



Attempting to penetrate the lost access in Calang, January 2005. (Air Putih)

Towards to Aceh Jaya

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Up to the second week after the tsunami, there were many disaster areas that had not been reached by the volunteers. Nias Island, Calang, Meulaboh, Lamno, Lhoong, Teunom, Panga, Krueng Sabe and many more other areas. In these isolated areas, thousands of survivors were still awaiting the arrival of assistance. They should certainly not be kept waiting any longer.

In collaboration with the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), we attempted to approach those isolated areas. We decided on Lamno and Calang, both located in Aceh Jaya regency. At that time, due to television news and public information, many organizations were already racing to and reaching Meulaboh, but Lamno and Calang were still relatively neglected.

In “normal” times, the distance from Banda Aceh to Lamno and Calang could be covered by car in two hours at the most. However, after the tsunami, it was completely impossible to reach either city by road because dozens of bridges had been destroyed and many kilometres of asphalt roads had simply disappeared, swallowed up by the waves. One vital bridge that had been destroyed was the Lhok Nga bridge, at the other end of which were the barracks of the Army Combat Engineers, where hundreds of soldiers had been devoured by the waves, together with their weapons. A Singapore-flagged ship laden with coal had been dragged 50 metres inland.

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Since the Lhok Nga bridge was destroyed, all we could do was try to obtain whatever information was available about conditions in the areas on the other side of the bridge. There were several settlements like Lhoong, Leupung, Lamno, Teunom, Calang and up to Meulaboh. Until the second week after the tsunami, no news or information could be obtained from those places. “Some friends crossed by foot to the other side, but there’s been no news from them till now,” said Taufik, a youth from the Green Camp, a club of young nature lovers based in Banda Aceh city.

In collaboration with volunteers from the JSR and the Green Camp we attempted to cut a way through to reach Lamno and Calang. There were three alternative ways to reach those places. First, by helicopter; but this was not possible because it would be extremely expensive and available aircraft were limited. The waiting list for prospective users, both from the military and NGOs, was very long; moreover, the cost of fuel was not proportional to the number of passengers and load that could be transported.

The second alternative was to send a team ahead first to physically clear an access road. The team would not need to be big; three to five people would be sufficient, as long as they were people with the ability and perseverance like the versatile TV hero McGyver (even one-tenth of his expertise would be enough). This pioneer team would be equipped with all the necessary field logistics including truck tyres to carry material across the river where the bridge was destroyed.

If we insisted on hiring a boat, the price would certainly be high. At that time for a journey of two weeks, the price was around Rp15-30 million.

The plan was that this team would gather the refugees scattered in the surrounding hills and persuade them to assemble at the football field or any open field where a helicopter could land. Next, the team would inform organizations that had access to the services of a helicopter and ask them to immediately drop aid at the collection sites where colourful plastic signs would have been laid to facilitate landing. The idea was to make sure that the aid could reach the chosen destinations.

The third alternative was to go by boat. This seemed to be the most efficient manner because a boat could carry much more aid and supplies and the volunteers would not spend too much energy in clearing a path through the forest. But going by sea at that time required one to be brave and courageous since the ocean was still rough. Since even on land we could still feel the tremors of hundreds of aftershocks, we were sure that on the sea we would be tossed about by the wild waves. It seemed that the whole world was still recuperating from the wounds caused by the shifting tectonic plates on the ocean floor. During those days we also heard the news of a small boat carrying people from the political party *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* (PKS) that had been stranded on Calang beach. Fortunately there were no casualties.

Finally, after weighing several considerations, we decided to go by boat to Lamno and Calang. Besides the fact that a boat would be more practical in carrying supplies and would conserve energy, travelling by sea would allow us to avoid conflict areas where skirmishes between the Indonesian Army and GAM (Free Aceh Movement) separatists still occurred quite frequently. But the problem was, from where could we hire a boat? The majority of boats and ships had been destroyed by the waves and for those that were not damaged, their owners were still in mourning and in deep trauma. If we insisted on hiring a boat, the price would certainly be high. At that time for a journey of two weeks, the price was around Rp15-30 million.

To solve the issue, we immediately closed ranks and divided our tasks. Organizations with affluent funds like JRS and Flora Fauna International (FFI) would look for a boat and provide the necessary

funds. We, the *Tempo* Volunteer Team and Green Camp, would provide the volunteers to carry out the aid mission to Lamno and Calang.

We also tried to persuade other organizations to support our endeavour. We managed to get aid to transport by boat from several institutions like the Indonesian Red Cross (PMI), state gas company PT LNG Arun, and Danone Ltd. The necessary rice, cooking oil, diesel fuel, medical supplies and clothes were then collected and made ready for shipment.

The atmosphere was so tense, as if we were preparing to go to war. “This is a truly serious trip, Sister,” said Taryono

On January 6, we received news that two boats could be hired. One was a small boat that could carry 3 tons, and another was of medium size capable of carrying a 20-ton load. The plan was to let the team of volunteers sail first on the small boat followed by the bigger boat, which would carry the aid to be distributed in Lamno and Calang.

On that morning, I and Bambang Eko Budiyanto (of the *Tempo* team) accompanied Father Sudrijanta from JRS to inspect the boats which were moored at Uleu Lheu. A local traditional fishing expert also came along to appraise the boats. The man said that as long as the boats were not overloaded, they could reach Lamno in eight hours and Calang in 12 hours. He repeatedly warned us not to overload the boats since the sea was still unfriendly. Father Sudrijanta agreed.

“Okay, we’ll use these boats,” he said.

Right after receiving the confirmation, our team made the necessary preparations. In two days we had collected the necessary provisions. Some members were sent to Medan to buy a satellite telephone, walkie-talkies, life vests, compass, grappling hooks, ropes, paraffin and other field equipment that were essential but unavailable in Banda Aceh. We were able to obtain all equipment in Medan except for the satellite phone. “They’re all sold out, we must wait until our friend returns from Singapore, where he is buying the handset,” said Father Sudri. That particular piece of equipment was considered indispensable since there were very limited communication facilities in the field.

While some colleagues hunted for equipment in Medan, the others prepared the locally available provisions. They made a thorough check of the rice, sugar, medical supplies, and First Aid items to make sure we didn’t miss anything. The atmosphere was so tense, as if we were preparing to go to war. “This is a truly serious trip, Sister,” said Taryono.

Since the smaller boat’s capacity was limited, it was not possible for the whole team to travel at once and it had to be divided into two groups. As field coordinator Taryono decided who was to travel on it

first. They were Taryono himself, Franky, Abot, Abdi Purnomo, Rahmat, Ruswandi, Ahmad, Sutrisno and some members from the Green Camp and FFI. Butet Manurung, who had returned from the Suku Anak Dalam forest in Jambi a few days earlier, joined the first batch.

One by one they prepared what each of them needed, such as the fact that since each of them needed so many thousands of calories per day the team should carry so many thousands grams of rice; so many thousand units of protein meant that so many packages of corned beef should be taken along, so many packages of instant noodles, etc.

The evening before departure: In one corner of the Assembly Hall, in the area allotted to the *Tempo* Volunteer Team, everybody was busy. Abot washed boots, prepared cooking utensils such as paraffin, small pots and pans. Franky and Sutrisno tidied up the ropes, grappling hooks, and field knives, making them ready for use. Rahmat meticulously noted down the logistic necessities of the team while Ahmad made sure that there were sufficient batteries. Matches were put into bottles to prevent them from getting wet, medical supplies were checked as well as to ensure that the usual field equipment like flashlights and raincoats were in every knapsack of the volunteers. Everybody was busy until late at night. We felt the gravity of the undertaking we were embarking upon.

I was truly impressed by the way my colleagues worked. They deftly prepared the field provisions and looked into every detail. One by one they prepared what each of them needed, such as the fact that since each of them needed so many thousands of calories per day the team should carry so many thousand grams of rice; so many thousand units of protein meant that so many packages of corned beef should be taken along, so many packages of instant noodles, etc.

It was indeed a very complicated calculation which was even translated into planning varied meals that should not be boring. On the first day, for lunch it was rice and dried fish, dinner was rice and corned beef. On the second day, lunch was rice and barbequed beef, dinner was instant noodles with corned beef, and so on for a period of two weeks.

Another thing was that Taryono made each of us carry an extra supply load for 1.5 persons. This was in the event there were displaced persons or volunteers who needed assistance. For journalists like myself, who usually do not bother to make elaborate preparations in terms of provisions, this was one of the possible problems that we should be prepared to deal with. "Don't worry Sister, we'll take care of you in the field," assured Franky. That was welcome reassurance. As such I didn't have to carry the heavy knapsack containing all the necessary provisions. I only had to carry a simple daypack.

Indeed, the detailed preparations of logistics gave me a headache and that was understandable considering that during my career as a journalist I used to just prepare the most basic necessities for a journey, which I now realise was reckless. But this team didn't want to take any risks; everything was prepared neatly and in detail. "We must be certain and clear of what we take. No shortages and nothing too superfluous. We don't want to be abandoned and we don't want to be a burden to anybody," said Rahmat by way of explanation.

Our busy preparations drew the attention of the other occupants in the Assembly Hall. The foreign journalists asked us what was going on.

"Where are you guys planning to go?" After being briefly informed some of them wanted to join us but upon learning that it was to be a risky journey they changed their minds, except for Eric Grigorian, an American photographer who won the 2003 World Press Photo Award. It was decided that Eric should join the second group. "I just need 10 minutes to pack my things," he said.

On arriving at Ulee Lhee a feeling of fear overcame us all. That was understandable since the Arung Samudera 033 boat looked so small and fragile in the wide open sea. Moreover, it was carrying a load heavier than normal.

Ten minutes? Aha, he obviously wasn't a field man used to taking along complete equipment like my colleagues. I was right; Eric just brought along some T-shirts, a jacket, a computer, camera, his personal medical supplies, and a few packets of biscuits. Exactly like me.

In the end, Eric didn't only come with us to Lamno but he joined our team as a volunteer photographer and eventually organized a photo exhibition titled, *100 Days After: Struggle Continues* in May 2005 at the *Antara* (Indonesian News Agency) Gallery of Journalistic Photos in Jakarta.

Dawn: 9 January 2005. The first batch was ready to embark on the journey. By truck and a twin-cabin vehicle belonging to JRS, we all headed to Ulee Lhee where the boat was anchored. On arriving at Ulee Lhee a feeling of fear overcame us all. That was understandable since the *Arung Samudera 033* boat looked so small and fragile in the wide open sea. Moreover, it was carrying a load heavier than normal. Usually, a 23-HP boat was designated to carry a dozen people but now it was to carry 25 volunteers plus four traditional experts of the sea. Supposing that each passenger weighed 60 kilos, that would already be 1.74 tons altogether, plus the knapsacks filled with provisions and equipment, the total load of the boat would be almost 3 tons; that was too close to the maximum load permissible, too risky.

The traditional experts, however, assured us that the small boat would easily transport the team to Aceh Jaya. “We already know the antics of the Indian Ocean,” said one of them. “*Bismillahirrohmanirrahim*”, God help us, we all whispered, silently praying for safety.

The engine of *Arung Samudera 033* was started up. “Have a safe journey. God bless you all,” we murmured as we embraced each other. Slowly the boat headed for the open ocean, which we all hoped would stay calm until the boat safely arrived at its destination. Waving hands accompanied the departure of the first batch, which would be divided into two groups; some would disembark at Lamno while the rest would continue to Calang.

After the departure of the first batch our task was to again check the aid for refugees that the second batch would be carrying the following day. Setri Yasa and Ali Anwar, both *Tempo* weekly reporters, Father Sudrijanta and Bambang Eko Budiyanoto, went to several aid command posts, PT LNG Arun, Danone Ltd and the Indonesian Red Cross, arranging the transportation of the aid supplies. They also bought items that were still lacking like diesel drums, gasoline, kerosene, cooking oil and eggs. Since Lamno and Calang had been isolated for two weeks, stocks of such items would certainly be very low.

While we were busy collecting and checking the provisions, we received disturbing news by telephone from Aceh Forum LSM, an NGO stating, “Butet must be immediately sent back from Calang today. Important.” Just that, no detailed information. Butet must be sent back. Full stop.

Naturally I and Eko became extremely worried. In emergencies, everything was to be done to have Miss Butet brought back, when necessary through the emergency evacuation network. We approached several important military and civilian persons who controlled the evacuation helicopter crew. “She could join the sick patients who are going to be transported, but everything remains uncertain,” was the response we got.

Some time later there came another phone call from a friend of Forum LSM. “Butet no longer needs to be in Calang because the friend she was looking for is already in Banda Aceh,” was the phone message. So ‘that’ was considered important.

Frankly speaking, we were irritated by the message. The fact of the matter was that there we were in the midst of an emergency and to get transportation for somebody to travel from Calang in those days was not as easy as flagging down a taxi in Jakarta. Furthermore, we were convinced that Butet, who had previously worked in the jungles of Jambi, would certainly not be whining to be immediately transported back. “Yes, you’re right,” said the caller, “Our apologies for not considering the complications in the field.”

Morning: 10 January 2005. This was the date that the second batch was to embark on its journey to Aceh Jaya. Myself, Eric Grigorian, Father Sudri and Christy Sandy (a volunteer doctor from JRS) went to Lampulo harbour, which was bigger than Ulee Lheue. We were joined by the volunteer team from PT LNG Arun, which was also to coordinate the distribution of aid.

The situation at Lampulo was much busier compared to that at Ulee Lheue. Hundreds of people walked up and down the pier. Five boats of 15-20 tons were moored at the harbour. It seemed that some foreign and domestic NGOs had also hired boats to take them to isolated areas. The main activity that day was the loading of equipment and supplies. “Rather than thinking about nothing, I’ve decided to help with the loading and unloading here. My wife and children have disappeared. I don’t know where they are,” said Zainal, a man with a

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rumpled face whom I met at Lampulo. Zainal was a fisherman who was out at sea when the tsunami occurred. “When I finally docked at Lampulo, the whole settlement had disappeared. My house, family, belongings and everything was just gone,” he said in a faltering voice.

By noon, our entire cargo had been loaded onto the boat; we were ready to sail. Two soldiers with long rifles, Ahmad and Sugianto, were assigned to protect us. “The escort is necessary because you are heading to a dangerous area. There are many GAM people in the hills around Lamno and Calang,” said Ahmad. We didn’t quite know to whom we should ask for confirmation about this statement. The situation at that time encouraged us not to ask too many questions and just follow standard security procedures.

The sea voyage was quite exciting. As the day wore on, the sea would become more violent, some people had warned us. My heart beat rapidly, especially when watching the black, not the expected blue, waves roll toward us. Garbage and pieces of ruins, zinc and trees floated around us.

“It’s much cleaner than a few days ago, when there was still a lot of floating dead bodies,” said Taufik, one of the boat crew members.

Slowly but surely the boat ploughed on. So far it had been alright and there had been no significant lurching. I was happy and felt that the voyage would run smoothly after all. In the distance we could see land. The quantity of garbage began to diminish and blue waves began to roll over the black waves that we encountered along the shore.

The calm sea, however, didn't last long. After sailing for an hour, bigger waves began to toss our boat around and it started rocking wildly. The whole contents of the boat were shaken upside down; some passengers began to get seasick, including me. Wow, it was the first time I had experience severe seasickness. I vomited, vomited and kept on vomiting, completely emptying the contents of my stomach. Eric was kind enough to rub some eucalyptus oil on my brow; he even cleaned up my vomit from the deck. He was a really good Caucasian man.



Some Santri (student at tradisional Muslim School) who survived from tsunami, Lamno, January 2005. (Mardiyah Chamim)

The sea remained unfriendly. Our stomachs kept being rocked about incessantly. Because I was so sick, I just lay down, afraid of even sitting upright. I just saw glimpses of the distant land; hills covered by layers of green vegetation with long bare patches of scars. Burnt trees, lifeless pieces of land, ruins of settlements and in the distance a very long scar of destruction.

For six and a half hours we were tossed about. Praise be to Allah, at 6 pm our boat approached Lamno. We were truly shocked to see the completely destroyed strip of land before us. The beach settlement had been totally destroyed. According to our notes, from the 48 villages at Lamno sub-district of Aceh Jaya regency, only 26 villages remained. At least 8,000 Lamno people had perished in the tsunami.

With wobbling legs because of the seasickness, I stepped onto the land. Good grief, as far as my eyes could see, not one structure stood erect. "Look over there Sister, it's a new coral island; before it was part of Lamno, and now it's separated," said Bachtiar, "There are many such new islands."

Afterwards, I looked at simple maps of Gampong Baru and Krueng Raya, drawn by Fahmi and Helmi, my activist friends from the *Rumpun Bambu Indonesia* Foundation; the maps showed that parts of areas had turned into new islands. The same thing happened at Lhok Sedu village in Leupung sub-district, Greater Aceh regency. “This was formerly fishponds but some parts disappeared because of inundation and other parts were separated and became new islands,” said Fahmi, explaining to me what he had been drawing.

A new map must immediately be drawn.

A mist of intense grief heavily shrouded Lamno. “These are the remnants of our village,” said Syamsul, a local villager of around 40, welcoming us. “Now all that remain are just memories. All my loved ones have disappeared. My wife, children, mother, grandmother, everybody has perished,” he said. Like Zainal whom I met at Lampulo, Syamsul also happened to be fishing at sea when the disaster struck. At that time, in the middle of the sea, he was surprised to see the waves coming from the direction of the land. “Strange, all my life I have always seen waves rushing from the sea toward the shore, and not the reverse,” he said.

What astounded him more was that the waves coming from the land were red and brownish. “A heat wave of air followed the waves,” he said. Those very waves rolled down and brought along blood, thousand of victims and ruins of buildings. Seeing that strange phenomenon, Syamsul immediately returned to shore and, upon arriving at his village, he realized that everything had changed. “I became truly confused. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. I thought I had lost my way and had not landed at the place I’d known all my life,” he said.

“A heat wave of air followed the waves,” he said. Those very waves rolled down and brought blood, thousand of victims and ruins of buildings.

The following days I roamed about Lamno, which had been ripped apart and severely devastated. Together with Eric I climbed Babad Dua Hill, the site of the *Indonesian TV* station tower, which also functioned as an Army post. From the top of the tower I could see the severity of the disaster. Village after village had been completely destroyed, dramatically changing the natural scenery of Lamno. Millions of memories had also been swept away.

From the top of the hill we could comprehend how difficult it was to describe the destruction that had occurred. How could the vastness of the disaster be conveyed in just one or two photos? How could a television news report of a few minutes describe the devastation left behind by an angry nature? How could a report of a few pages in a journal or newspaper depict what had happened?

It must be acknowledged that the media had failed and would never be able to describe what really occurred in Aceh. “Not even close,” said Eric. What did emerge in the media was just the juxtaposition of loose fragments that were wrongly deemed as representations of the calamity. Very possibly, many pieces had been left out and ignored by the media.

Climbing Babad Dua Hill we discovered the pieces that had been left out and ignored. The road toward the foot of the hill was densely covered with dead bodies mixed with the ruins of buildings. The stench of dead bodies under the fallen trees and building debris surged into the air. “They were running to avoid the waves, but the speed of the angry sea was unbeatable. Many people were thrown up to the foot of the hill,” said Sudirman, a local villager who accompanied us on our climb.

At the top of the hill we discovered the abandoned Army post. We discovered bedrooms that had been abandoned by their occupants, slippers streaked with dried blood, a half of a cut pond apple fruit, and a cup in which the coffee had dried up. All were in great disorder. Hastily scribbled-down messages and prayers for safety were seen on the walls. They all bit into our minds; they were all rusty.

Thirst and hunger made me look outside to the trees, looking for fruit that could relieve our protesting stomachs. Eric and I both looked at the half pond apple fruit, which still looked good.

“Want to try?” he asked. Sure. I produced a small pocket knife from my knapsack. Hmm...that was the tastiest fruit I had ever eaten.

Tired from walking quite a distance, we looked for a motorcycle for hire to travel around Lamno. “No fuel, Sister,” said one youth with a motorcycle. Luckily another youth rented us his motorcycle.

“Sister, you are a reporter. This motorbike is of more use to you. Spread the news about our condition here,” said the youth, handing over the keys.

So the whole day I and Eric drove about Lamno on the motorbike. I drove. We went past markets, football fields, schools that had been converted into displaced persons camps, Lamno Telecom Office building that had turned into a public bath, and we also visited the shacks along the hills.

Suddenly, driving around a sharp bend, I lost control of the motorbike and...we both fell and were thrown a few metres. Luckily we didn't slide into the deep ravines along either side of the road and luckily some villagers were passing by. A man kindly helped remove the motorbike that was pinning me down.

A few moments later, Eric stood up and embraced me while I was painfully trying to stand up. “So glad you’re alright,” he said. I was surprised that the shooting pain and body aches had suddenly disappeared. The men who were helping us all smiled.

The news about our accident swiftly spread through the village and I was given special treatment by villagers when we arrived at the next refugee camp. “Eat this, kid; you must be famished, after falling off the bike,” a mother said, offering me a plate of rice cakes and vegetables. *Tarimagenasong*, thank you, mother.

During the time we spent at Lamno, our team stayed in two places. One was the house of *Pak* Muhammad, 40, the informal community leader of Lamno. The second place was the Post Office of Lamno sub-district where we stayed together with the family of *Pak* Hasan, the post office head. It was from these two places that we distributed aid and coordinated the medical assistance for the refugees. A job that was certainly much more complicated and difficult than I previously thought.