

Powell declares tsunami aid part of global war on terror

Imperialism in Samaritan's clothing

By Bill Van Auken
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During his whirlwind tour of the tsunami-devastated nations of South Asia, US Secretary of State Colin Powell let slip that the begrudging and belated funding offered by Washington to the ongoing relief effort is all part of its “global war on terror.”

Speaking of US aid and the participation of the American military in relief efforts, Powell declared: “It dries up those pools of dissatisfaction that might give rise to terrorist activity. That supports not only our national security interest but the national security interests of the countries involved.”

Noting that the majority of the victims of the tsunami were Muslims, the US Secretary of State continued: “We’d be doing it regardless of religion, but I think it does give the Muslim world and the rest of the world an opportunity to see American generosity, American values in action.”

Powell’s trip is largely an exercise in damage control. It is aimed at overcoming the well-founded international perception that the government of the most powerful imperialist country in the world—and specifically its president, George W. Bush—reacted with appalling indifference to the worst natural catastrophe in living memory.

The US Secretary of State has been accompanied by Florida’s Governor Jeb Bush, who seems to be acting as a personal emissary for his older brother, while exploiting the international tragedy to further his own political ambitions by appearing to be grappling with a global crisis.

What of the claim that Washington’s reaction to the massive destruction and loss of life wrought by the tsunami is an expression of “American generosity, American values in action”?

Generosity implies selflessness, hardly a characteristic of US foreign policy. On the contrary, the successive decisions to increase US aid from an obscene \$15 million, to \$35 million and finally \$350 million were taken with a calculated view toward the immense damage that Washington’s miserliness was inflicting upon US imperialism’s global image.

As Powell acknowledges, the aid is part and parcel of a “war on terror” that is directed at furthering US global economic and political hegemony by means of military power and aggression.

No doubt, the shock of the tsunami’s devastation and the

unimaginable loss of human life have led to expressions of what might genuinely be described as “American values,” but not from the administration in Washington.

The open-heartedness and political naiveté associated with the generosity of the American people has been on display across the United States, with students and youth organizing bake sales and other activities to raise money for the victims, and many thousands donating to fund appeals.

It is noteworthy that US television and newspapers have accurately portrayed the scale of the disaster. Once American ruling circles determined that the Bush administration’s initial disdain for the suffering caused by the Indian Ocean earthquake was untenable, the corporate media conglomerates swung into action, providing non-stop coverage of the catastrophe. Graphic and chilling images of rows of corpses, parents carrying the bodies of their young children and villages reduced to rubble have been shown nightly to US viewing audiences.

One cannot help contrast this coverage to the media’s cowardly and complicit silence in response to the human catastrophe created by the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. Images of the dead, of sobbing parents clutching the bodies of children killed by US bombardments and of blocks reduced to rubble are readily available, but rigorously censored by America’s vaunted free press.

Describing a helicopter flight over Banda Aceh in Indonesia, Powell said he had “never seen anything like it” in his military and government career.

“I cannot imagine the horror that went through the families and all of the people who heard this noise coming and then had their lives snuffed out by this wave,” he said. “The power of the wave to destroy bridges, to destroy factories, to destroy homes, to destroy crops, to destroy everything in its path is amazing.”

Perhaps the US Secretary of State would have benefited from a low-flying helicopter ride over the Iraqi city of Fallujah, though continued resistance to the US occupiers there would no doubt have precluded such a tour.

Such a flight would have afforded a view of what a

man-made tsunami has left of one of Iraq's principal urban centers. The fabled "city of mosques" lies in ruins as the result of a tidal wave of fire and steel unleashed by US warplanes, artillery and tanks.

What of the horror of the Iraqi families who heard the roar of ceaseless US aerial bombardment and the thunder of cannon barrages for days before American tanks finished laying waste to their city? Does Colin Powell try to imagine what went through their minds? How many of their lives were snuffed out is something that neither the US government nor the US mass media even bothers to consider.

While the Pentagon and the media continuously spoke only of US forces killing "rebels" and "terrorists" in Fallujah, the reports emerging from initial attempts at recovery in the city tell a very different story.

The director of Fallujah's main hospital has reported that an emergency team from the facility has thus far recovered more than 700 bodies from the city's rubble. More than 550 were women and children, while the majority of the men were elderly. Babies have been found dead in their homes from malnutrition. The search has thus far only extended to a fraction of the city, with other areas still inaccessible because of fighting.

The deaths in Fallujah are not included in the credible estimate made in a study published last October in the British medical journal *Lancet* of over 100,000 additional violent deaths in Iraq since the US invasion, the majority the result of US bombardments. The figure, which equals two thirds of the current estimated death toll from the tsunami, has received scant attention in the American media.

In addition to these violent deaths, there are many thousands more—particularly among young children—caused by the destruction of the country's infrastructure, resulting in a lack of safe drinking water and the unavailability of refrigeration and basic medicines. Taken together, this human toll represents a manmade calamity that is on a par with the natural disaster that has struck South Asia.

As for "American values," it is fair to ask whose values were expressed in the vile torture chambers created by the US military and the CIA in Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo and many lesser-known American detention facilities serving the "war on terror"?

Whose values led military interrogators and guards to shock Iraqi prisoners with electrodes, light them on fire and subject them to sexual abuse and humiliation?

It is now clear that the orders that gave rise—and continue to sanction—such atrocities came from the White House itself, embraced by Bush and given a pseudo-legal justification by the man he has nominated to serve as US attorney general, Alberto Gonzales.

Behind these depraved actions lie the "values" of a predatory and corrupt ruling elite that is prepared to carry out mass murder and torture in order to further enrich itself. It has been

able to continue the criminal enterprise in Iraq only by systematically lying to the American people and, with the media's collaboration, covering up the scale of its crimes.

The hopes, more or less openly expressed by various leading figures in Washington, that the participation of the US military in relief efforts in South Asia will somehow erase the searing images of torture that emerged from Abu Ghraib or of the mass destruction in Fallujah, will prove vain. Few will be convinced that US imperialism has suddenly become a philanthropic institution.

Even after twice raising its aid pledge, Washington's spending on tsunami relief would barely cover two days of its continuing war in Iraq. On the scales of American capitalism, "values" are measured in dollars and cents, and the whole world knows it.

A little over a century ago, the great revolutionist Rosa Luxemburg wrote an imperishable essay on the reaction of the great powers to another devastating natural disaster, the volcanic eruption of Mt. Pelee that wiped out 40,000 people, virtually the entire population of the French Caribbean colony of Martinique. [See "Martinique" <http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1902/05/15.htm>]

She brilliantly exposed the hypocritical expressions of sorrow over the loss of life and pretensions of humanitarianism emanating from the capitals of France, Britain, the US, Germany and Russia. The governments of each of these countries, she pointed out, were responsible for bloodbaths carried out either against their own working class or in savagely repressing anti-colonial resistance from Africa to the Philippines.

Luxemburg wrote: "And now they have all turned to Martinique, all one heart and one mind again; they help, rescue, dry the tears and curse the havoc-wreaking volcano. Mt. Pelee, greathearted giant, you can laugh; you can look down in loathing at these benevolent murderers, at these weeping carnivores, at these beasts in Samaritan's clothing. But a day will come when another volcano lifts its voice of thunder: a volcano that is seething and boiling, whether you need it or not, and will sweep the whole sanctimonious, blood-splattered culture from the face of the earth. And only on its ruins will the nations come together in true humanity, which will know but one deadly foe—blind, dead nature."

In the light of recent events, these words remain evergreen. The juxtaposition of massive human suffering and imperialist hypocrisy that has characterized the aftermath of the South Asian tsunami is symptomatic of a society rent by inequality and oppression and ripe for social revolution.

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