



Helicopter carrying aid landed in the street Lamno, Aceh Jaya. (Mardiyah Chamim)

Aceh, Here We Come

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During those days it was definitely not easy to go to Aceh. I knew that the area had become the hottest destination on earth. It was as if the area exerted a magnetic force that was even stronger than the attraction of Bali, Hawaii, the Caribbean, or any famous tourist destination you could name. At first, however, I thought the rushed and hectic situation was just like that at the end of the fasting period when everybody was also frantically trying to travel back home to their villages.

At that time only the official flag carrier Garuda Indonesia provided flights to Aceh. Predictably, there were no empty seats; all were fully booked and the increased price usually applied by the airline during peak seasons failed to act as a barrier. People went in hordes to Aceh; they were people who wanted to look up their relatives, volunteers or just those who were curious to get firsthand information: they all wanted to go to Aceh.

Some airlines then offered free flights. Adam Air, for example, invited volunteers to fly to Aceh free of charge. But finding a free flight was also not at all easy. Thousands fought to get the free seats and all claimed to be eligible for priority treatment.

By riding tandem on one of the many hired motorcycles, I went to Adam Air's headquarters at Cengkareng, West Jakarta. I tried to meet those who had the authority to decide who got the free seats that the airline was offering. Some airline officials gave me the look of "can you really do something over there?" "Are you aware that every seat is extremely valuable?" said Gunawan Suherman, President Director of Adam Air.

His doubtful question and look were understandable. On each flight Adam Air offered around 150 free seats, while there were thousands, perhaps even tens of thousands of people who wanted to rush to Aceh. The whiteboard in Mr. Gunawan's office showed the requests pouring in from political parties like Golkar and Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, also from the Ministry of Social Affairs, the World Wild Fund, and many others, all demanding dozens of free seats, all wanting to be prioritized.

"Yesterday we transported 50 volunteers from a well-known organization. But really, among them were several old people and some were even in wheelchairs. Instead of providing help they might well just increase the burden," said Gunawan. Because of the rather slack selection process it was no wonder that many of the so-called "volunteers" who had been flown to Banda Aceh demanded to be flown back to Jakarta the moment they arrived in Banda Aceh. "Some fainted when they saw so many corpses on the street; they were truly shocked," he added.

It appeared that once at the site where the tsunami had struck, volunteers needed not only robust physical strength but also strong emotional courage and profound sincerity, which were indeed even

more necessary. A volunteer from Finland was able to do hard work, registering all items that were needed by the refugees by going from one camp to another, all by himself—and he only had one arm!

I did my best to convince Mr. Gunawan why our team should go even though it was not from a well-known organization;



we also didn't have an imposing flag or banner. Ours was just a team of a dozen young people who were willing to work hard, whose ability in the field had already been tested. Our team, which I coordinated, was from the Puter Foundation and we had quite a convincing track record. We had already assisted former State Minister for the Environment, Sarwono Kusumaatmadja, in addressing the national disaster of the great fire in Kalimantan and I had also heard from several sources about the foundation's heavy involvement and its agile activities in the Ujung Kulon nature reserve, also in Banyuwangi and Ambon.

“Evacuation of dead bodies, okay. Road clearing, okay. Carrying kilograms of rice on our shoulders, also okay. Our team members are essentially as strong as the TV hero MacGyver,” I said. People may be surprised to read that I made such boastful claims, which may sound like the slogan of the number-one soy sauce company. I must confess that I had no field experience whatsoever as far as disasters were concerned. All I had was the very real motivation of our desire to do something for Aceh.

In short, the rather lofty explanation worked. We were to join the Adam Air flight on Monday, 3 January 2005 at 20:00 hours. Our team was given seats that were first reserved for government and political officials who, according to Gunawan, just wanted to go there to have their presence and faces put on record and broadcast. “I'm sure your team will be much more useful over there,” he said. Thank you Mr. Gunawan.