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Indonesia: Natural Disasters or Mass Murder?

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Indonesia: Natural Disasters or Mass Murder?

By Andre Vltchek

Another day, another unnecessary loss of lives: 24 people killed and 10 still missing in floods and landslides on the small island of Tahuna off Indonesia's Sulawesi. The date is January 12, 2007.

At an alarming rate, Indonesia is replacing Bangladesh and India as the most disaster-prone nation on earth. Whenever the word Indonesia appears on the list of headlines on Yahoo news, chances are that another enormous—and often unnecessary—tragedy has occurred on one of the islands of this sprawling archipelago.

Airplanes are disappearing or sliding off the runways, ferries are sinking or simply decomposing on the high seas, trains crash or get derailed on the average of one per week Illegal garbage dumps bury desperate communities of scavengers under their stinking contents. Landslides are taking carton-like houses into ravines; earthquakes and tidal waves are swallowing up coastal cities and villages. Forest fires from Sumatra are choking huge areas of Southeast Asia.



Aceh after the Tsunami, Dec. 2004
(Photograph by Andre Vltchek)

Indonesia's press and mass media report every disaster in excruciating detail. But they fail to provide analysis to show that what is happening is extraordinary and intolerable, that probably no other major country is experiencing such devastating loss of human lives due to disasters that are either man-made, easily preventable, or subject to government action to minimize casualties. To link the enormous number of lost human lives in countless disasters with corruption and the system's socio-economic priorities is unthinkable for the major media. The Jakarta Post, Indonesia's leading daily newspaper, recently declined to publish this commentary.

Since December 2004, Indonesia has lost some 200,000 people in various disasters, excluding automobile accidents and military conflicts. That is more than Iraq lost in the same period of time in the course of a deadly war, and more than Sri Lanka or Peru lost during their long civil wars. Indeed, many Indonesians are

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experiencing lives as dangerous and hazardous as those in war-torn parts of the world. In the absence of comprehensive statistics and comparative analysis, however, few realize it.

Indonesia is poor, but it certainly has the capacity to protect some of its most vulnerable citizens. The main problem is a lack of political will and a system whose priorities lie elsewhere. There is plenty of concrete and bricks to build dams and walls against tsunamis, to reinforce the hills around those towns, which are in danger of being buried by the landslides. One has simply to look around Jakarta where dozens of new shopping malls are springing up and at the palaces being built for corrupt officials.

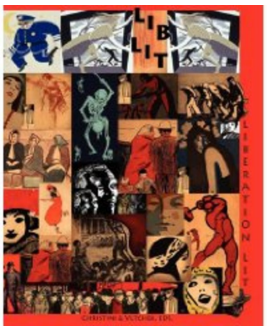


Children of Aceh (Photograph by Andre Vltchek)

Failure to deal with the problems of natural and man-made disaster is rooted in the combination of the dominance of the calculus of profit and the system's corruption. Local companies and officials have developed an uncanny ability to profit from everything, even from disasters and the suffering of fellow citizens. When the toll has to be calculated in hundreds of thousands of lost human lives, corruption becomes mass murder.

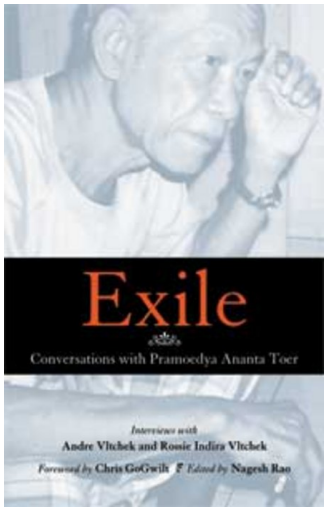
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Andre Vltchek wrote this report for Japan Focus. Posted on January 15, 2007.

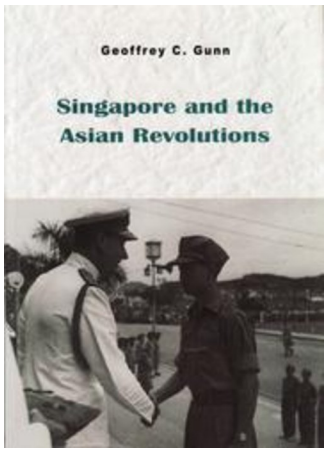


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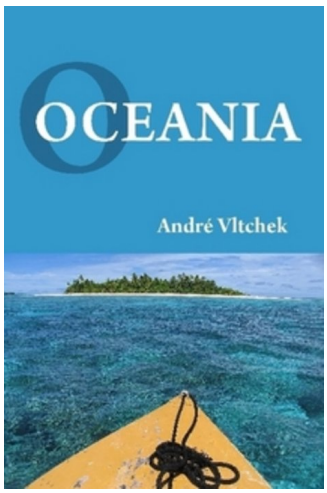
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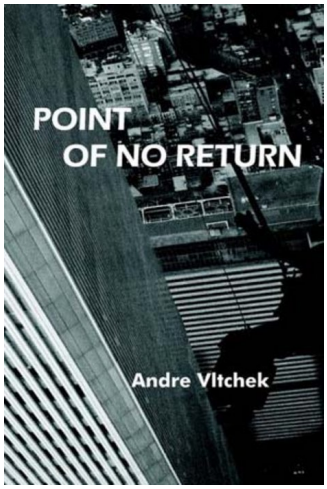


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