

Relief is for our reputation, too

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The tsunami response has partly repaired the damage done by attitudes to asylum seekers, writes Anne Summers.

When has the world responded so magnanimously to the tsunami disaster? The global outpouring has surpassed any relief effort, with amazing acts of generosity every day serving to spur further giving. There have been inspiring reports of individual big-heartedness, such as Sandra Bullock's \$US1 million (\$1.3 million) and, in Britain, national giving on such a scale that it exceeded the Government's donation.

Countries such as China, which have rarely got involved in global humanitarian relief, have made large gifts and even the tiny, impoverished nation of East Timor has parted with money, which it can ill-afford to do. From the US there are reports of charity websites crashing from the pressure of so many people trying to donate, while businesses such as the online bookseller amazon.com rejigged its site to include a donations facility and raised more than \$US3 million in one day.

The scale of the death and destruction has been huge but is far from being the worst the world has seen. As the *Christian Science Monitor* pointed out earlier this week, many more people have died as a result of ethnic violence in the eastern Congo - 3.8 million since 1998 - and millions more are displaced in the Darfur region of the Sudan. But these tragedies have not attracted anything like the same support.

"There are many reasons the Asian tsunami has commanded the world's attention in a manner which the Congo has not," the article commented. "It was sudden. It was dramatic. It happened during the holidays, a time when many in the West may be contemplating more than their own lives. And scenes of devastation were immediately beamed into the living rooms of the developed world."

The world has been swept away (to use one of the more overworked phrases of the past two weeks) on a surge of sympathy and a desire to do something.

The Australian response has been even more overwhelming. As of yesterday, private donations to relief agencies had been more than \$170 million, with corporate and business giving more than \$27 million, including 15 donations of \$1 million or more. When the Australian Shareholders Association suggested that corporate giving be scaled back unless shareholder approval was obtained, it was howled down.

"This [tragedy] is so different from anything we have experienced. It is right on our doorstep and Australia has a very special role to play," said Katie Lahey, the chief executive of the Business Council of Australia. "We are rich ... and we can respond."

There has been a degree of competitiveness - a "my donation is bigger than yours" kind of thing - that has propelled business giving in particular to unprecedented heights. Many people are making more than one donation and there is barely a shop in

the country that does not have a Red Cross tin at the counter. We have opened our hearts and our wallets in a way that has surprised us all. Why?

"Because it is Asia and it's a natural disaster," says Suzette Mitchell, executive director of the International Women's Development Agency, a tiny, Melbourne-based aid group that works with grassroots women's organisations in Asia and the Pacific. "Australians find it more difficult to relate to Africa and to disasters caused by civil wars, but Asia is a holiday destination for so many Australians and half the victims in Thailand were Europeans. We can relate to that."

Although we are close to Asia and many of us travel there, we have not always been so big-hearted. We are, after all, the same people who in October 2001 averted our eyes when the SIEV-X, a creaky boat overladen with asylum seekers from Indonesia and bound for Australia, sank and 353 people, mostly woman and children, drowned. And we continue to tolerate those who do make it to our shores being locked up in detention centres for indefinite periods. While some are busy collecting for tsunami victims in Sri Lanka we should not overlook the fact that there are Sri Lankans detained at Baxter who cannot even get their visa applications processed.

I am sure we all feel great pride in the fact that our country heads the list of donor nations with our unparalleled billion-dollar rescue package for Indonesia, but in the same week that the Prime Minister, John Howard, announced this aid, the Finance Minister, Nick Minchin, confirmed a 50 per cent blow-out in the cost of the detention centre being constructed at Christmas Island.

We are spending \$336 million on an 800-bed centre in this remote outpost even though, Minchin said in a press release, there has not been an unauthorised boat arrival at Christmas Island since December 2001. Why don't we send the money to provide beds for tsunami victims in their own countries? Some nations, such as Canada, are offering rapid-response immigration and family reunion facilities for people from tsunami-ravaged countries. Not us.

Nevertheless, our willingness to give so much should make us feel good about ourselves. Suzette Mitchell is surprised - "positively surprised", she says - at the generosity. "I'm not much of a flag waver," she told me yesterday, "but I've been buoyed by this."

I think we all have. Many who have felt so uncomfortable or even ashamed of our policies on asylum seekers can feel that finally we are doing the right thing. We have not totally closed our hearts to other people's misery and we are doing what we can with what we have - which is plenty. And we keep wanting to do more.

Last week, Mitchell sent out a heart-rending email reporting the appalling news from Sri Lanka that women and girls were being gang-raped in the camps. "After losing families, homes and livelihoods, women victims of the tsunami are facing fresh horrors," Mitchell wrote. She asked for money to "help protect and empower local women in the wake of this disaster". The response has been unprecedented, with many individuals who have already given to relief agencies saying they now want also to particularly help these women.

It is a further sign of the way we have opened our hearts. We may not fully understand why, but we know we have to keep on doing it.

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