

Hubris Shaken: A World Aquiver

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Empire Burlesque - Chris Floyd - All across the Hindu Kush, spreading through Central and South Asia, an underground tsunami of stone sent tens of thousands down to Sheol - old and young, male and female, good and evil alike. On that same day, on the other side of the world, hundreds more were drowned in mud and rock when the backwash of a hurricane tumbled down on the Mayan Indians of Panabaj.

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Planet Waves

Chris Floyd

Empire Burlesque

Friday, 14 October 2005

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Humankind received yet another harsh message from its landlord last week. In the agony of Kashmir, in the laments of Guatemala, the planet once again laid down the hard truths of its brutal gospel: The earth doesn't love you. The earth doesn't need you. The earth doesn't know you are here.

As on the day when the ocean surges and river floods destroyed America's Gulf Coast, the blind, implacable processes of nature made short work of humanity's pretensions to significance. All of the petty, pointless human divisions into religions, tribes, races and political factions, all the prideful ambitions for power and wealth, all the private hopes for love and fulfilment, all the prayers of the faithful and the scorn of the defiant - everything of human worth and meaning - all were obliterated without mercy by the swift, iron hand.

"The situation is very, very bad," an official in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province told The New York Times after Saturday's quake. "There are bodies lying everywhere. Those who have survived are lying in the open without food, shelter or medicine. The situation has been made

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worse by the rain and hailstorm that followed the earthquake. There is no way we can reach out to them."

"Entire families have disappeared," a local aid worker in Santiago Atitlan told Reuters after Saturday's storm-triggered mudslide buried Panabaj in 40 feet of mud. "In some cases, there is no one that can identify the cadavers. And in other cases, it is because of the state of decomposition that we are going to have to bury them without names."

Bury them without names. The earth doesn't know your name. The earth doesn't care. The earth doesn't dote on your children. The earth doesn't tend your sick and your old. The earth neither accepts nor rejects you. You are simply one of the literally innumerable organisms battening on its flanks. For billions of years, there were none of your kind here; billions of years from now, your kind will be long gone - buried without a name - and even the planet itself will be consumed in the great slow fiery death of the sun. And the earth doesn't care about that either.

So where is the human factor in this vast indifferent planetary engine? Obviously, our accelerating rapine of the earth is destabilizing global weather patterns, exacerbating killer storms, bringing droughts here and floods there, quietly targeting untold millions of people living on the coastlines of rising oceans. But this, too, doesn't trouble the earth; its mechanics grind on irregardless of the particular mixture of heat and gases fed into the system. If the oceans boil, they boil; if nations starve, they starve; if the human community tears itself to pieces in a vicious war of all-against-all for dwindling resources - as even the Pentagon now predicts for the coming century, The Observer reports - why then, so be it. The aftermath rain will still lash the survivors lying in the open without food, shelter or medicine; it won't ask who supported the Kyoto Treaty or who voted for President George W. Bush.

Although we've already passed the tipping point on global warming, we could still mitigate some of the effects, we could lessen the blow - but we won't. Too many of those meaningless divisions bind us: too much greed, too much self-righteousness, too much ignorance and fear. And of course there is no mitigation for the tectonic plates shifting beneath the skin of the earth; they'll continue to push on relentlessly, creating new deadly fissures, ripping open ocean floors, bringing down mountains and raising mountains up. Against this no human action can prevail.

Where the human factor shows most starkly is in the extent of unnecessary suffering in these unavoidable catastrophes. In Pakistan and Guatemala - as in New Orleans - the poor died in overwhelmingly greater proportions than the rich, who build their homes on higher, firmer

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ground. The rickety apartment blocks that collapsed in Islamabad caught no mine-owners or telecommunications entrepreneurs in their ruins. The poor drowned by the hundreds in low-rent Gulf Coast districts shorn of protection by ruthless commercial development, insufficient funding of levees and reclamation projects, and bipartisan, corruption-bloated political posturing, as The Washington Post shows in a devastating report.

And as in all disasters, those with political pull will benefit most from "reconstruction" aid. In Sri Lanka, poor villagers are being banned from re-settling on tsunami-hit beachfronts for "safety reasons" - yet their land is being given to developers for five-star hotels, the Guardian reports. In New Orleans, the feasting on the dead by Bush cronies has grown so brazen that Washington has now been forced to re-bid some of the early pork payoffs, The New York Times reports. This is largely a show to allay public outrage, of course; billions more will remain safely stuffed in Bushist coffers.

At every turn, human greed compounds our suffering. The urge to eat each other alive for power and profit, to consign whole sections of the common human family to degradation and exposure is a cruel mimicry of the planetary indifference that shadows us all. Of course, the earth isn't human, it has no capacity for conscience and compassion - but what's our excuse for cruelty?

Chris Floyd