



Insight: Can disasters shape history?

Bridget Kendall, BBC diplomatic correspondent
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In the second installment of a new monthly column, Bridget Kendall asks whether natural disasters act as agents for political change.

Perhaps our first instinctive thought is that of course they do.

In the United States, for example, opinion polls suggest public dismay at the government's failure to respond adequately to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, has made a deep impact on potential voters' attitudes in this election year.

Choosing a president capable of dealing with a national crisis has been high on the list of electoral priorities - higher even, it seems, than finding a solution to the Iraq debacle.

Let's not forget that on a smaller scale, this has always been true in the US: no American mayor or governor, so the saying goes, is deemed to have shown his or her true worth until they've weathered a bad snow or rain storm, and shown they can run a city or state in an emergency.

This is the litmus test for re-election.

Philosophical change

Go further back to the great Portuguese earthquake of 1755 and the consequences were not only political, it's argued, but profoundly philosophical.

The massive jolts shattered buildings and started numerous fires. The tidal wave that swept in immersed whole areas of Lisbon. Tens of thousands of people died. Large parts of one of Europe's most important cities were reduced to rubble. Even today you can still see ruined remains of some buildings.

And since it happened on All Saints' Day, when many people were in church, the apocalyptic scale provoked an intense battle between church and state. Was this the wrath of God, or was the cause scientific? Should citizens turn to prayer and repentance for salvation, or clear dead bodies to avoid disease and set about rebuilding?

In the end, the triumph of pragmatism over religious faith helped entrench the ideas of the Enlightenment.

Go further back still, and there is even an argument that earthquakes may have hastened the end of entire civilizations.

The mysterious end of the Bronze Age in 1200BC may be partly explained by a string of earthquakes and aftershocks in the Eastern Mediterranean, say some geophysicists.



President Bush was accused of not responding adequately to Katrina

How else, they argue, can one explain that so many major cities and palaces in such a relatively small area were all destroyed in the same 50-year period?

Armenian set-back

But not all earthquakes and natural disasters bring political change in their wake.

The Armenian earthquake of 1988 was devastating for this small Soviet republic. The entire city of Spitak was destroyed, along with poorly constructed schools and hospitals, which meant that the death toll was more than 50,000.

You might have thought that such a cataclysmic event would act as a spur to the political rumblings already threatened to crack the foundations of the weakened Soviet state. But in fact, although the Soviet Union did, of course, collapse three years later, that was for other reasons.



The Spitak quake deepened Armenia's sense of isolation

The Spitak earthquake, instead of prompting faster change, probably arrested Armenia's development, deepening a sense of isolation and economic deprivation already exacerbated by quarrels with Azerbaijan and Turkey.

More recently, the earthquake that flattened the Iranian city of Bam in 2003 looked as though it might lead to a political breakthrough between Iran and the US.

The US authorities temporarily eased sanctions on Iran and sent in a disaster and medical team as part of the international relief effort.

But hopes of rapprochement came to nothing. If anything, relations have hardened as Washington has grown more concerned about the nuclear intentions of Iran's increasingly conservative leaders.

"Earthquake" diplomacy

But sometimes there are breakthroughs.

Let us not forget another set of recent earthquakes that did help create a political bridge between two former rivals: the quakes that shook Turkey and Greece in the summer of 1999 helped initiate what's become known as "earthquake" diplomacy.

The outpouring of sympathy and aid from citizens on either side led to a new political engagement to end decades of mutual hostility.



Turkey and Greece engaged politically after the 1999 quake

So what made the difference here? Why in this case was there a political turning point?

The answer, surely, lies both in public attitudes and in political will. The governments in both Greece and Turkey were ready for this moment and seized the opportunity. Whereas in Iran, the political momentum was pulling away from pro-Western reformers.

So we need to be careful to distinguish between cause and effect. Some natural disasters may, indeed, provide a catalyst for change. Others serve as an opportunity to shine the spotlight on a situation that is already dynamic.

Perhaps this is what the world is witnessing as it watches China grappling with its most recent terrible earthquake and apparently showing a new openness and flexibility.

The impact of the Olympics this summer, the increased prosperity of many citizens and an evolving political leadership was, it seems, already encouraging transformation.

It is interesting to compare what is happening now with China's last major earthquake of 1976. It is believed to be the largest quake of the 20th Century measured by the number of casualties, which were possibly more than 600,000.

China initially refused international aid from the United Nations, insisting on self reliance. But there were political repercussions; the reformist leader Deng Xiaoping was able to use the blame game afterwards to take over power from the Gang of Four and effectively end the Maoist era in China.



The US temporarily lifted restrictions on Iran after Bam

A parallel can be made for the Chernobyl nuclear accident in 1986 - a man-made disaster, but one of quake-sized catastrophic proportions.

Opening up

Some have argued that it was this emergency that forced the Soviet Politburo to open its doors to change, leading to an explosion of political "glasnost" or openness that ended censorship and, with it, political repression.

But the opposite argument may be even more compelling: the new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was already intent on opening his country up, and seized on the Chernobyl disaster as an opportunity to ram down the throats of his internal hardline critics reforms which he was trying to push anyway.

So perhaps the point is that the rubble or flood waters of disasters may pour through a door that is already ajar, opening it still further.

But what happens when the door remains firmly locked - as in the Burmese case? Does that pressure piling up behind the door force it off its hinges and precipitate a full-blown political crisis?



Gorbachev was trying to open up the Soviet Union before Chernobyl

In theory, perhaps. But in practice, I find it hard to think of an example.

But maybe in this increasingly global age, we should no longer be looking at change at the level of one country, but internationally.

Already we have witnessed a groundswell of political opinion calling for greater global responsibility to intervene when nation states fail in their duty to protect their citizens.

Instant global images of distress have encouraged global responses to the Asian tsunami or the recent Pakistan or Bangladesh disasters. A new and urgent dismay at leaving people to their fate is what lies behind the new UN "responsibility to protect" in the case of war crimes or genocide.

Now there have been new calls to extend an international obligation to move in to disasters like the one in Burma, when a nation state looks like failing to meet the needs of its own citizens.

So, perhaps, what is politically significant about the disasters we have witnessed this year is the way they may move this debate forward, strengthening the argument for global rather than national responses to emergencies, in name of global citizenship.

Some of your comments...

Swift coordinated global humanitarian responses to emergencies should be the norm irrespective of the brutal regimes controlling certain countries. The leaders of such countries should not be allowed to hold their citizens to ransom. If they continue their unreasonable behaviour they should be forcibly hauled to the Hague for human rights' violations. The junta in Burma is callous to the extreme. It is high time the world speaks with one voice.

Pancha Chandra, Brussels; Belgium

I think that when a government is unable and unwilling to meet the needs of so many desperate people and when the disaster is so vast, that the international community has a moral obligation to provide compassionate disaster relief even if it is against the wishes of the countries' ruling party.

Ellie Houghton, Maine, USA

A most interesting article. The last paragraph contains a suggestion that might well lead to vital changes in public opinion.

Michael Stevens, Danderyd, Sweden

The 1985 Mexico City earthquake resulted in a large civil movement which was able to mobilize despite the government's initial delayed reactions. This situation ultimately forced the current hegemonic political party to open up through various political reforms, and ultimately led to the 2000 elections. It was not the earthquake alone, but it did serve as a catalyst for ordinary people to come together and to witness the inefficiency of the ruling party.

Montse, Mexico

Naomi Klein has a book about this called *The Shock Doctrine*, basically about how disaster results in implementation of whatever political ideas are on the ground (she gives examples of Katrina and the 2004 tsunami among others). Andrei Cherny's book *"The Candy Bombers"* describes how a manmade disaster in Berlin (the Soviet blockade) caused a similar political shift in Germany (resentful defeated post-war ex-enemy, to close ally of the US).

Reader, California, USA