faced a hate campaign aimed at preventing substantial Indian assistance to them.

It took a long time, and laborious negotiations, for the two sides to allow a few points on the 1,700-km Line of Control for passage of Kashmiri people divided by a conflict of political creation. Right now, the victims are roughing it out through a cruel winter, with no major joint-India-Pakistan initiative to mitigate it.

Nature may prove kinder to India and South Asia in the coming year. There is no reason for hope, however, that the rulers of the region weighed down with “security concerns” will.

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**P.S.**

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