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CAN NATURAL DISASTERS PRECIPITATE PEACE?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Though there is still debate over the specific contribution of climate change to violent conflict, the balance of evidence suggests climate change will likely be politically destabilizing across broad swaths of Africa and Asia, with natural disasters and climatic fluctuations linked to the outbreak of armed conflict. This brief considers the prospects for natural disasters to instead provide windows of opportunity for achieving peace via negotiated settlements. Drawing on case studies of Indonesia and Sri Lanka as comparisons for patterns documented in Africa, the findings demonstrate, first, the importance of decoupling negotiations over *disaster relief* from the negotiated *peace process* and, second, the pivotal role of proactive international mediators. Though some aspects of African conflicts and natural disasters make them more complicated to resolve than those in the Asian cases discussed here, natural disasters may still provide opportunities to foster peace and build resilience in Africa.

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Previous CCAPS research has pointed to significant security implications of climate change for Africa and, by extension, the international community.[1] That climate change is a security issue has moved from a matter of conjecture to a consensus position within both the scientific and security communities. The 2014 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report finds that "[c]limate change can indirectly increase risks of violent conflicts in the form of civil war and inter-group violence by amplifying well-documented drivers of these conflicts such as poverty and economic shocks."[2] Both a recently released report by the Center for Naval Analyses, overseen by 16 retired U.S. military officials, and the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review note that the risks associated with climate change are both real and accelerating.[3] Though there is still debate over the specific contribution of climate change to violent conflict, the balance of evidence suggests climate change will likely be politically destabilizing across broad swaths of Africa and Asia.[4]

In particular, increasingly frequent and intense natural disasters will place strain on comparatively poorly resourced and developing country governments that are less equipped to address humanitarian crises and maintain public order. Last year's Typhoon Haiyan, which caused catastrophic damage across the Philippines, China, Taiwan, and Vietnam, was one of the strongest cyclonic storms ever recorded. In its immediate aftermath, eight people were crushed by a throng of looters at a government food warehouse in the Philippines, and gunfire between armed men and government forces reportedly stopped a mass burial in the hard-hit city of Tacloban.[5] The climate prognosis moving forward is grim: most climate change scenarios forecast an increase in the intensity of cyclonic storms, as well as more frequent periods of drought and flooding.[6] The security implications of these natural disasters are real: several studies have linked natural disasters to civil conflict initiation and an uptick in terrorist activity in the post-disaster phase.[7]

While much scholarly attention has focused on the potential for natural disasters to precipitate conflict, such disasters may also provide propitious moments for building peace. Natural disasters can create new arenas for interaction between the parties, such as joint management of disaster response or coordination of international relief supplies, thus creating opportunities for cooperation and dialogue.[8] Disasters can create a temporary political vacuum in the affected territories, allowing for the repositioning of political actors and, thus, the potential emergence of more pro-peace attitudes among leadership.[9] However, these transformations are not always lasting and are often limited to the short-term emergency period. While cooperation between the parties is more likely during the emergency phase, a reemergence and intensification of conflict is likely in the reconstruction phase that follows.[10]

Nevertheless, the "window of opportunity" that emerges during the emergency phase does have a peacebuilding potential that should not be overlooked. In the terms of contemporary conflict resolution theory, disasters stimulate the creation of a moment during conflict that is "ripe" for negotiation, temporarily delegitimizing further violence and presenting an opportunity for peaceful settlement.[11] However, not all "ripe" moments are seized. By comparing the post-disaster trajectories of Indonesia and Sri Lanka in the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, the remainder of this brief highlights active mediation and de-politicization of disaster relief in the post-disaster period as key determinants of peaceful settlement.

These cases provide valuable lessons with potential application to several ongoing conflicts in Africa.

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INDONESIA AND SRI LANKA: LESSONS IN POST-CONFLICT PEACEBUILDING

The 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami brought devastation to over ten countries, most severely affecting the province of Aceh, Indonesia and northeast Sri Lanka.[12] The scale of the human tragedy is well known: more than 280,000 dead across Southeast Asia, millions displaced, and countless more affected by disease and undernourishment. When the tsunami struck, both Indonesia and Sri Lanka were going through protracted low-intensity armed conflicts involving groups seeking regional autonomy: the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) representing Tamils in Sri Lanka, and *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* (Free Aceh Movement) representing the Acehnese in Indonesia.

At the time of the tsunami, there was little hope for resolution of the conflicts in either case. Within six months after the disaster, however, Indonesia was on a path to peace while Sri Lanka remained mired in conflict. In Indonesia, the parties held five successful rounds of peace negotiations under the guidance of a Finnish NGO, Crisis Management Initiative, leading to a peace agreement in August 2005,[13] subsequent demilitarization, and local elections. In Sri Lanka, the peace process stalled once again. Eventually, the newly elected president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, officially abandoned the 2002 ceasefire and launched a military offensive, eliminating the Tamil Tigers in 2009 amid widespread allegations of grave human rights abuses and civilian casualties.[14]

The case of Indonesia, where the peace agreement itself noted the critical peacebuilding role of the disaster,[15] shows that disaster-induced "ripeness" can be seized for the benefit of the peace process. The case of Sri Lanka demonstrates a contrary outcome. The similarity of the physical impacts of the tsunami in both cases, and yet different conflict outcomes, provides a natural experiment for assessing the role of policy responses in each conflict. Two factors seem to matter most.

Apolitical Disaster Response

The first lesson learned from differences seen in the disaster relief efforts in Indonesia and Sri Lanka is that politicization of disaster response can lead to both ineffective response and opposition to the peace process. In Sri Lanka's case, the issue of humanitarian aid management was the cornerstone of negotiations after the disaster, complicating the final attempt at negotiations before the parties completely withdrew from the peace process.

In Sri Lanka, as the parties attempted to create a joint aid management mechanism known as the Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS) failed[16] and the government institution for disaster management called the Task Force for Rebuilding the Nation (TAFREN) proved ineffective,[17] hundreds of NGOs started independent reconstruction operations, further undermining centrally administered response efforts. With the lack of one unitary management mechanism and so many actors involved, lines of delegation and accountability were blurred, leading to ineffective disaster response, public dissatisfaction with disaster relief, and emergent conflicts over unequal disbursements of aid.

In Sri Lanka, conflicts arose in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, as LTTE opposed the Sri Lankan army's participation in relief processes and accused the government of discrimination.[18] The government and the army, in turn, accused LTTE of forcing Tamils to refuse government aid,[19] banned several NGOs operating in the area,[20] and attempted to channel reconstruction funds through the Tamils Rehabilitation Organization—LTTE's internal agency.[21] The disaster response role of international NGOs, which were generally mistrusted in Sri Lanka even before the tsunami,[22] became part of the conflict. Nationalist Sinhalese powers in Colombo saw the increased activity of international organizations in northeast Sri Lanka as proof of a pro-Tamil orientation among these organizations. The LTTE, on the contrary, believed that international NGOs undermined their control in the region.

The failure of governement run P-TOMS, associated mistrust among key actors in the country, and spread of conflict over aid distribution in Sri Lanka thus aggravated opposition to the peace process among both the Tamil and Sinhalese sides of the conflict.

Politicization of disaster response can lead to both ineffective response and opposition to a concurrent peace process.

In Indonesia, however, humanitarian aid issues were treated separately from the conflict. The Indonesian government created a separate agency—the Agency for the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction of Aceh and Nias (*Badan Rehabilitasi dan Rekonstruksi* or BRR)—that dealt with disaster-related aid. Opposite to the case of Sri Lanka, the Indonesian disaster relief process was kept separate from the process the peace negotiations: aid for conflict victims and aid for disaster victims were administered without any institutional overlap. BRR was apolitical, centrally administered, inclusive, and perceived as being attentive to local opinion.[23] All projects were to be approved by this single national agency, leading to greater accountability than in Sri Lanka, where the majority of resources were channeled through numerous NGOs, without a reliable coordination and accountability system.

Prior to the disaster in Indonesia, the government managed all conflict-related humanitarian aid in accordance with the martial law proclamation, which banned all NGOs and international actors from the region. After the disaster, the government opened up the region for humanitarian work. However, BRR prohibited NGOs and international organizations from initiating conflict-related humanitarian projects and instead allowed them to only focus on disaster relief, thus leading the NGOs to assume an apolitical stance in their tsunami response, disregarding conflict in their operations.[25] Coupled with a centralized system of disaster aid management, this mechanism led to minimal conflicts over disaster aid distribution. Even when public dissatisfaction arose over issues such

as slow distribution of disaster aid funds and long reconstruction times,[26] it did not affect the peace process.

The mediation style of international mediators plays a pivotal role in shaping peace negotiations in the post-disaster context.

Thus, rather than disaster aid management being another source of grievance between conflict actors and a detriment to the peace process—as was the case in Sri Lanka—disaster aid management in Indonesia did not undermine the peace process and in fact served as an opportunity to build confidence between conflict actors and break prior stalemates that had stalled peace negotiations.

Proactive International Mediation

The second lesson learned from the Indonesia and Sri Lanka cases is that the mediation style plays a pivotal role in shaping peace negotiations in the post-disaster context. International mediation can be a key component in resolving seemingly intractable civil conflicts, especially when the warring factions are composed of members of different ethnic groups and territorial autonomy is a root issue.[27] In both the Indonesian and Sri Lankan cases, these conditions were present.

In Sri Lanka, Norway acted as the mediator and assumed a passive role in negotiations. In this way, Norway did not actively seek to bring parties to the realization of a "mutually enticing opportunity" for negotiations,[28] which the shared disaster experience may have presented. Norway entered the peace negotiations in 2002 and maintained the same approach of minimal involvement throughout the peace process. Norway has been described as a "reluctant peacemaker" in this process,[29] with its strategy based on the principle that the LTTE and government should have primary ownership of the process.[30] The role of Norway was limited to carrying messages, while both the LTTE and

the government could veto any decisions. As a result, the facilitator was not in a position to propose new ideas in order to break stalemates,[31] leading to a slow failure of the 2002 ceasefire agreement. The tsunami did not change the Norwegian strategy. Norway did not initiate new communications between the parties over this shared challenge,[32] potentially missing a key opportunity to foster new dialogue and change the dynamics of the previously stalled peace talks.

In Indonesia, on the other hand, the Crisis Management Initiative and its leading mediator Martti Ahtisaari, the former president of Finland, were actively involved in the Indonesian peace process, continually communicating with the parties and identifying favorable conditions for peace as they arose following the tsunami.[33] Martti Ahtisaari officially started in his role as a facilitator shortly after the disaster, following a series of informal contacts between all the involved parties in December 2004. The mediator imposed several rules on the peace process, including that "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed," which was meant to discourage the parties from presenting any parts of the negotiation process as their "victories" to the press before the final agreement was signed.[34] The mediator also urged the parties to be ready for concessions if peace was truly desirable,[35] holding regular meetings with the parties and drafting the first version of the final agreement.[36] As a result of the mediator's active involvement, the peace process leveraged the post-disaster environment to gain the momentum that negotiations in Sri Lanka lacked.

Other Contributing Factors

Other differences between the cases cannot be discounted. The tsunami had similarly disastrous effects for rebel-controlled territory in both countries, but differences in each opposition group's funding stream also help explain the divergent outcomes. For the Free Aceh Movement in Indonesia, its primary resource base was the local Acehnese population. The tsunami thus destroyed its resource base,

depriving the movement of the arms and materials necessary to continue the fight and helping lead its leaders back to the negotiating table. In contrast, the LTTE in Sri Lanka had access to a large diaspora population that allowed it to sustain the war effort through active remittance programs.[37]

Also, the pre-tsunami conflict trajectories were slightly different, with the Sri Lankan peace process already deadlocked and parties exhibiting fading willingness to negotiate, while the Free Aceh Movement in Indonesia was significantly weakened already before the tsunami by the imposition of martial law and implementation of Indonesia's first democratic elections.

However, the influence of post-disaster aid management and differences in mediation styles did push these conflicts in different directions after the disaster, and international actors may be able to leverage these dynamics in future post-disaster peacebuilding efforts.

These results yield important conclusions for policymakers engaged in peacebuilding in a post-disaster context. First, policymakers should strive to avoid possible overlap in disaster aid and conflict aid distribution in terms of management structures. Doing so allows relief agencies to navigate the emergency space without aggravating conflict grievances, keeping the two channels separate and independent.

Second, in terms of peacebuilding efforts, it is important that proactive mediators seize the moment presented by conflict actors' shared need to navigate the challenges presented after a natural disaster. Involved facilitators and third parties should emphasize the value of this time period for talks and settlement, as it provides rare ground for compromise, joint action, and trust building.

APPLYING THESE LESSONS IN AFRICA

What do these findings suggest for Africa? Long-running conflicts dot the continent—with conflicts in Somalia, the Democratic Republic

of the Congo (DRC), Uganda, Sudan, and the Niger Delta simmering for a decade or more—and Africa is certainly vulnerable to natural disasters. However, two main factors complicate the prospects for disaster diplomacy in the region.

What do these findings suggest for Africa? Initiatives to foster resilience during periods of drought, food insecurity, or other disasters can promote social cohesion and conribute to peace.

First, most of Africa's major disasters are of the slow-onset variety. Over the 20th and 21st centuries, droughts have been by far the deadliest disasters on the continent.[38] In contrast to fast-onset events like cyclones, floods, and earthquakes, where in a matter of minutes or hours entire regions can be plunged into disorder, droughts only emerge over periods of months. Thus, they are less dramatic and tend not to provoke massive, targeted disaster relief. The slow-onset nature of these events also makes these disasters less likely to disrupt politics as usual and occasion a trip to the negotiating table.

Second, in both Indonesia and Sri Lanka, the opposition had coalesced around a single rebel group that could credibly commit to honoring the terms of negotiated settlements. As the number of parties to negotiations increase, the likelihood of ending conflict via negotiated settlement drops precipitously, as there are fewer possible negotiated outcomes that can satisfy all parties.[39] Indeed, the process of negotiation can further splinter already fractious movements. Many African conflicts are characterized by the presence of numerous armed opposition groups with competing interests. In Somalia, for example, the opposition has coalesced around al-Shabaab, but the large number of non-state armed actors would complicate any attempt to create a truly representative and inclusive peace process. A broadly similar situation exists in DRC, where a single autonomy-seeking

movement—M23—coexists with a complex constellation of armed non-state actors.

Governments should seek to avoid linking disaster relief to the peace process, and international mediators should be willing to press the peace agenda when these moments of opportunity arise.

Despite these challenges, there may still be a role for disaster diplomacy in addressing communal conflicts and in preserving peace in post-conflict societies. Communal conflicts typically occur along tribal, ethnic, or religious fault lines, and often occur between members of communities coexisting in close proximity. In many instances, these communal conflicts can be as deadly as civil conflicts: recurrent clashes between Fulani Muslims and Tarok Christians in the city of Jos, Nigeria, for example, killed at least 2,350 people between 2001 and 2011.

At the community level, initiatives to foster resilience during periods of drought or food insecurity can serve as important mechanisms for promoting social cohesion. In Liberia, for example, the evaluation of a protracted relief and recovery operation found that 90 percent of the 1,200 participants interviewed believed that the short-term jobs provided through the operation had helped to promote peace and reconciliation.[40] While not disaster diplomacy per se, these types of interventions are often implemented by international organizations such as the World Food Programme. They have helped to contribute to peacebuilding both directly, by addressing some of the root causes of conflict, and indirectly, by promoting social bonds that can forestall a return to violence.

Most of the focus on the climate-conflict nexus has centered on the prospects for climatic fluctuations and natural disasters to be a cause of conflict. The case studies presented here, however, suggest that natural disasters may provide windows of opportunity for forging peace.

Moreover, they suggest concrete policy implications: governments should seek to avoid linking disaster relief to the peace process, and international mediators should be willing to press the peace agenda when these moments of opportunity arise. When the disaster-induced "ripe" moment for new negotiations is seized and the potential obstacles to the peace process are minimized, natural disasters can potentially become a shared foundation from which to build peace.

ENDNOTES

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