

Sir - International organisations should think carefully about imposing conditions on the distribution of aid to the people of Aceh in Indonesia and of the Tamil areas of eastern and north-eastern Sri Lanka, who have suffered the violence of bloody civil wars as well as that of a natural disaster.

The UN humanitarian relief co-ordinator, Jan Egeland, has said that ceasefires are a precondition of international aid and the dispatch of experts to assist local efforts. Canadian Foreign Minister Pierre Pettigrew reportedly told his Indonesian counterpart, Hasan Wirayuda, that safeguarding the ceasefire between the military and the rebels was necessary for international assistance. Australia, Germany, Britain and America may be afforded leverage to pressure the conflict parties into constructive negotiations.

However, the present beauty contest about who gives most and fastest might lead to a situation where aid promotes conflict. Supplies provided by Operation Lifeline Sudan, launched in 1989 to alleviate famine largely caused by decades of civil war, often had to be channelled through the two parties to the conflict. The two sides, instead of simply distributing them to the civilian populations in areas under their control, used them to fund and extend their military power. Such misuse of aid is a real danger, in Sri Lanka at least.

Greater access afforded to foreign media and human rights organisations in the wake of the tsunami might lead to an increase in international pressure on Indonesian and Sri Lankan governments and rebels to search for a way to settle their disputes.

The devastation has forced both sides, at least temporarily, to re-focus their activities. This and the international aid available to both regions may create opportunities for peace, but it will be up to local leaders whether they are exploited.

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