



Aceh's tsunami remembered, part 1: 'Just get them in'

By Robin Davies
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By the end of 2004, staff of the Australian embassy in Jakarta were more than usually ready for a break. It had been a busy enough year with national elections and, for aid personnel, a rapid expansion of the bilateral aid program. Then, on 9 September, their workplace had been [bombed](#). Come Boxing Day, some staff were unwinding along the coast of West Java, including myself.

At one point I could be seen peering out to sea, looking for waves of suspicious stature. There had been sketchy reports of an early-morning earthquake just west of the island of Sumatra to the north, and consequent tsunami. I peered in vain. Only a few ripples nibbled at West Java, by which time an opposite, if not equal, reaction was already beginning to develop. The gaping void created by the tsunami in Sumatra would shortly attract a tropical revolving storm of international aid to the worst affected province, Aceh, and the island of Nias in the neighbouring province of North Sumatra.

In this, the first instalment of a two-part post, I look back ten years to the first days and weeks after the tsunami hit Sumatra and sketch the general scene. The second instalment will recall the approach to emergency response which was adopted by the Australian government's aid team.

Unsurprisingly, information on the disaster was scant at first. Those who might have provided it were in most cases dead, displaced or searching for family members, and communication infrastructure was badly damaged. Nevertheless, as with every natural disaster, odd reports quickly appeared, indicating at first that a few people were thought to have died, then tens, then hundreds, then a few thousands. It was clear enough within hours of the initial report that the impact of the earthquake and tsunami must have been quite severe—severe enough that many foreign embassy staff wasted little time in breaking their leave and returning to Jakarta to monitor the situation and begin contingency planning for

their countries' aid and consular responses.

Within about 24 hours, the Indonesian government released an estimate of 4,500 fatalities, which was assumed to be the sort of overestimate that often appears before numbers stabilise. A little later, Vice President Jusuf Kalla revised the estimate to 25,000, a figure which appeared to have no particular foundation but which, by that time, nobody was ready to question. Ultimately, it was determined that the world's most powerful earthquake in forty years had killed somewhere toward 170,000 people in Aceh and North Sumatra, constituting almost three-quarters of all fatalities attributable to the Indian Ocean tsunami. Nobody will ever know exactly how many people were borne out to sea or buried in mass graves.

At the time of the disaster, Aceh was more or less a closed province, off limits to all but a few international organisations. The Indonesian government had been negotiating on and off for years with the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), with some help from neutral international mediators. While these negotiations seemed to be making some progress in the period before the tsunami, UN organisations and official bilateral donors were as a rule kept out of the province, or represented by Indonesian nationals whose movements were circumscribed. It was thought these organisations' presence or their actions might in some way give legitimacy or encouragement to the independence movement.

The only international development organisations active in Aceh just before the tsunami were the International Organisation for Migration (IOM, a non-UN intergovernmental agency), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and a few non-government organisations, including Save the Children. As a result, there were few obvious aid delivery partners *in situ*. In addition, UN disaster coordination and response agencies had, by their own choice, barely a toehold anywhere in Indonesia. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the World Food Programme (WFP), in particular, would have exited Indonesia before that time if not for Australian advocacy and funding.

The Indonesian government was perceived as slow to open the pulverised province and request international assistance, though it took little more than 24 hours to do so. The province was, in practice, open regardless of any decision of the national government. Journalists and some of the more freewheeling early responders, including some staff of international NGOs, quickly crossed its borders at will. But official donors, and particularly their military personnel assets, obviously could not enter without permission. This was soon given emphatically. After arriving in the provincial capital of Banda Aceh on the day after the disaster and seeing the devastation for himself, a shocked Vice President Kalla said, 'Just get them in.'



The subsequent traffic jam of international donor agencies has been well documented, including in [one](#) of the [Tsunami Evaluation Coalition](#)'s series of reports, but was not instantaneous. In the first few days, access to Banda Aceh was achieved by car or truck from Medan, the capital of North Sumatra, or by military transport aircraft. The first international personnel, including a member of the Australian government's own aid team, went

in by road to make arrangements for the subsequent arrival of goods and other personnel by air. Fortunately the airfield at Banda Aceh was in good enough condition, once the initial flooding subsided, to receive Royal Australian Air Force C-130 Hercules aircraft, though mobilising those aircraft and negotiating permissions took several days.

The Australian Defence Force's (ADF) pre-existing relationships with relevant Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) generals proved invaluable in securing both initial permissions and ongoing cooperation. Four Australian C-130s and four Iroquois helicopters were placed at the disposal of the collective emergency response effort for as long as necessary. The first C-130 landed in Banda Aceh on 29 December, bearing supplies from Emergency Management Australia (EMA) stores. The one on which I first travelled, arriving 30 December, carried the first contingent of UN personnel including the UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Indonesia. The latter was quickly collared among the ruins by a western TV reporter and his cameraman—'where have *you* been?'

Banda Aceh from the air was a city weirdly bisected. In one half, all settlements up to several kilometres inland, and sometimes further, had been annihilated; in the other half, little appeared to have changed. On the ground, everything along the seaward edge of the affected zone looked to have been run through a great blender. Some of the damage had been caused by the earthquake but most of it by the surging ocean which picked up objects in its path and smashed them against other things further inland, and again on the way out, leaving in most areas nothing but the concrete pads on which buildings had stood. Inland from the affected zone, however, economic activity seemed to go on as usual, with street markets and many small shops open and gearing up to meet anticipated demand.



International aid personnel had at first to cram themselves into whatever intact, vacant buildings they could find, most notably the small IOM offices, consisting of just a few rooms in a converted house, which were on the right side of the divide. Somehow, basic food and water were found in sufficient quantities, very slow but good enough internet connections were established and mobile telephone communication was found to be possible via one

obscure network provider whose towers must have largely escaped damage. Over the following days, on top of their all-consuming information collection, policy advisory, resource allocation, aid coordination and public relations duties, international aid personnel frantically sought houses, cars and drivers to rent, and local staff to provide support services. Uniformly, the local people who rented out their houses or worked for aid agencies in various capacities had lost some or all their family members, with women and children over-represented, to the tsunami.

Personal security was at that time a larger concern than might be imagined. There had been several major terrorist attacks on foreign-identified sites in Bali and Jakarta over the period 2002 to 2004, most recently that on the Australian embassy. It was feared GAM members or prisoners freed by the tsunami would attack aid convoys or distribution sites, if only to obtain supplies, or that extremists would take violent exception to breaches of sharia law by foreigners in the province. There were rumours that some extremist groups were camped in growing numbers near the airfield. In the end, though, there were no incidents of any real substance, aside from some looting and some unofficial taxation of humanitarian assistance at checkpoints. Those feared to be extremists turned out simply to be extremely devout, and intent on helping others of their faith.

Regular aftershocks, some quite substantial, added to the general sense of insecurity, sometimes causing local residents to run for high ground and tempting foreigners to follow suit. Chaotic aid coordination meetings were sometimes reduced to temporary and not unwelcome silence by these tremors, which continued for weeks. The major earthquake which further devastated the islands of Nias and Simeulue off the western coast of Sumatra in late March 2005, killing a further 1,000 or so people, proved that the tectonics were still lethal.

Once the donor rush really got going, by about the second and third weeks after the

tsunami, daily life became easier for foreigners but work became exponentially more difficult. By some estimates, several hundreds of international non-government organisations were now present, seeking infrastructure, staff, information and beneficiaries. Well-intentioned but mostly misguided offers of in-kind help came thick and fast to Australia's aid team, which (including Indonesian national staff) now numbered about 15 in Sumatra (Banda Aceh, Medan and Padang), backed up by another 20 or so in Jakarta. Accepting even some of the more sensible such offers constituted a large and inefficient diversion of resources, but merely turning them down, and dealing with the consequent indignation, was problem enough.

In other cases, organisations or individuals (even including medical professionals) simply turned up in Jakarta or Banda Aceh, courtesy of tourist visas, and sought guidance on how they might make themselves useful. Some of the organisations concerned were Australian domestic charities with no international experience. Some wanted not only guidance but material support, such as engineering services from the ADF contingent. Many people in this category, Australians and others, appeared to think they were visiting a failed state, or at least an ungoverned one. Fortunately for them, they were visiting a very tolerant and distracted state.

Official donors did not always conduct themselves better than private blow-ins. They too frequently supplied things without reference to demand or need and, almost without exception, competed to attach themselves to 'flagship' emergency interventions or, even early on, reconstruction projects. Moreover, some had a limited understanding of, or in some cases little interest in, the strengths and weaknesses of local and international partners in Indonesia. As a result, they aggravated the traffic jam by spreading their largesse too widely. A particularly notable exception here was Singapore, whose self-sufficient and highly professional search and rescue teams were going about their grisly business quickly and methodically long before others got organised.



Labouring beneath this writhing mass of international actors was a rather small set of organisations with actual delivery capacity. The IOM did a large and under-appreciated job of mobilising trucks and moving goods and people overland within Aceh and between Aceh and Medan. Miraculously, no foreign officials were run over while attempting to attach their national flags to various parts of these vehicles. WFP, despite having no presence in the

province before the disaster, got going quite quickly; likewise UNICEF (disclosure: I now sit on the board of UNICEF Australia). Save the Children, with its pre-existing networks, played an important role in reuniting families and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which had sometimes been active in Aceh before the tsunami, moved in with characteristic speed and determination, providing rapid medical and relief services across the province.

Most important, though, were the efforts of Indonesian actors. Of course the Indonesian military were present in large numbers (and therefore suffered large casualties). TNI soldiers did much of the search, rescue and recovery work, debris clearance and distribution of humanitarian supplies, some of which came from their own stocks. Among other local and national organisations, the Indonesian Red Cross (PMI) mobilised volunteers from across Indonesia. The major Indonesian Muslim organisations, Nahdlatul Ulama and particularly Muhammadiyah, played an important role through their schools, hospitals, health clinics and volunteer networks. In addition, the local affiliates of international NGO federations including CARE and World Vision were able to mobilise people and goods quickly to provide assistance across the province, including the most remote islands.

The Indonesian actors just mentioned had mainly manpower and some institutional capacity to offer, and the most effective international actors had quite specific mandates. This meant there were sizeable gaps in the collective response, particularly in the early weeks.

Sanitation, for example, was a large problem for displaced people, there was no strategic approach to the provision of shelter for such people, and certain medical supplies were in shortage even while others were in glut. There was much more for Australia's aid team to do than simply getting behind the effective actors already in place. How we tried to do more will be the subject of part 2 of this post, tomorrow.

[Part 2 of this post](#) will discuss how the Australian aid response unfolded in this environment.

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Counsellor (Development Cooperation) at the Australian Embassy in Jakarta from 2003 to 2006. The photographs above are his, taken during several visits to Banda Aceh and the west coast of Aceh.

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