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Natural Disasters and Peacemaking**

The world is plagued by frequent disasters as well as violent conflicts. In some cases the geography of disasters overlaps with the fault lines of conflict. Where this is the case, disasters can have a powerful influence—positive or negative—on political dynamics and developments in affected countries.

On one hand, natural disasters may trigger fresh conflict or further complicate complex political situations. Disasters can undermine livelihoods and compromise human security, particularly if the long-term habitability or economic viability of an affected area is compromised. Disasters may also trigger a range of societal conflicts because they are profoundly discriminatory in their impact on people—and because the human response to a disaster may well reinforce such unequal impacts. Thus, fault lines may easily emerge or deepen—between rich and poor, urban and rural communities, and different ethnic groups.

On the other hand, disasters may entail a silver lining—generating fresh opportunities to bring long-running conflicts to an end. By triggering an outpouring of sympathy, disasters can dramatically reshape the societal and political landscape. For one thing, the destruction wrought by a disaster may be of such a scale that relief and reconstruction can only proceed by striking a ceasefire or negotiating a peace agreement. If the disaster creates suffering that cuts across the divides of conflict, it will likely prompt common relief needs and interests. The shared grief and the need to cooperate may provide the spark necessary for overcoming distrust—though there may be no more than a brief window of opportunity. Cooperative relief and reconstruction could lay the basis for a new political dynamic that can sustain broader conflict resolution and peacemaking efforts.

This hope was expressed regarding the civil wars in Sri Lanka and Aceh (Indonesia) in the aftermath of the December 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean. In Aceh, a peace agreement was negotiated successfully, yet in Sri Lanka, initial euphoria has given way to worries over the possible resumption of hostilities.

The disaster-peacemaking connection poses a challenge not just to governments and civil society in affected countries, but also to a broad range of international actors—diplomats, relief groups, development aid administrators, environmental advocates, and others. What can they do to translate a groundswell of goodwill in the aftermath of disasters into lasting commitments and changed policies? What needs to happen to prevent “spoilers”—those who see gain from continued conflict—from derailing the peace process? And how can the sometimes disparate demands of humanitarian action, reconstruction, environmental restoration, longer-term sustainable development, and conflict resolution be integrated and reconciled with each other?

The potential of disaster mitigation and management as a tool for conflict prevention and resolution—which could be dubbed “humanitarian peacemaking”—is as yet still underdeveloped. But it has much in common with a concept that has received growing recognition in recent years—that of “environmental peacemaking”—the notion that shared concerns and vulnerabilities relating to environmental issues may help advance peacemaking efforts among communities and countries with adversarial relations.