‘Less Meeting, More Fighting!’: Lessons Learned by Grassroots Katrina and Tsunami Social Activists by Bill Quigley

American activists were startled to find that Indians could not comprehend the passivity of the U.S. public to the ejection of Katrina survivors from their home city and state, in the wake of the flood. "If this happened in India, there would be a revolution," said one Indian community organizer. The Christmas Tsunami that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives along the coasts of the Indian Ocean did not destroy the people's will to rebuild on land that was their birthright. But "disaster capitalism" has apparently triumphed in the United States, where rights can be washed away with no trace.

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Bill Quigley is a human rights lawyer and professor at Loyola University New Orleans. Bill recently returned from India where he and other Gulf Coast community activists toured hundreds of miles of coastal communities devastated by the Tsunami. They met with Indian community members to discuss common challenges and strategies to rebuild their communities. In August, the Indian people will be visiting the gulf coast. The trips were sponsored by ActionAid International and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

The tiny old woman with the tanned deeply lined face stood up and told us what happened to her coastal village of 130 families in Tamil Nadu India, along the southeastern coast. Before the tsunami, villagers survived by gathering prawns by hand from shallow waters and by hiring out to work for people who owned fishing boats.

Without warning, on December 26, 2004, a thirty foot tsunami wall of water roared through their coastal village sweeping aside everything in sight. The elderly woman was knocked down. With her hands she demonstrated how she was violently tumbled over and over by the powerful following waves. Finally able to wrap her arms high around a coconut tree, she clung to it as her clothes were ripped from her body by the surging waters. When the waters receded, every house in her village was gone. The tiny woman, now quietly crying as she told her story, was ashamed as she searched for something to cover her nakedness. She started searching for her missing family and the rest of her village. Many were dead. Some are still missing today. Those who remained were homeless.

Today, some families in her village live in newly constructed 340 square foot concrete homes built by international relief agencies. Others live in temporary thatched huts perched on top of their neighbors' new homes. All are trying to rebuild their lives.

The December 26, 2004 earthquake in the Indian Ocean measuring 9.3 in magnitude sparked-off a series of devastating tsunamis that killed over 230,000 people and made millions homeless. Since then, Indian community organizations have struggled in the face of unprecedented problems to try to recover and rebuild.

A group of grassroots Katrina social justice activists were recruited to visit with our Indian counterparts from the most devastated areas of coastal India to see what we could learn with and from each other.

Together we visited numerous villages up and down the Indian coast and listened to hundreds of people describe how the tsunami and its aftermath continues to impact them. We listened to displaced families as we sat on woven mats in steaming thatched huts as the temperatures passed 105. An entire fishing community told us their story under towering palm trees backed by the brilliant blue Bay of Bengal of the Indian Ocean. We ate rice, yogurt and fish off of banana leaves with our fingers while we visited with one village. Others shared what happened as we walked in the blazing sun through fields of women and men digging dirt with shovels and pails to construct a new road.

We shared the experiences of our gulf coast communities and the massive and continuing human rights violations perpetrated against Katrina survivors both at home and internally displaced. We shared a slide show illustrating human and civil rights violations after Katrina. After finding out that police fired weapons to turn away fleeing people trying to escape across the Mississippi river in New Orleans, the continuing displacement of hundreds of thousands, and the government's determination to demolish thousands of usable public housing apartments, our Indian friends were incredulous. One said "This would never happen in our country. If this happened in India, there would be a revolution!"

Over hundreds of miles and days and nights of visits, we and our Indian friends found tremendous similarities in our experiences between the Tsunami and Hurricane Katrina.

Our governments, on all levels, have and continue to fail us. The needs of poor and working people have been mainly neglected. Incredible incompetence and apparent lack of sustained concern have combined to aggravate and amplify the effects of the disasters. It is primarily through the efforts of small voluntary organizations that

any real progress is being made.

We released a joint Tsunami-Katrina statement at the end of our trip summarizing five of our joint observations.

We first agree that our communities have each been the victims of disaster capitalism. After each of our disasters, the tremendous loss and suffering of our people have been seized upon as opportunities for profit by commercial and financial interests. The rebuilding processes have been driven not by the needs of the people, but by economic and corporate interests which have neglected and over-ridden the needs and perspectives of local communities.

Second, we agree that technological and bureaucratic planning for disasters is not enough. Communities at risk of disaster must be respected and involved in all preparations for disaster. While we recognize the important responsibility of government in preparing for disaster, we have seen the failures of preparation that is based on technology alone. We have also seen the failures of bureaucratic and professional planners. These failures will continue until the communities themselves are given a priority in preparing and shaping and executing planning for disasters. All preparation must be sensitive to community needs and traditions.

Third, before, during, and after disasters, the needs of the least powerful must be made a priority. This is nearly the opposite of what has been occurring. These needs include the full implementation of human rights to housing, land, occupation and livelihood, freedom from discrimination, and the right to return.

Fourth, we insist on gender equity. Our experiences have clearly shown us that there is a systematic violation of the rights of women in every phase of disasters. In planning, preparation, evacuation, distribution of relief, rebuilding, the right to return, and in every phase of policy and decision making, the presence and participation and value of the role of women have been seriously inadequate. The human rights of women must be immediately respected as their suffering and disrespect continues today in both our countries.

Fifth, we demand accountability and transparency. Anyone who is raising, taking, or spending money in the name of our communities must be accountable to our people. We call specifically for our governments, our NGOs and our non-profits to let our communities know how much has been raised, how much has been spent, how all funds have been spent, how it has been spent, and each organization, corporation, governmental unit or person who receives any funds. Our communities must participate in all these decisions. In order to have true community directed participation, we insist on our rights to accountability and transparency.

Our joint tsunami-Katrina statement can be supplemented by many other personal observations of this writer.

As social justice activists and organizers, we need to do a much better job of developing solidarity. We are battling for the very lives of our traditional communities and we need each other's ideas and support. We cannot afford fragmentation. We cannot afford to consider one group more worthy or deserving than others. In the US, we need to do much more to forge linkages between the needs of coastal Louisiana and coastal Mississippi and the urban needs of the New Orleans metro area. Nationally, we need to strengthen our alliances with other communities fighting for justice. Internationally, we have much to learn from each other and we must build much better solidarity. Our Indian sisters and brothers told us if they knew what was going on after Katrina they would have demonstrated in front of the U.S. Embassy in India demanding the government respect our human rights. It is a tactic of our enemies to divide and conquer, it is our job to connect and conquer.

We must insist on rebuilding our own communities. In India, we found examples where the communities decided how to rebuild, chose to use local materials, and demanded and won the right for local people to do the rebuilding so they could learn new skills. We were shocked to find that many more new homes have already been built in India for their displaced than in the U.S. Non governmental agencies and non-profits, many with the best intentions have come to our communities and have accomplished little good. They and the government must be held accountable. India is trying, we have much to learn from them.

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There is a universal need after the trauma of disasters for what the Indian activists call “psycho-social counseling.” This need continues now and will continue until it is met. Recovery is not only about the physical aspects of rebuilding a place to stay or finding a job or getting some compensation. It is also about relationships. On the gulf coast in the US and India we know there are hundreds of thousands of people who continue to deeply suffer the traumas of these disasters. They cannot “get over it” without trained assistance.

The same is true in India, however, the Indians are training volunteer community counselors to help villages and organizations identify the non-physical effects and to help people and communities heal.

In India the caste system creates invisible divisions and tens of millions of invisible people. Dalits, or untouchables, built magnificent temples as slave laborers but are met with violence if they try to enter the temples their ancestors built. In the US, we use the systems of color to create our invisible people. No just solutions are possible without directly confronting the continuing existence and legacies of these systems.

At the same time, economic lines have been sharply drawn in both our nations. In the U.S. it is property ownership that draws the line. Two people who lived different halves of the same house for the same number of years are treated dramatically differently if one owns the house and the other rents. Property owners may get up to $150,000 in compensation in Mississippi and Louisiana – renters, nothing. In

India, fisherfolk are eligible for compensation for their lost boats and new housing. Those who worked on the boats for the owner are entitled to nothing. Like most economic injustices, these artificial human distinctions, often codified into unjust laws by those who profit from them, must be challenged and dismantled. Our shared economic class issues must be a point of unity for us, across lines of caste and race.

In both countries, if you plot the intersection of race (or caste), gender, and economic status, you will find those who are left out of the repair and rebuilding. In both our countries the disabled were left behind at every step. This is not an accident. These are all human decisions and can and must be reversed.

As an important part of solidarity, we have to keep reminding ourselves and our organizations that action cannot be confused with progress. After a disaster, we are all very busy. We have all been subject to countless planning meetings and consultations and we have tried to participate in our communities. But the test of all actions should be – “Does this help build, expand, or defend a movement towards justice?” If it does not, we must re-think it. Because unless we are building a more just world, the next disaster will prey on the victims of injustice just as much as these did. Our Indian friends reminded us that economic equity is the best way to reduce the impact of disaster.

Disaster victims in both the US and India are crippled, confused, and buried beneath bureaucratic paperwork demands. The approach in both countries is that one must prove they are eligible and worthy of assistance. Legal requirements and administrative schemes choke the distribution of help.

Right, not charity, is our common demand. Human rights, not bureaucratic eligibility criteria, must be the foundation for relief, recovery and rebuilding. People have human rights to food and shelter and the opportunity and assistance necessary to live a life of dignity. The government must respect and implement human rights. The

degradations and delays and disrespect of eligibility applications for basic human necessities must cease. Human rights must be our shared basis for going forward. Internationally, if the bottom of the North can link up with the bottom of the South, human rights will be our shared language.

The final and best piece of advice I received was from T. Peter, head of the Kerala Fish Workers Association. Their organization has struggled with elected officials, private companies, and the caste system in all phases of life. He leaned over, his dark face split by a broad smile, and told me what we in the U.S. should be doing to bring about justice for our gulf coast: “Less meeting, more fighting!”

And so we will.

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