Not just a natural disaster

By Dan Rabinowitz

An instructive study that was quoted in the media in the days after the tsunami disaster contains an appalling statistic: The resident of a poor country is 15 times more likely to die in a natural disaster than the resident of a Western country.

The vast disparity in durability and in the ability to cope physically and organizationally with extreme situations is well known from comparisons of the destruction wrought by earthquakes. In California, where construction laws are a function of the existence of the San Andreas Fault and where the residents are rich enough to underwrite rigorous standards, few are killed. In China, in 1976, hundreds of thousands died, and in Iran two years ago tens of thousands perished.

Part of the difference is of course due to the differences in the ability to predict disasters and prepare for them. In the 1960s, after deadly tsunamis struck Chile and Alaska, the United States and Canada got together and, in cooperation with other countries that abut the Pacific Ocean, set up a warning system that neutralizes almost completely a nightmare scenario of the kind we saw in the Indian Ocean last week. The poorer countries of the latter region diverted their limited resources to more urgent needs, from their point of view.

Activists in international organizations who deal with emergency assistance to disaster-struck regions have long maintained that the term "natural disaster," which seems to hint at an event divorced from human deeds or omissions,

Disengagement plan

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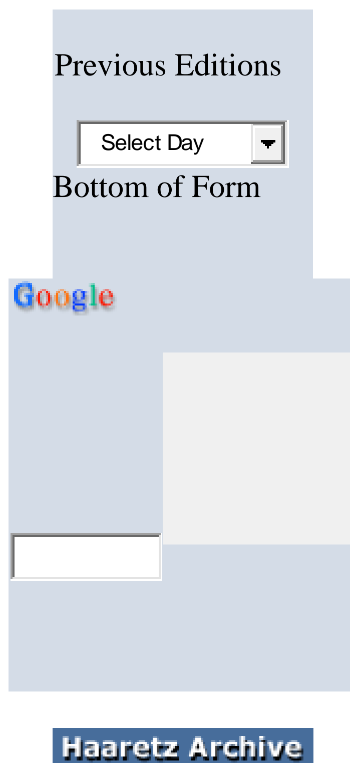

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is misleading. In the case of a natural calamity - earthquake, drought, avalanche - what people, institutions and countries did or did not do before, during and afterward always affects the scale of the destruction, the damage and the suffering.

The disaster in the Indian Ocean thus exposed what can be termed the "vulnerability divide": the invisible barrier that separates recourse- and infrastructure-intensive countries, which are able to protect their citizens from natural and environmental hazards, and impoverished countries, whose weakness renders them incapable of coping effectively with such events.

The understanding that human activity determines the scale of the damage, along with recognition of the existence of the vulnerability divide, appear, in one formulation or another, as cardinal components in the debate that has raged in recent years about the warming of the planet. The oil, car and electricity-consumption lobbies succeed in blurring the information periodically, but today it is clear to every sensible person that the warming process is anthropogenic - a human act. The debate over the rate at which the planet will grow warmer over the next century has to be decided in the form of a binding consensus, but even those who believe in an optimistic scenario of slow warming know that the change we are facing is tremendous.

The additional conclusion that is gradually emerging - and which is well illustrated by the results of the tsunami disaster - is that the suffering the warming will cause will be dispersed unequally. Countries with a semidesert climate, such as the countries of the Sahel in Africa, will suffer from dramatic warming and desiccation. Countries whose agricultural regions are located at or below sea level, such as Bangladesh, will be the first to suffer from salinity and flooding if the ocean levels rise. Countries whose economy is dependent on large rivers are liable to find themselves in a hopeless predicament. Each of these dangers will be magnified powerfully if

the country in question is poor and has only a meager infrastructure.

The decisive contribution of man to this unbalanced equation is, of course, the fact that the warming of the planet is caused by the emission of gases from power plants and the engines of vehicles - sources that are concentrated mainly in the strong, industrialized countries. When we consider all this together, it is clear that environmental problems for a long time have not been a matter for biologists, ecologists or engineers. They are social issues whose source - and solution - lies at the heart of the global political economy.