

Weeks of Tension

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Krueng Raya mosque was still standing among the ruins of kampong because of tsunami (Nefransjah)

During the remaining evenings approaching the end of 2004, heavy rain poured down incessantly in Jakarta, the Indonesian capital which many indigenous citizens still lovingly called Betawi. In the few intervals when the rain abated, some end-of-the-year trumpet sellers caressed their wares, which they hoped would in a few days bring them their long-awaited small fortune. No one suspected that it was the advent of a savage disaster; a disaster that destroyed not only the fortune of the trumpet sellers but also changed the face of a large portion of the earth.

Tsunami. Like the meatball soup that burst on the table when the fragile bowl broke, the Indian Ocean was raked up by a super-fast power and poured over, washed away, gulped down and crushed everything from inanimate things to living beings. It was so fierce and so swift. “That day, no single person could have withstood it,” said Cut Nyak Daud, *Panglaot* of Lampuuk, recalling the fatal Sunday morning of December 26.

In Jakarta our faculty of perception was too limited and mediocre to digest and comprehend the calamity that befell Aceh. The flow of information was too limited. Almost all telecommunication and transportation facilities were cut off. Aceh was left alone by itself; isolated.

SMS through mobile phones frantically crisscrossed the air waves, while the truth of the messages was unclear, undefined. The number of victims was also conflicting, further confusing our emotions. First it was 3,000, then around 20,000, a few hours later it was tens of thousands. The figures kept on rising. Other messages told of dead bodies lying in the streets. I shivered. The horror and tension were building up in me because the information was so limited and obscured.

Accompanied by some friends I went to Ciliwung Studio along Ciliwung River, East Jakarta. The two-storey building is the headquarters of *Jaringan Relawan Kemanusiaan* (JRK), the Network of Volunteers for Humanity led by Father Sandyawan Sumardi. We hoped to get more bits of information here.

For some Jakarta citizens, Father Sandy and his JRK had been a well-known figure and institution, well-skilled in mobilizing the spirit of humanity solidarity. When the big flood inundated Jakarta in 1998, JRK wove the humanity arteries of Jakarta citizens that had nearly been dried up, so infrequently had they been exercised. A public emergency canteen and several health service posts were established in a number of places in the city. Young people with Search & Rescue expertise went to help those who had been trapped on the roofs and doctors were busy treating those who had been

exposed to the cold air. Housewives and professionals from all sorts of backgrounds were also involved. All were actively doing things for the sake of humanity.

When the waves of demonstrations swept along Jakarta in 1997-1998, JRK was also active. A public canteen prepared thousands of rice meal packages every day. Medical and evacuation services were made available for the students who were busy dismantling Suharto's regime.

On the last day of 2004, JRK was again active. From morning till late in the night people came to the



The ship was dumped in front of hotel Medan, Banda Aceh, about 3 km from the sea. (Eric Grigorian)

two-storey house. Among them were Rosiana Tendean, former national badminton player, Dinny Jusuf, activist from The Voice of Concerned Mothers, Doris Panjaitan, activist and member of the political party *Partai Indonesia Baru*, Protus Tanuhandaru, Father Sudrijanta from Jesuit Refugee Service, Nugroho Dewanto and Seno Joko Suyono, both *Tempo* reporters. All were eager to contribute whatever they could to help the disaster victims.

Indeed, Aceh relief posts eventually sprouted not only along the Ciliwung River. In almost all the city's alleys, mosques, churches, schools, community self-help offices, newspaper and television offices, relief posts for Aceh were soon established. One of those relief posts was from the Indonesian environmental society, known by its acronym Walhi, which was quite credible in handling post-disaster emergency situations. In short, the waves of solidarity ran swiftly, spreading everywhere and inspiring everybody.

In the late afternoon of the last day of 2004, the year-end festive mood seemed to have bypassed Jakarta. The usual merrymaking mood that used to reach its peak on New Year's Eve went missing. Late in the evening one or two shrieks of trumpets were heard but it was more the trumpet sellers themselves who blew with the hope of yet catching a buyer. The city's streets were deserted, the night dragged slowly on. It was indeed rather cold.

Unlike the deserted streets, the Aceh relief posts were on the contrary very crowded and busy. As if touched by a magic mantra, Ciliwung Studio was suddenly full with mothers, children and young people who were all busy packing relief packages that slowly began to pile up. Rice, food, baby milk, sarongs, cloths, blankets, medicine, plastic body bags, sacks, cartons filled with heaven knew what, all poured in from everywhere, donated by everybody.

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That same afternoon I made an impulsive and reckless decision of wanting to immediately go to Aceh. Not as a reporter but as a volunteer. I had no idea at all what, how and with whom I was going to the disaster area. Why, I even had never set foot on that westernmost tip of the Indonesian archipelago. I had made no preparations whatsoever, I had no idea what I was going to face. Everything was still dark and uncertain.

A few days later an opportunity for me to go came up. After discussing with members of the *Lambung Nurani Tempo* (LNT), a community organization from *Tempo*, namely Putu Setia, Hermien Y Kleden, Inong, Anne Handayani, Endri Kurniawati and Setri Yasa, we established a volunteer team. A small, reliable and agile team, and I was appointed as coordinator. God willing, hopefully, soon I could fulfil my wish of going to Aceh.