

Africa's weekly silent tsunami

By Parker Mitchell and George Roter
OpEd in The Globe and Mail – Jan 11th 2005

The Asian tsunamis provided Canadians with horrifying images of physical destruction and anguished survivors facing the realization of how little they had left with which to rebuild their lives. A wave of compassion swept Canada and donations poured in – more than \$94-million from individuals so far.

There will always be natural disasters, but their impact is compounded by poverty, and poverty is a problem that persists. While the tsunamis highlighted that issue in Asia, Africa suffers a silent tsunami every week. That's right: More than 130,000 Africans die every week of preventable causes – the equivalent of a tsunami disaster every seven days. Yet, because these deaths are dispersed, occurring far from the media's cameras, because there is no single cataclysmic event, they are almost forgotten. But, week after week, the disasters pound away at the continent.

Take AIDS: Next week in Africa, 44,000 people will die of AIDS, a disease that is universally acknowledged to be overwhelming the continent. Take malaria: Next week in Africa, 19,000 people will die of malaria. Add to that another 200 million to 300 million new cases a year. In the next 12 months, almost one in two people in Africa will have the disease. Take tuberculosis: Next week in Africa, 8,000 people will die of TB; millions more may be stricken.

We have ways to solve these problems. A simple mosquito bed net effectively prevents malaria, and costs just a few dollars. TB is treatable where medicines are available. Thanks to increased availability of drugs, we are beginning to make progress on AIDS.

But there's more. Next week, unsafe water in Africa will kill another 14,000, most of them children. We know the solutions: proper hygiene promotion, access to sanitation and clean water. It would cost \$15 a person a year to implement them in the worst affected areas. So far, we haven't done it.

What else will happen next week in Africa? About 15,000 mothers and babies will die from childbirth-related causes. About 9,500

children will die from preventable illnesses, including measles and tetanus. Years of breathing smoke of indoor cooking fires will cause 18,000 people to die from respiratory illnesses.

By next Tuesday, 130,000 people will be dead of preventable causes. The week after that, another 130,000. Over the next 52 weeks, seven million people will be dead, about four million of them children. If you could choose where to be born, you wouldn't choose Africa; roughly one out of five children won't see their fifth birthday.

I fervently hope that Canadians will build on our recent outpouring of compassion. Our country should be front and centre in helping the world meet the Millennium Development Goals set by the United Nations in 2000. The eight goals mean ameliorating hunger, economic poverty, AIDS, access to water, children's education – all of which will make people less vulnerable to Mother Nature. They represent a consensus on what the world needs to do but is not doing.

The world community recently set up the Global Fund to Fight Tuberculosis, AIDS and Malaria (diseases that, combined, kill more than five million people a year). This year, the fund had less than \$1-billion to disperse. If the world can pledge \$4-billion in two weeks to help the tsunami survivors, can we not set our sights higher and make poverty history?

In 1970, Lester Pearson led an international commission that challenged the world to commit 0.7 per cent of our gross domestic product to international assistance. Canada agreed, and began making strides. We reached 0.5 per cent in the 1980s, but, lately, we're embarrassed to find ourselves at the back of the pack. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development calculates that, in 2003, we gave only 0.24 per cent, behind almost every major country except the United States, which was even stingier.

Canada's response to disasters shows our deep-seated compassion. If we were to work resolutely to reduce poverty and mitigate the effect of future disasters, it would show the world that our commitment to charity is deeper still.

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