



From the window of Lampuuk mosque, Aceh Besar. (Eric Grigorian)

A Very Exhausting Night

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Monday evening, approaching midnight, 3 January 2005. We landed at Sultan Iskandar Muda Airport, Banda Aceh, after an approximately four-hour Adam Air flight. My heart was beating hard.

The airport was truly crowded and hectic. Dozens of cargo aircraft carrying aid supplies and passenger planes had to wait their turn before finally being allowed to land. An official even told me that his plane had to fly to Kuala Lumpur due to technical problems while in its holding pattern, awaiting its turn to land.

Thank God, our plane landed smoothly with no problems. Once on the ground we were immediately confronted by chaos, with many people in great agitation and panic. Reporters, volunteers, and NGO activists all spilled over the modest-sized airport. In several corners I saw women wearing high-heel shoes and bouffant hairdos. How they could find the time to make themselves up in that fashion baffled me.

Elsewhere in the airport people were sitting with aimless looks on their faces. It appeared they were local people looking for relatives, or wanting to get a flight back to Jakarta. Photocopies of snapshots of lost persons were pasted everywhere; the walls were also full of haphazard news like “Fulan is safe, heading for Jakarta” or “So and so is with uncle so and so”, or “Father is safe, brother John Doe is gone.”

Trying to get a taxi into the devastated town was an extremely tough job. Several people offered rides for outrageously high prices. US\$150 for a single ride that normally would cost just Rp50,000 (US\$5). Foreign reporters, especially television crews, easily accepted the offers without blinking an eye or pausing to consider.

We were met by Martin Hardianto, a friend who had joined the Team of Nature Lovers from the University of Indonesia (Mapala), who had arrived in Aceh one day earlier. He herded us onto an open van that he had rented from local people. “Come on, let’s go to the Governor’s Assembly Hall,” said Martin. There was no hope of staying in an air-conditioned hotel room with the luxury of a hot bath.

The evening air was tepid. With the rented car, Martin was kind enough to show us around the city of Banda Aceh. The road to the Governor’s Assembly Hall was enveloped in an air of mystery. Everywhere was dark, there was no electricity. The few glimmers of light that peeped through from several buildings were run by generators. A few foreign television crews were recording the dramatic midnight scene in front of the completely destroyed Pante Pirak Supermarket.

Along a stretch of road in Lambato district there was a mound of earth: a mass grave. The sharp pungent air made our stomachs churn. Martin handed us linen masks. “Use these,” he said. However,

the smell from the haphazardly buried bodies was too sharp to be warded off by the thin cloth.

But, incredibly, every square inch of space had already taken

Afterwards, a volunteer doctor told us how she had vomited because of the overwhelming and sharp smell of corpses and had decided to return to Jakarta because she just could not bear it; she said the smell had rendered her incapable of thinking clearly.

That night our van slowly made its way into the city; the sharp smell coming and going. When we approached the vicinity of Baiturrahman Mosque, the main landmark of Banda Aceh, we found the area covered with scattered piles of slimy garbage, mud, wooden poles, ripped-off zinc sheeting, broken glass, and the distorted skeletons of rickshaws and cars.

At long last we arrived at the Governor's Assembly Hall where hundreds of local and foreign volunteers and journalists lay scattered about on the floor, some asleep and some trying to sleep. Our group immediately tried to find space in which to lie down but, incredibly, every square inch of space had already been taken. Even the outside yard was full of all sorts of tents of motley shape and colour marked with various flags. There were tents with Japanese characters, Spanish flags, and writing in Mexican.

All 11 male members of my team finally found places to lay their weary bodies, although they had to huddle against each other to do so. As for me? Frankly speaking, I was thoroughly shocked and had not expected to face such a situation. I didn't know how to find a place to sleep and silently prayed, "Please God, help me, at least for tonight, I really need to get sufficient rest."

Luckily I met Monica Tanuhandaru, an activist who later became assistant to the then Coordinating Minister for People's Welfare, Mr Alwi Shihab, specially designated to handle Aceh matters. "Let's go to the JRS (Jesuit Refugee Service) house. There's at least a bathroom and a place to lay down," she said.

So we headed to a house that was comfortable enough in Jalan Ateuk Pahlawan, not far from the Assembly Hall. The place was adequate and, although we had to share with a dozen other volunteers, I was able to curl up in a sleeping bag and looked forward to resting for a few hours before facing the hard days ahead.

But just as I slipped into a deep sleep, around 2 am, the earth shook and trembled. The tremors were indeed not so severe but they were enough to shake me into a panic. Everybody ran out of the house.

Oh my God, that was my welcome sign.