



Resident of Krueng Raya in the middle of his house ruins. (Nefransjah)

P R O L O G

Notes of Bereavement

Bereavement. No words could sufficiently describe this feeling: of grouping through a dark and fathomless abyss while suffering and excruciating pain deep within one's heart. As time goes by, the searing pain becomes all the more unbearable because those who have been wrenched away from passed away, instantly. Through the eyes of the tsunami survivors we conceive how fathomless indeed is the dark abyss.

It's the same pitch-dark abyss that has swallowed Fahrumi, 32, making him decide to continue living in a taxi. He rents an old yellow car and has converted it into his abode, where he now lives and by which he is now earning a living. All day long, from dawn, to noon, to evening he drives through the streets and lanes of the city, looking for passengers (who are not always there), or just whiling away his life. It is not that Fahrumi has no tent in the refugee camp where he can always return but, he says, "Living in a tent reminds me constantly of my son and wife. I could lose my mind. To this day I haven't been able to find their bodies".

There are times when the longing for his departed loved ones torments him so fiercely, forcing Fahrumi to stop at the site where his house once stood: Gampong Blang Oi, Ulee, Banda Aceh. He can find nothing among the ruins, "Just a pile of tiles". His house, furniture, tools have all disappeared—there is nothing left, but yet the memories of his wife and only son keep haunting him.

Perhaps, it is such memories that also touch the heart of Amalia. The little 5-year-old girl was bereft of her brother, who was a faithful playmate. Every time she says her prayers, Amalia never forgets to utter her request, "Oh dear God, please return my brother because his little sister no longer has a friend to play with."

Then there is Rusmalia, a middle-aged woman I met in Lamno, 60 kilometres from Banda Aceh, who with great hope and deep faith handed me a snapshot of the son she hasn't seen since the tsunami, saying with a hopeful timbre in her voice, "Young woman, please put this photo on the wall of missing people. Who knows, maybe one day we will meet again." I don't know how she keeps her flame of hope burning, or whether it is even worth keeping alive.

I know I can never imagine myself being suddenly bereft of my loved ones. But for Fahrumi, Amalia, Rusmalia and hundreds of thousands of Aceh people, such bereavement is not in their imagination. Tragedy has certainly struck them, and their loved ones have indeed been wrenched away from them without even asking leave, without even giving them a choice. Since then, life for them will never be the same; life can't be as it was.

It is to those who lost so much that I dedicate my writing. Humbly, I wish to present something to Fahrumi, Amalia, Rusmalia and the hundreds of thousands of others who bravely continue to live their lives after the tsunami swept away their loved ones. It's not a glorious or glamorous piece of writing that I'm offering them; just simple notes on what I witnessed, what I saw, what I heard, what I felt and what I have pondered during the last year when I intermingled and got personally involved with Aceh and Nias and their people.

As a journalist who joined a team of volunteers in Aceh after the tsunami, I have collected quite a considerable amount of notes that have been told and jotted down from different perspectives. However, it is certainly not my intention to make this book a formidable and serious piece of reference drenched with theories and high-sounding social-cultural analysis. This book is simply a collection of the impressions I absorbed in the field, gleaned perhaps through a naive or even pompous perception.

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These simple notes are also inevitably tinged with a most personal and sometimes emotional shade and there are equally inevitably behind the descriptions of scenes that have not been put on record out of sheer modesty; no, it is only that I so wish to be as truthful as possible, to simply convey what I actually witnessed and experienced. After all, volunteers are like rock singers, aren't they; what I mean is, volunteers are also human beings after all.

I must confess that I had and perhaps still have no profound comprehension of Aceh, *Tanah Seulawah* or the Blessed Soil. Before the tsunami I had never set foot in Aceh. The only remote connection I had with Aceh was writing about the recent developments of Indonesia-GAM (Free Aceh Movement) relations, interviewing Aceh leaders living in Jakarta, and conducting phone interviews with colleagues in the field. Most of those activities I conducted from behind a desk in the relatively comfortable office of *Tempo* weekly.

I therefore beg for apologies if in my notes there is a whiff of "hello, here we come to help you all" scent. As far as possible I have avoided writing from such an angle which, unfortunately, has been employed in many volunteers' reports published in the media. I must, however, concede that I may not have always succeeded in doing so.

Becoming a volunteer is not just about rendering assistance or stretching out a helping hand to those in need. I will never forget what Karlina Supeli, lecturer at the Driyarkara Academy of Philosophy in

Jakarta, said about the work of a volunteer. She was responding to my apprehension about not having the resilience and strength to become a volunteer in Aceh for a long period of time—not for just one or two weeks. “It is a two-way process. It’s not only the volunteers who must strengthen the people, but it is also the people who will give us the necessary strength,” said Karlina. According to her, this two-way process enables the volunteer and the community to stand on equal ground, with each possessing something valuable to give and take.

There were indeed times when I felt frustrated because I could not do much.

Karlina is completely right. My months of travelling and getting to understand Aceh, befriending fishermen, feeling empathy with the sadness of mothers who have lost their children, all that has been a truly invaluable enriching experience. Witnessing determined people trying to get back on their feet from nothing has been like receiving a shot of encouraging spirit. Unexpectedly, I also interacted with people of different backgrounds and shades who were united by the same spirit of humanity and adventure. It was a truly extraordinary experience that I deeply cherish.

There were indeed times when I felt frustrated because I could not do much. There were times when I was truly vexed because my wish to help people was hindered by so many obstacles. Quite often I felt my anger rising, especially when I daily observed dozens of representatives of domestic and foreign donor agencies conduct complicated assessments and yet no tangible assistance arrived.

The people had been plunged into sadness, were physically and emotionally hungry and tired, and yet they were bombarded with questions like how many people perished in their village, how many survived, how many schoolchildren needed assistance, what people really needed. Heaven knows why the answers to such questions were eventually lost in space, evaporating like useless bubbles of air, or were hijacked in midair, and the promised assistance never arrived.

Such chaotic situations had a negative impact on the volunteers who were in daily contact with the people. “Sister, when will our houses be built, when will our boats be repaired, when will we get school uniforms?” Worse still when cynical or apathetic remarks were made like, “You, Sister, you just tell lies. Every day we are asked various questions yet we still sleep in tents. Just empty and false promises.”

It seemed there were no words sufficient to lift their spirits. It seemed truly improper to demand that the people exercise patience. They were in deep grief, they had lost so many things. If we were in their place, we would also lose our patience.

The volunteers, including me, often felt frustrated but when our eyes met the vacant look of a woman who had lost her whole family, when I felt the warm embrace of a child who had lost its mother, or when I met young people who had left behind their comfortable lives to become volunteers, then the feelings of frustration would evaporate and be replaced by rays of hope, a hope for a brighter future that would hopefully arrive soon.