

Perspectives on the Devastation in Aceh

Alfred Nakatsuma

My first view of the devastated area in Banda Aceh reminded me of a picture of post-atomic bomb Hiroshima. The destruction looked similar; vast expanses of areas in Aceh were completely leveled as far as my eyes could see. Only building foundations remained. When seeing the Hiroshima photos, I felt something deeply personal because many of my relatives died in that event. Riding through the damaged area in Aceh, I felt something similar. I lived in Indonesia for more than three years, and had come to love this country and her smiling people. Seeing them now in tears, collecting their pulverized belongings and picking up their dead relatives struck me deep and hard.

Though numbers convey the facts, the images burned in my mind perhaps give the best understanding of the destruction. Hundreds of cars were crumpled like paper balls. Large fishing ships remain slammed into buildings. Many areas where houses and stores once existed are now covered only with small bits of concrete, grossly twisted structural steel, and splinters of wood that were once wooden beams. In many areas, nothing higher than two feet stands.

The devastation was caused by a one-two punch consisting of a jolting 9.0 earthquake that crumbled concrete structures, followed by a massive tidal wave that in some areas swept kilometers inland. In Banda Aceh, as in much of the western coast of the Aceh province, the highest density of population unfortunately resided close to the shore. As of the writing of this article, in Indonesia alone, almost 100,000 people are confirmed dead, 130,000 are still missing, and over 400,000 are displaced. Just yesterday (January 30), I saw two truckloads of body bags being dumped in mass graves. The stench is unbearable. Heavy machinery is finally able to access and clear areas under which more bodies lie.

I've been here for almost a month on the U.S. Agency for International Development Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) serving as the Rehabilitation and Transition Advisor. After the magnitude of the disaster became known, the international relief community mobilized quickly to address the lack of food, shelter, water and sanitation needs of the needy. Despite the inaccessibility of many areas on Sumatra's west coast due to the destruction of 26 bridges, helicopter airlifts and boats from private sources and militaries quickly began to fill the gaps. U.S. AID responded within 48 hours by providing large quantities of relief supplies and funding a sixty-truck caravan to deliver them from Medan to Banda Aceh. A couple days ago, the UN Humanitarian Information Center told me that over 200 NGOs are now here, and over 3,000 military personnel from 11 countries are now working on this relief effort. Yesterday it was reported that there are still small villages along the coast that are isolated and not receiving sufficient support, but it is nonetheless clear that the hunger and illness that were feared on a large scale have not materialized.

The U. S. government has provided 12,500 metric tons of emergency food assistance through the UN's World Food Program as well as millions of dollars in support to the

UNHCR, WHO, UNICEF. The U.S. government is also funding dozens of national and international NGOs involved in emergency relief, water/sanitation, shelter, health, child protection, psycho-social support, cash-for-work and income generation. U.S. Navy helicopters have until now been flying intensive sorties every day to drop emergency relief food and non-food items in difficult-to-access areas. I've accompanied them to assess these areas and develop programs to serve these people.

My task has been to support the transition of tsunami-affected Acehnese from the emergency relief to a longer-term development stage. To do so, we've been focusing on providing cash-for-work to those who lost everything they owned. The wages are mainly for cleaning the rubble in their towns and villages, but they also provide a cash injection that will begin to help them re-establish economically. By the end of this week, we will be providing such support to approximately 20,000 heads of households. We have also approved funding for longer term programs that will help re-establish local markets, develop income earning opportunities and hopefully enable these residents to return to their traditional pre-tsunami livelihoods.

My interactions with the locals have been extraordinary. I've heard so many stories of tragedy and sadness. "Bapak, air mata sudah habis." (Mister, we have no more tears left.) But I have also seen resilience and hope. The collective sorrow is slowly bringing collective healing. These interactions have taught me many things, and I will continue to draw upon them for strength in my life.

As I prepare to return home, I feel glad that we have been able to make a significant contribution to the relief and transition effort here, and I have learned so much from the process. I was surprised to discover the degree to which politics affect this kind of effort at every level. Relationships between people, organizations and countries significantly influence decisions related to strategy, operations and tactics. Thanks to my Mansfield Fellowship in Japan in 1997-98, I had developed a strong personal relationship with one of the key Japan International Cooperation Agency decision-makers, who is now involved in Aceh. On his second night in town we had the chance to get out of the office and sit in a local coffee shop alone to exchange information in frank and friendly terms, and make a connection between the U.S. and Japanese responses to the devastation in Aceh.

In the end, this is all about people. Though relief and development should mainly be about the people we serve, implementation involves a complex network of interlocking relationships. To serve well, a vast pyramid of people and organizations must collaborate effectively. The experience of working with the international relief community has been interesting, but it is the Acehnese people who taught me most.

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