

On My Mind

1/14/05

I find myself, when reading the latest accounts of the fatalities resulting from train wrecks, or club fires, or landslides, storms, or other natural disasters, comparing the numbers with the number of deaths that have resulted from the Sumatra earthquake and tsunami. And while death is always tragic, those numbers - three or fifty or sometimes a hundred - seem so puny when compared to what happened in Aceh and Phukett, India and Malaysia.

Yet, the tsunami numbers aren't nearly as large as other death tolls on-going today: 3 million AIDS deaths a year, 1 million malaria deaths a year, 800,000 dead in Rwanda, 300,000 deaths in Darfur. The outpouring of money and offers of assistance to the victims of the Sumatra tsunami are heartwarming, but as was pointed out in a Washington Post editorial appearing in last week's Tribune, it is what amounts to a "haphazard charity."

What is it that has triggered such a generous response to the tsunami disaster - but ignores the victims of disease, of hunger, of war? Does it somehow seem a more real suffering, since so few (relatively speaking) know very much about the suffering from AIDS, malaria, from troops, militia, insurgents, destroying homes and lives? To what extent is it due to the fact that we are not exposed - with no thanks to the otherwise ubiquitous media - to daily new pictures of those disasters? (Though it must be noted that the Trib has done a spectacular job of covering it all - culminating in last Sunday's gripping front page.)

Wouldn't it have been better if President Bush had asked his father and former president Clinton to raise money to meet a few of the other pressing needs in the world - since help and funding for the tsunami victims seems to be pouring forth without their help? Wouldn't it be nice if all those who have contributed to the tsunami victims donated an equal amount to help for AIDS victims, to help for Darfur victims, help for the dispossessed in Palestine and Iraq and Afghanistan, to mention just a few? Just think what that might accomplish!

I find it all deeply disturbing. And the more so as the reports come out that rebels in Aceh, in Somalia - in the midst of their disasters - have resumed their civil wars. To paraphrase Ellen Goodman, syndicated Boston Globe writer, who wrote in a column this week in the Pacific Daily News, "It is impossible to watch this unfolding tragedy and not wonder why we manufacture disaster when nature provides enough of its own."

There is talk now of curtailing the activities of foreign aid personnel in the devastated areas, of asking U.S. military to leave, as immediate needs for food, water, medicine are met, as the countries begin to assert and assume responsibility for the reconstruction of the devastated areas.

I find this re-assuring, as I was beginning to worry about who would be in charge of re-building, what kind of structures and villages would replace those destroyed. Would the western world import its own ideas of what constituted a village, would the U.S. proposed its ugly "planned urban development" patterns, would local customs and traditions be ignored?

Of course, it would be good if those who were in charge did replace the homes and the infrastructure with some degree of planning and foresight, if stronger homes and improved water, power and sewer systems were part of those plans, if it all could be done sooner rather than later. Perhaps foreign assistance will still be necessary - in the form of funding if not labor. But at least it appears that it will be done under the management and control of the people who live there.

Something that seems to be happening outside the control of the people most affected is the U.S. Supreme Court's handling of the case of the CNMI's stateless individuals. The Supreme Court has again extended the time available to the U.S. State Department to decide whether it will appeal a lower court decision in support of the stateless. How long will the Supreme Court continue to let the fate of the stateless dangle unresolved? Who is speaking for the stateless? Who is defending their side? What a case of David and Goliath!

A somewhat similar case is the request by the CNMI administration that the NMI Retirement Fund lend it \$20 million so that the administration can fully fund the public school system. Hundreds of people depend on the Retirement Fund - on its solvency and prudence and judicious investments - for their very survival. The administration, on the other hand, has a terrible reputation as a money manager, with its on-going inability to pay the debts it has already incurred. Economist and former resident Bill Stewart spoke eloquently on this issue in the 12/29 Tribune. Stewart's comments have now been translated into Chamorro, and reprinted in this past Wednesday's Trib. I hope readers will share it with their friends - it is too important an issue to ignore.

What follows came to me via an e-mail from a friend. It seems particularly appropriate in light of the extravagance of the plans for the President's January 20 inaugural. As was asked in an op-ed piece in Thursday's PDN, how many \$40 million parties is one person entitled to (Bush's 2001 inaugural also cost \$40 million) especially when this one comes at a time when troops go without armor in Iraq, and hundreds of thousands are without food, water and shelter in the wake of the recent tsunami.

I realize that there are any number of readers who will not be sympathetic to what follows. But I include it here because I think it is worth a try. It would be interesting to know how much of an impact it will make - here and elsewhere. (And please pardon the language - this is how it came to me, and I saw no reason to change it. Note also that it was written before the tsunami struck.)

"Not One Damn Dime Day - Jan 20, 2005

"Since our religious leaders will not speak out against the war in Iraq, since our political leaders don't have the moral courage to oppose it, Inauguration Day, let us declare Thursday, January 20th, 2005 "Not One Damn Dime Day" in America.

"On "Not One Damn Dime Day" those who oppose what is happening in our name in Iraq, can

Speak up with a 24-hour national boycott of all forms of consumer spending. During "Not One Damn Dime Day" please don't spend money. Not one damn dime for gasoline. Not one damn dime for necessities or for impulse purchases. Not one damn dime for anything for 24 hours.

"On "Not One Damn Dime Day,' please boycott WalMart, Kmart, Target...Please don't go to the mall or the local convenience store.

"Please don't buy any fast food (or any groceries at all for that matter).

"For 24 hours, please do what you can to shut the retail economy down.

"The object is simple: To remind the people in power that the war in Iraq is immoral and illegal; that they are responsible for starting it and that it is their responsibility to stop it.

"Not One Damn Dime Day' is to remind them, too, that they work for the people of the United States of America, not for the international corporations and K Street lobbyists who represent the corporations and funnel cash into American politics.

"Not One Damn Dime Day' is about supporting the troops. Now 1,200 brave young Americans and (some estimate) 100,000 Iraqis have died. The politicians owe our troops a plan for a way to come home [other than in a coffin].

"There's no rally to attend. No marching to do. No left or right wing agenda to rant about. On "Not One Damn Dime Day" you take action by doing nothing.

"You open your mouth by keeping your wallet closed. For 24 hours, nothing gets spent, not one damn dime, to remind our religious leaders and our politicians of their moral responsibility to end the war in Iraq and give America back to the people.

"Please share this project with as many people as possible."

Lastly - and in a very different vein - may I too, join the chorus of congratulatory praise, respect and admiration on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of Bishop Tomas A. Camacho's appointment as the first bishop of the CNMI. Even though I am not of the Catholic faith, he has helped me, as he has so many others, and I shall be forever grateful for his generous spirit, his open friendliness, his grace and wisdom.