

Apocalypse Now: Three Days in Aceh, Four days after.

By: Amanda Kasoem

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A harrowing eyewitness account of a daughter who accompanied her *Soroptimist* mother on the first trip delivering aid to the stricken area of Aceh province.

My mother and I left our house in Jakarta at 4 AM on December 30th, four days after the devastating *tsunami* to catch the first flight to Medan-Aceh. My mother, Lily, is a member of Soroptimist International of Jakarta. She was on mission representing her club, and Forum for Executive Women (FEW) to hand-deliver the first batch of aid (medical supplies and clothes) to the communities stricken by the tsunami in Aceh province. It's only a small club of 17 women, but they all have big hearts and are determined to help in a big way. This trip also served as an opportunity for gathering information needed for the strategic planning of the provision of long-term aid. Her club members all echo the same sentiment: *"We want to continue to help, even long after the news disappears from the front pages. We are here for the long haul."*

This time we only had 6 large boxes with us because we weren't sure how much excess luggage our commercial flight would allow. We were also not sure about transportation. From the TV footage that we had seen so far, it seemed that a lot of the roads were in ruins and there were reports of a major fuel shortage.



Queuing up for fuel

Due to some oversight, my mother and I were put on separate flights that were scheduled to depart ten minutes apart. Both our flights were delayed, and my mother's flight arrived 3 hours after mine. The people on my flight comprised a mixture of aid workers and anxious looking people with the mission to find family members, so the atmosphere in the plane was a somber one. Each of us was trying to psychologically prepare ourselves for the onslaught of haunting images and despair that would assault us for days to come. To my right there were a man and a woman both anxious and scared to return home to Aceh as they feared that all their family could possibly be dead. At that time there was absolutely no communication as the power and phone lines were down. So, these people, including myself had heard no news from our respective families in Banda Aceh and the surrounding areas.

At around mid day our plane arrived in Banda Aceh. The arrival hall of this airport was a dark and smelly 40-square meter room. Due to the chaos, many boxes of aid were piled high, unclaimed along the walls. Hundreds of people were pushing their way through. The airport had served as a refugee camp for the past few days and the smell of human waste and sweat was overpowering. There was no electricity so the conveyor belt was not working and the baggage was dumped by the truckloads into the arrival hall manually by airport staff, resulting in more chaos.

It took two hours to collect all of our 6 boxes and then an hour later my mother's flight landed. Then we had to deal with the somewhat trickier situation of finding transport. After extensive enquiring, my mother was able to secure a car to take us into town to our relative's address for the astronomical sum of Rp. 200,000, (US\$22) probably 5 times the normal fare. Our driver was a very kind man who apologetically explained why he had to charge that much. Due to the shortage of fuel he had waited in a queue for five hours the previous day and paid Rp. 300,000 (US\$33) to fill up his gas tank, when usually it would only cost a quarter of that amount.

Driving into town, the first shocking thing we saw was a mass grave. Nothing in the world could have prepared me for the sight of the huge bulldozers shoving hundreds of bodies unceremoniously into deep pits. Watching similar scenes on my TV screen it had seemed so surreal, like a movie, so unbelievable that I hadn't comprehended it. Traveling in that car was when the enormity of it finally dawned on me. The stench of decomposing bodies was so strong that even with our car windows shut we could smell it so we immediately put on our face masks and braced ourselves for worse to come.

Although the roads in Banda Aceh remained for the most part intact, a lot of the building structures were badly damaged. There was debris everywhere and we saw trucks and cars turned over inside the remains of houses. The city center was like a ghost town. All the houses had been abandoned. There was no one to be seen on the streets. People had either left Aceh for Medan or had sought shelter in refugee camps scattered around the city. Upon turning from the main street into the street where our relative's house there was a dismembered corpse lying unclaimed on the sidewalk.

We were greatly relieved to find that our relative's house was still intact. The house was actually 14 kilometers from the harbor but we could see that the sea water had reached this area and it brought with it a thick layer muddy sludge. Everyone was happy to see us (even though we had never met before) and welcomed us into their house with open arms. Although they had no electricity and no running water they hastily put together a "lavish" welcome of water and biscuits.

For the next hour we listened to their personal stories of the earthquake and tsunami. They described how the earth was shaking so violently that they couldn't even remain sitting upright on the ground. One of our family members even thought that it was "kiamat" (apocalypse coming). They also said that the water came so fast after the earthquake that they had little time to react. The oldest family member, Ibu Idham recalled incredulously how she, a woman of 76 managed to scale a 3 meter high wall to escape the rushing water.



My mother and I decided to rent a motorized rickshaw or "becak" to take us around the town center to see the extent of the damage. Our driver told us that he had lost his wife and two children. The only reason he survived was because he had been plying his rickshaw in an area of town that was not affected. His face showed the guilt and sadness of being the only survivor. He said he did not feel lucky to have survived, when his family did not. Somberly he took us all the way to the harbor where the destructive force of

the tsunami was most apparent. Most buildings had been reduced to their skeletal frames. We saw a huge ship that had been dumped in the middle of a house. In this area we also saw the limbs of corpses partly buried in the rubble. It was all just beyond description. We passed rows of bodies that had not been put in body bags yet. Each corpse was frozen in various expressions and posture of fear: mouth wide open, legs and arms outstretched in a defensive position. By then the corpses had become very bloated and looked like they were about to explode. I was surprised at how I was able to cope then at such a sight... I guess I was in shock... I still am.



Our *becak* driver took us to the “pendopo” (town hall), which had been turned into a refugee camp for survivors and journalists from the international press. People were scattered on the grassy area surrounded by what little belongings they managed to salvage; they all seemed to be in a daze. Nobody had any clue as to what to do - they were in a zombie-like state. Everyone we talked to had lost someone: sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, grandparents, friends, neighbors...Even the people who still had houses that remained mostly intact were too scared to stay there as they were afraid of potential aftershocks. Many believed the rumors of a second tsunami.

The following morning we heard that the death toll had reached 80,000 far exceeding the numbers of any other country affected by the tsunami. We

decided that we had to rent a truck in order to distribute the clothing and medicines that we had. Luckily one of our family members, Ir. Nazar (who works for the Governor’s Office), was very knowledgeable and was willing to help us out with the distribution. He, along with his son, Fatahillah (a medical student), miraculously found us a truck with a driver for the day. My mother, Fatahillah and I sat in the back of the open truck with all the boxes, while Nazar sat in the front acting as navigator.

Nazar told us that we didn’t have to worry too much for the people in Banda Aceh itself but that we had to concentrate on getting our supplies out of the city to the people along the coastline of the peninsula who had no refugee camps to go to and no military assistance. This insight was proven correct when we dropped off two boxes at a *Puskesmas* (community health clinic) in Banda Aceh itself. The people there had received enough food aid and although they had limited supplies of medication, they were still able to dress wounds and treat survivors adequately.

As we reached the outskirts of the city we were stopped by the military. They checked all of our boxes and asked us to hand-over the goods to them for delivery. With Nazar’s skillful negotiation we were eventually permitted to proceed by granting their request to relinquish a small bundle of women’s underwear!



We drove past kilometers upon kilometers of rubble. The villages to the left and right of the road had been completely leveled. Some areas were still under water. It was obvious that this area has not received any aid as we saw hundreds of unattended dead bodies as far as our eyes could see. It felt as though we were driving through a war zone. Along the way we picked up an orphaned boy. His eyes glazed over in tears as he looked on helplessly at what's left of his village. Now and then we could see some people scavenging through the remains of their houses, looking for belongings, family members and food. It was a desperate plight. On top of the prevailing stench, there was a strong wind blowing dust into our eyes and even with our face masks on, it was hard to breathe.

40 kilometers later (half way to Meulaboh) we came upon the remnants of a city called **Krueng Raya** that was eerily quiet. We were met by a group of people covered in dirt who, at the sight of us, approached our truck with tears in their eyes. We listened in amazement as they told us that we were the first people they had seen since the tsunami hit their city. There were only 300 survivors and most of them had retreated into the mountains. They pleaded for some food as they had been scavenging in the mud for grains of rice and had subsisted on whatever they could find in the mountains. We explained that we only had medication and clothes with us (which they gratefully received) but that we could take two of them back to Banda Aceh with us to find food at the *Posko* (military coordinating post).

Once back in Banda Aceh we went directly to the *Posko*. After reporting the situation of their village, the two villagers were given 50 boxes of instant noodle and a few hundred kilos of rice to take back to their village. That night we went to sleep exhausted but unable to sleep well. On one hand we were happy to be able to give people some aid they desperately needed,

on the other hand we were saddened with the knowledge that it was far from enough. From what we had seen there was so much aid that was not being distributed properly due to lack of any proper, systematic coordination, communication, transportation, fuel and manpower. Moreover, we were all restless as three earthquakes erupted that night amidst heavy rainfall, which kept all of us feeling that the ground was perpetually stirring beneath us. The fear of rising water was palpable.

The next morning we woke at dawn and began to pack our meager belongings for our return to Jakarta. We were heartened by the fact that we have established a local, trustworthy and knowledgeable contact and have gathered enough information to report back for planning a strategic approach for the provision of long-term aid to the area.

Although our flight was scheduled to depart at 10.50 AM we knew we would have to get to the airport early, so Nazar found us a taxi and we were at the airport much earlier than the usual 2 hours before the ETD. I couldn't help feeling relieved to leave Aceh as my mind and emotion were overwhelmed by all the stories, images, and smells and by the living in a constant state of shock and fear.



While my mother battled her way through the noisy, sweaty crowd trying to buy tickets at the check-in counter, I sat outside by the main entrance of the airport

trying to catch my breath from the dizzying, hot atmosphere. To the left of me sat a man who sadly showed me the tattered collection of clothes and jewelry he had managed to salvage from his dead family members. To the right there was a man making sandwiches for his family of four out of chili and crackers.



Me: riding on the back of the open-bed truck

Once inside the waiting area, the atmosphere was a lot calmer, as everyone was obviously relieved knowing that they were finally leaving. As our flight was once again delayed several hours we were able to befriend more people who told us their harrowing stories as well as many stories of miracles. One notable story came from an 18 year-old orphaned girl who came from a town a few kilometers away from Meulaboh. Out of 4000 inhabitants she was one of 80 survivors and one of a handful that was not severely wounded. She told us how the tsunami wave had lifted her up and deposited her on the side of the mountain with only a cut on her forehead. She had been found by some distant family members from Medan who had fought their way to bring her back with them. Another woman who was approaching 90 was the sole survivor from a family of 14. She could not understand why *she* was the one that God had spared.

A consolation to all of us was the sight of the first US military helicopters flying around. Finally aid was beginning to reach Meulaboh where more than 80% of

the city was feared to be completely destroyed. It was good to know that the local authorities who had been unprepared in the face of such an emergency are now not alone in providing aid.

With this testimonial I hope I can share with you another perspective of what is currently happening in Aceh and that you can realize the gravity of the situation. A lot still needs to be done. It is clear that a lot of aid is coming in but obviously distribution remains to be a huge problem. I know a lot of you have contributed money and aid through various channels, including the military operated Hercules aircrafts, which is a huge help to the people. However, from what we have seen, the most effective means of getting aid out is through small private operations and through NGO's who are directly sending their own volunteer staff there because the military themselves do not have enough resources to coordinate such a huge influx aid. Hopefully in the coming days as more foreign governments are getting involved by sending in helicopters and planes, the aid will eventually reach more people so desperately in need.

Another urgent need is providing help to the many children who have become orphans through this tragedy. At the moment we do not have estimation of the number of orphaned children in Aceh however, there is a definite need for shelter and for psychological counseling for these children. It is important that they are not robbed of their childhood and forced to become "little adults" as a consequence of this tragedy. In general, there is going to be a huge need to establish Psychological Trauma Centers in different parts of Aceh and Medan for both children and adults.

On the other and, from what we observed, the Acehnese people do not want to be treated with pity. They are proud people. What they need is helping hands to be able

to help themselves rebuild the various social and concrete infrastructures. Clearing the debris, reinstalling electricity, water, telephone, transportation (petrol, road and bridges) would be the main things to start with. With these in place, the economy should eventually recover. Looking at the current condition, the children can easily lose at least a year of schooling. One of the surviving children said she couldn't possibly imagine there being school for a long time, never mind there are no school buildings, but all her teachers were dead!

With all the misery presented above, one wonders, "Why?" Catastrophe of this magnitude does not happen often. People will be asking for reasons for a long time to come. Aceh has been an area of domestic political, religious, economic and military dispute for a long time now. I can only hope that this catastrophe will inspire both the people and the government to abandon the dispute and adopt a more humane and compassionate approach in addressing the aspirations of all the people, not just in Aceh but all across the archipelago.

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UPDATE
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**"FROM 6 BOXES TO
2 TRUCK LOADS IN 6 DAYS"**

SIJ-FEW have decided on this project of providing a long-term aid to a selected village. The project is dubbed **"Adopt a village"** program which aims to help the community rebuild both the social and "concrete" infra-structure of their village.

The response to SIJ-FEW appeal for donations was overwhelming. In just under a week donations and pledges came pouring in from within Jakarta and around the world. The next shipment of 2 truck-loads of donation of clothes, food and medicine is scheduled to depart Jakarta Friday, January 7, 2005. Money were donated to buy needed supplies and to pay for the cost of delivery. Soroptimists and FEW members donate their time as well as money. Volunteer members of SIJ and FEW will accompany each shipment to ensure delivery.

There are so many donors, some of them are: New Zealand Embassy - Jakarta, The British International School and Gelombang Fajar Worldwide Movers.

A dedicated Soroptimist Disaster Funds account will be established. Meanwhile the Bank Account for this project is:

Bank Central Asia (BCA)
Branch: Jl. Sudirman, Jakarta
No: 03500087435
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