



Pray for tsunami victims in the Leupung funeral mass, Aceh Besar, November 2005 (Mardiyah Chamim)

# Army of Body Hunters

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*Early morning: 4 January 2005. After a simple breakfast at the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) headquarters, I immediately joined the Tempo Volunteer Team at the Governor's Assembly Hall. We didn't have a definite programme of work, and since ours was just a small team we decided to join other teams already in place. The National Disaster Relief Coordinating Team, known by its acronym Satkorlak, was the one we joined.*

**B**esides distributing relief goods, particularly food and medicine, the Satkorlak Team concentrated on removing the numerous corpses. This was important because there were still so many out in the open.

Seeing the scattered dead bodies, with their pungent smell filling the air, everybody was bound to be deterred by this horrific situation. All of us were reaching for death at the end of a candle, said the late Jim Morrison of The Doors rock group. So simple—at the end of a candle.

The chaos in Banda Aceh at that time was indescribable. Piles of slimy garbage littered the whole city. On the streets, shoes could be seen everywhere, ownerless dolls, necklaces without necks. Every inch of soil seemed to hold its own sad story, of the fierce waves that swooped in faster than an aeroplane. Black marks, remnants of the inundation could be seen on the roofs of two-storey buildings. The tops of coconut trees too. Those who survived the calamity told of seeing miles and miles of waves retreating into the sea, and 15 minutes later lashing back into the land like giant cobras attacking in all directions with full force.

In such a chaotic situation it was not easy to lay out an organized plan of rescue. Even well-ordered plans were bound to be shattered; everything was in a state of emergency. The NGO activists, the donor institutions, as well as the volunteers, everybody did what they could—and what had to be done—at the time. Medical doctors mopped the floors at the airport, reporters helped carry supply bags to trucks, or volunteers moved singly from camp to camp. “I just noted down all details of the displaced persons camps: how many survivors, how many babies, how many elderly women. That’s all I could do,” said Rully a volunteer from Walhi, the Indonesian environmental group.

But Banda Aceh was not totally drowned in the sea of sad stories. Even in the dire situation, one or two occurrences did bring some smiles. I met some foreigners from France, Germany and America carrying big knapsacks on their backs; not even for one second did those knapsacks leave their backs. That was understandable since they contained huge amounts of money, a practical solution for a city where the entire banking system had collapsed. It was from those knapsacks that money was distributed directly to the people in the camps. “How many people are in this camp? How much do they need? Alright, here is Rp15 million, please manage it well,” they said while handing over the money to the coordinator of the displaced persons camp.

Take note of the following conversation between two doctors from Germany (German Emergency Doctors) and a camp manager in Greater Aceh regency. I happened to be there and was asked to be an instant translator.

“Diyah, please, tell him that we want to unload medicine and food from two containers that will arrive at the airport soon,” one of the German doctors said to me. I immediately conveyed the message to the camp manager.



Dead bodies in bags ready to be carried to mass funeral,  
3 January 2005 (Eric Grigorian)

“No problem, Sister, but not for free. We must be given cigarette money (tips). Nothing is free here,” said the camp manager, a young man.

“Of course, just ask him how much he wants. Five million rupiah?” asked the German doctor firmly.

Hearing the amount the young man became angry and said in a

high voice, “What, five million to unload two containers? I want one million!”

That was one occasion I had trouble translating the response. Myself, father Sudri and Eko who were also at the location, looked at each other in amusement.

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The situation was completely mashed up, total chaos. Corpses were everywhere like in a scene from the film *Hotel Rwanda* starring Don Cheadle. The difference was that what I saw was the very reality, not a scene on a movie screen.

By that time it was evident that the rehabilitation activities would not produce optimal results. How could the situation be restored and rehabilitated if every minute we discovered tsunami victims lying lifeless along every inch of street? Those bodies deserved to be properly dealt with; they should at least be returned unto the earth whence we all came.

There was a suggestion to use heavy equipment to evacuate the dead bodies. A Becko excavator, for example, could be used to dig up the bodies that were trapped within layers of slimy mud. It would be faster and more efficient, and we could then concentrate on helping the living. The dead after all never return to life. Helping those victims who were at death's door, who were famished, who were trying to deal with their mental anguish—that was much more important.

But this idea was not applicable within the Aceh context. In a discussion with Minister Alwi Shihab, I proposed the use of heavy equipment. “Actually, it’s already been tried,” said Alwi. But it didn’t work because the Becko operator refused to dig up bodies from the road as if they were scraping up zinc and wooden debris. He was afraid of being cursed; afraid that the restless souls would haunt him. That was why Alwi decided that heavy equipment was only to be used within a certain time limit when the streets still emitted the stench of human decay. In the meantime, manual evacuation of corpses was still the best way.



Corpse evacuation in Punge, January 2005 (Mardiyah Chamim)

Led by field coordinator Taryono Darusman, the Tempo Volunteer Group joined in the massive operation of removing the bodies. We went to the Satkorlak post at the corner of the Assembly Hall’s yard and each of us was given a pair of yellow galoshes, a pair of orange gloves and a linen mask. “Don’t force yourself; if you feel unable to do the job, if you feel like vomiting, don’t be ashamed to stop working and just return to the Assembly Hall,” said Banjar, in his forties, one of the Satkorlak officers who was coordinating the evacuation of corpses.

Soon the 12 of us—myself, Setri Yasa and Abdi Purnomo (both Tempo reporters), Taryono, Eko, Rahmat, Sutrisno, Ruswandi, Franky, Ahmad Sobirin, Ahmad, and Agus Gumilar—headed into the field. Bravely we carried 15 body bags with us. In the beginning, we wore an expression of “we certainly-can-evacuate-dozens-of-dead bodies” on our faces, which was greeted with a smile from the Satkorlak officers. “If those 15 body bags can be filled by noon, that will be good enough,” said Banjar, who frequently participated in SAR operations and was now accompanying us.

Dear readers, my apologies, but you should not expect too much from me. Although I had frequently done daring things, carrying a dead body, and one that was bloated and discoloured, this I truly was unable to do. From the very beginning I had told the other team members that I would just perform supporting duties. I was just making photographic documentation and jotting down in my notebook all that was happening. That included photographing and noting down the names written on the respective identity cards—official IDs, certificates, student cards, birth certificates, list of English course students—documents that were found scattered among the corpses.

Now, it no longer existed; all the stalls had been destroyed. The iron gate, zinc roofs and windows had all been ripped off together with parts of walls.

At that time the most daring thing that I did was adjust a loose mask string of a colleague, or cut a piece of raffia rope with which to tie up a body bag. Sometimes I walked up and down, handing out bottles of mineral water to my thirsty colleagues. What else could I do, that was my way of contributing in the evacuation effort.

The Lampasse and Punge areas, not far from Baiturrahman Mosque, were our first targets. In the past, they were the centres of trade and offices. Lampasse was a bustling spice market, now it no longer existed; all the stalls had been destroyed. The iron gate, zinc roofs and windows had all been ripped off together with parts of walls. Many times I saw arms and legs, completely blackened, protruding from among the ruins.

When I first set foot in the area, I was aghast. With every step I took, I was greeted with corpses left and right. Within 100 metres I counted 15. Some were trapped between wrecked shop gates; some hung on trees; some just lay in the mud. All were naked; all were bloated and blackened.

Whilst walking among the dead bodies, with the hair on my nape rising, my mobile phone suddenly rang, taking me by surprise. It was really a startling interruption. I cannot remember who called me, but what I do remember was that in the middle of the conversation I suddenly emitted a loud scream because I had accidentally stepped on the dead body of a woman wedged under a shop gate.

Honestly, and not just for politeness' sake, I saluted the whole team. Without hesitation and without being nauseated they swiftly carried the corpses, put them into bags that were just big black plastic trash bags, and not the proper body bags.

Sutrisno, one of the team members nicknamed Otoy, was the most efficient in handling the bodies. “If it was not too decomposed, I could carry it myself,” Otoy said. However, most of the corpses were in an appalling condition. Many times, while being put into a bag, a body part—the head, arm or foot—would be dislodged and fall off. It was then that Otoy, the long-haired man, would pick up the part and put it into the bag together with the body. “Sorry John, it was unintentional,” Otoy would say. “John” was the name we gave to all dead bodies.

It turned out that our manner of removing corpses was not efficient. The evacuators’ hands came into contact far too frequently with the corpses; that was very risky. Banjar suggested that the plastic bags be cut open and the corpses then wrapped like sticky rice cakes are wrapped in banana leaves. That would be easier, and our hands would not touch the bodies so frequently.

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Later, two volunteers from another team were reported to have been contaminated by *Clostridium perfringens* because they had been in direct contact with decomposing corpses. Those volunteers’ fingers reportedly became gangrenous because of the bacteria. Once the news circulated, we took more precautions. “Don’t let’s become a burden; otherwise instead of helping, it will be us requiring help,” said Taryono.

My greatest respect went to the soldiers that I met in Banda Aceh at that time. While repairing a collapsed bridge they also efficiently evacuated corpses with whatever tool was available—without the protection of even the flimsiest of masks and gloves. They just wrapped their hands in ordinary plastic shopping bags that they found on the streets. They didn’t even have drinking water with them. A 600-millilitre bottle of mineral water that I carried was passed among a dozen soldiers amidst much joy. “Thank you, Sister. Tomorrow, please bring more water, okay?” they said.

While the soldiers worked, I noted down the activities of my colleagues. Our team was divided into two groups. One group searched for dead bodies along the Punge river; the other group looked in the ruins of shops and hostels in the same area. Arriving at a street corner, the second group went into a house at which a local youth was pointing while saying, “There’s a corpse inside, Brother. Please, take it away.” He was right, in the middle room of the house Taryono and friends found the remains of a woman. “The air in the room was really pungent,” said Franky. He immediately ran out of the house followed by the other members of the group. The brave men vomited. It appeared that for 10 days after the tsunami, all the windows and doors of the house had remained tightly shut; the stench in the room was overwhelming. I was lucky; I hadn’t followed the group into the house.

By around 2 pm our team had managed to evacuate 13 dead bodies. You were right Mr. Banjar, it was definitely no easy task to fill up all the plastic bags that we had carried with us since morning. We placed the corpses that were already in bags along the street so they could be picked up by the army trucks assigned to transport bodies. From there they would be taken to a mass grave, in Lambato near Sultan Iskandar Muda Airport.

Banjar and Taryono decided that we had removed enough corpses that afternoon. We headed back to the Assembly Hall to rest but the trip back was not easy. There was no public transport at all, so we walked about 2 kilometres under the blazing sun, the air filled with the stench of decay. Once or twice an army truck passed by and offered us a lift but, wow...we would have to stand among the bags of corpses! Thanks, but no...thanks.

On arrival at the Governor's Assembly Hall we immediately washed, scrubbing our hands and bodies with soap, then changed into complete sets of fresh clothes. We shouldn't let bacteria or whatever else we carried back from the field contaminate our tired bodies because it would make matters worse if we fell ill at such a chaotic place.

The nickname given to them was "Buyat Army", buyat being the acronym for pemburu mayat or corpse hunters.

After we had washed and were presentable, we reported that we had evacuated 13 dead bodies. The number was noted on the whiteboard in the Satkoralak post, in the Assembly Hall. Dozens of other volunteer teams also reported the number of corpses each had evacuated that day. Those teams came from different organizations, the most active being the Indonesian Red Cross, the political party Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS), the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI—Front Pembela Islam), and the Mahameru Nature Lovers Student Group.

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Not all hunters of dead bodies worked in a group; there were several individuals who worked alone, without even carrying a flag of an organization. One of them was Agil Daeng, 22. I heard the story about the medical student from Nezar Patria, a reporter colleague at Tempo who arrived in Aceh in the first few days after the tsunami.

Agil Daeng was sitting, leisurely watching television when he first heard of the terrible natural disaster. He choked up when he saw the images on the television screen. “Dead bodies scattered everywhere; what a sad sight,” he said.

Without hesitation and without any coordination, Agil grabbed his bag, withdrew his savings of around Rp1 million and went straight to Jakarta airport, hoping to buy a ticket. Agil even forgot to inform his parents about his trip; everything was done in a hurry and on impulse—reckless, without considering the consequences.

But alas, he couldn't get a ticket to Banda Aceh. Since he was very determined, Agil didn't give up and instead just flew to Batam. From there he hoped to eventually reach Banda Aceh via Polonia Airport in Medan. During transit in Batam, Agil purchased 100 plastic bags large enough to carry corpses. He also bought linen masks, gloves and disinfectant.

In short he arrived at Banda Aceh's Iskandar Muda Airport at noon on Tuesday, December 28, 2004. All by himself, with no acquaintances or close family there; he walked to Banda Aceh city, which at that time was virtually a ghost city. No electricity, no potable water, very limited food. The city was totally devastated.

Agil wanted to find a relative who lived in the Darussalam area, near the University of Syiah Kuala, but he couldn't do so because access to the area was blocked. Every inch of the streets was filled with corpses, of young and old, men and women. The whole city was paralyzed. Each and everyone who had survived stared with expressionless faces, dazed. Fearlessly Agil approached them and asked for help in evacuating the dead bodies. “At first they were reluctant; they were afraid of being contaminated,” said Agil. Later, after being informed that the corpses would indeed spread disease if they were left to decompose, the people eagerly gave him a helping hand.

It was indeed extremely difficult, during the first few days, to ask the local people to participate in the cleaning and rescue tasks; most of them just watched. Not because they didn't want to help but because they were physically and emotionally scarred. It should also be borne in mind that for decades the spirit of taking the initiative had been stifled amongst the Aceh people. Helping fellow citizens, fostering the ties of friendship and of relationships, all had become loose. Instead, the daily mood was filled with suspicion and alertness. “Dead bodies lying around is a familiar sight. Not infrequently we

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found a dead body in front of our house, shot dead by the Indonesian Army or by GAM,” said Rizal, a youth living in the Lamnyong area.

On the other hand, the volunteers from outside of Aceh were also reluctant to involve the local people. They felt that the local people, who were severely traumatised, should not be involved in the physical rescue activities. On their part, the local people also felt excluded and not regarded as part of the

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teams carrying out the rescue work during the post-tsunami period. This feeling of alienation was later revealed. “We do want to help but with what and how? Everything is already being done by the volunteers. It’s as though we are thought to be incapable of doing anything,” said Aldi, a youth living in the Lampineng area, Banda Aceh.

The fact that Agil Daeng succeeded in getting locals involved in removing dead bodies was certainly a real achievement, especially since he not only led the evacuation activities, but also arranged the distribution of emergency medical assistance to hundreds of refugees crowded in front of the Municipal Assembly Hall of Nanggroe Aceh Darusalam. As a medical student, Agil knew how to render assistance to severely traumatised people. His was truly a pioneering undertaking since at that time not many government officials, NGO people or volunteers had been able to reach Aceh.

After being in Aceh for five days, Agil was relieved to see aid from inside and outside the country begin to flow in. The pioneering dead body hunter returned home, back to his university campus.

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During the first weeks following the tsunami, the evacuation of dead bodies was everybody’s priority. It was reported that more than 2,000 bodies were discovered every day; at one time it was 2,972, on another day it was 2,400, then 2,650. These were the figures the groups of volunteers reported to the Satkorklak official at the Governor’s Assembly Hall.

One month later the number of corpses discovered went down to less than 2,000 a day. This was not because the roads had been cleared of the dead, but rather because it became more difficult to find them. After being in the scorching sun for days, it became more difficult to lift the bodies. Moreover, there were also many, many corpses buried beneath the ruins of buildings, or wreckages of ships. Therefore it became difficult to remove them by hand.

At the end of January 2005, Satkorklak reported the official number of corpses evacuated at 92,751. That was as far as the official number was concerned. Meanwhile, many other discovered corpses had not been reported to Satkorklak. Agil Daeng and the local people, for example, immediately buried

dead bodies at the site of discovery. There was simply no time, no manpower or facilities to carry the dead to the mass grave or to report them to Satkorlak. Many months later, bodies that had been buried in such a hurried manner rose to the surface. Skulls, foot and hand bones, bits of fingers were found to have been scattered around by scavenging wild boars. Consequently, locals and volunteers had to retrieve and re-bury the scattered remains.

It became evident then that the final body count as recorded by Satkorlak didn't fully reflect the real total number of victims. According to the Ministry of Health, a rough estimate of the number of tsunami victims in the Province of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam and Nias reached 180,000, but the real number of lives lost is anybody's guess and remains one of God's secrets.

Also making the count difficult was less than satisfactory administration of the population.

Also making the count difficult was the less than satisfactory administration of the population. For decades Aceh had been a region torn apart, where rivulets of tears ran freely. The long-running conflicts—among themselves, and against the security forces—and the prolonged atmosphere of fear made it difficult to obtain official and correct numbers of the population. The varying figures also became detrimental in addressing the issue of displaced persons. It was extremely difficult to obtain the exact number of refugees, the number of women and children who survived the disaster and what kind of aid had already been given to them. This confusion of numbers certainly hampered the planning and implementation of assistance programmes for the victims in the post-tsunami period.

Jokingly my activist friends would classify the data into three groups: official data, unofficial data, and the Indonesian version of data. It was this last category of data that kept on changing and being exposed by several offices or groups, each always claiming to be the most original and exact.

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Referring to the evacuation of dead bodies, many friends asked whether we had encountered mystical happenings on-site. It was a natural enquiry since our society in general is constantly interested in the mystical realm.

During the first weeks, “being haunted by restless souls” indeed became the general topic of conversation. At sunset, for example, it was not easy to hire a motorcycle driver to take paying passengers to areas known to be most severely devastated by the disaster, like Punge, Peunayong and Ulee Lhee. “It's better to go in the morning. It's unwise to go in the afternoon because we would be travelling in another realm,” was the usual excuse of the drivers.

Fortunately I had never possessed a sixth sense or sensitivity to the spirit world. Nevertheless, I did feel an unexplainable hot atmosphere. During those first weeks, the air in Aceh was smothering hot, not only because of the blazing sun but also because of the abundance of negative energy that seemed to come from heaven knew where and was present in the land and air of Aceh.

If I was only feeling hot, that was not the case with Otoy. The long-haired man confessed to frequently seeing the souls of the victims restlessly hovering in great confusion. One evening he said, “There are six people near our tent; they ask that we pray for them.” Oblivious that Otoy was referring to the souls of departed persons, we dashed out of the tent to see who the people were who were asking us to pray for them. After we understood what he meant, we asked locals to join us in prayer to help the souls rest in peace.

Afterwards, news of Otoy’s supernatural ability spread and many people asked him about the whereabouts of the bodies of relatives who had not yet been found.

“Brother, please tell us where is the last location of our grandmother. We wish to collect her remains,” a young girl implored. After being asked such a question, Otoy would usually remain silent for a while, then, as precisely as possible he would describe the location where the body of the deceased was.

We nevertheless felt the more pressing task was to help the infants, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, mothers, fathers, grandfathers, and grandmothers who were all trying with great resilience and perseverance to survive the ordeal.

In the beginning I doubted Otoy’s ability; he may have just been showing off to Aceh girls, who were indeed sweet and attractive. But strangely enough, Otoy could precisely describe the physical traits of the deceased in question. Many times Otoy’s instinct was right and there would indeed be a dead body at the location he described in need of burial.

It was true that Otoy could not answer all enquiries because the location of the dead body sought would sometimes be too far away to be detected by his sixth sense. In such an instance, Otoy would calm the enquiring person with comforting words. The long-haired man had a knack with everything.

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The Tempo Volunteer Team officially joined Satkorklak for only four days in evacuating dead bodies. We then tried to find other networks of groups where we could render our assistance more appropriately. With profound respect for the dead victims, we nevertheless felt the more pressing task was to help the infants, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, mothers, fathers, grandfathers and grandmothers who were all trying with great resilience and perseverance to survive the ordeal.