

Reflections on Tsunami

an oral history



National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia

Provincial Archives Agency of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam

Jakarta 2006





Book cover : "Tsunami dan Kisah Mereka"

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an oral history

Selected, edited and translated by Tjandra Mualim

National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia

Provincial Archives Agency of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam

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State Minister for Administrative Reform

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**WELCOMING NOTES
STATE MINISTER FOR ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM OF
THE REPUBLIC OF INDONESIA**

It is, in my opinion, most appropriate for us all to convey our praises and gratitude to God Almighty for His infinite Mercy and Guidance which have inspired us to generate and develop initiatives, ideas, work and tangible efforts for the improvement of the welfare of the whole Indonesian population in particular and ultimately that of all mankind.

In my capacity as State Minister for Administrative Reform which includes among others the coordination of the activities of the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia (ANRI), I greatly welcome and appreciate the initiative of ANRI in collaboration with the Archives Agency of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam Province to produce an abridged English rendering of the book "Tsunami dan Kisah Mereka", which is a collection of dramatic accounts of a number of survivors of the earthquake and Tsunami waves that shook and swept through part of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam Province on December 26, 2004.

The forceful and gigantic earthquake and Tsunami waves have destroyed almost the entire archives, both the documents that are still being directly used for the execution of government and development activities, as well as documents that have historical values. In order to prevent further deterioration of, and also to preserve, the affected archives, the State Ministry for Administrative Reform had on March 9, 2005 issued and distributed Ministerial Decree Number SE.06/M.PAN/3/2005 concerning a program to preserve, prevent and secure state documents/affected archives from catastrophe/disaster.

By this decree, ANRI in collaboration with the National Land Registry Agency (BPN) and together with the Government of Japan, had successfully cleaned up and restored an 80 cubic-meter land registry documents that had been submerged in mud. As a result of this huge undertaking, the legal guarantee and adjudicative rights of the people have consequently been ascertained.

It is my sincere hope and wish that the abridged English rendering of "Tsunami dan Kisah Mereka" be widely distributed to provide a valuable and perhaps also an inspiring lesson for the readers.

Jakarta, May 18, 2006

State Minister for Administrative Reform
of The Republic of Indonesia


Taufiq Effendi





P R E F A C E
by
Director General National Archives of The Republic of Indonesia

"Tsunami dan Kisah Mereka" by Damanhuri bin Abbas et.al. is a collection of dramatic, heroic and traumatic accounts of one hundred and eleven persons who have survived the onslaught of the huge and terrible tsunami waves that swept through the Province of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam, Indonesia on Sunday, December 26, 2004.

"Tsunami dan Kisah Mereka" can virtually be regarded as a recorded oral history interviews although it may not have been conducted following precise oral history methods such as in "Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression" by Terkel (1970).

The oral history interviews, initiated by the Provincial Archives Agency of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam, is designated to contribute and complement the many written documents on the disastrous event and also to enrich the archives holdings of the Provincial Archives Agency. Naturally, the significantly valuable oral history interviews are not just to be stored and preserved but should also be widely disseminated for the greater public use and interest. Based on this point of view and with the permit of the Head of the Provincial Archives Agency of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam, an bridged English rendering has been made of "Tsunami dan Kisah Mereka" for the wider dissemination and use of English-speaking readers.

On behalf of the National Archives of The Republic of Indonesia (ANRI), I would like to extend my deepest and most sincere appreciation to the Head of the Provincial Archives Agency of The Naggroe Aceh Darussalam for his permission to do the abridged English rendering. It must however, be emphasized that this abridgement does not represent all the 111 interviews but it certainly reflects the totality of feelings, spirit of courage and resilience and most importantly the profound faith in Allah The Almighty which permeate in all the stories. I would also like to thank Tjandra Mualim who has done his best to undertake the assignment and has produced this small book which, in spite of its limitations and shortcomings, would I hope become a useful tool for the international world to get a glimpse of the tribulations that had descended upon the people of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam. Perhaps this small book would also help the world to better understand the psyche of the inhabitants of the war-torn province that has since decades been known as the Verandah of Mecca.

Thank you and have a pleasant reading

Jakarta, May 2006

Djoko Utomo
Djoko Utomo



INTRODUCTORY NOTES

When the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia requested me to edit and render into English its recording of Aceh tsunami survivors' recollections I felt honoured and immediately accepted the offer. I saw it as an opportunity to contribute to the dissemination of information to a wider range of people about this very huge and global catastrophe. However, after reading the transcripts of more than 100 oral recordings, published as a book titled 'Tsunami dan Kisah Mereka' by the Aceh Provincial Archives Agency, I was rather daunted because those very personal stories were so horrific and full of such unimaginable sufferings, making me feel very inadequately qualified to do the job. What the survivors had experienced was truly beyond my comprehension and imagination.

Fortunately I was given the opportunity to meet some of them personally and to visit some of the locations, giving me a better insight, perspectives and scales of the ordeal the survivors had gone through. However, never having experienced myself a natural disaster of such proportions and terror, I feel I ought to offer my sincere apologies for any misinterpretation and misunderstanding that I'm sure I'm guilty of making. Despite those shortcomings I do hope that this collection of condensed anecdotes would enable the readers to obtain a proportionate portrait of the formidable calamity itself and more importantly, generate an understanding and appreciation of the abundant and profound faith in the Almighty and courage, solely because of which those people have succeeded to survive.

The devastating natural calamity that occurred at the end of 2004 and killed thousands of people in Aceh, the most northern tip of the island Sumatra in the Republic of Indonesia, and also in Nias island on Sumatra's West coast and indeed in many other countries around the Indian Ocean, will no doubt be always remembered and referred to by future generations. Similarly, the sufferings and losses as well as the resilience, courage and optimism of the survivors will certainly be always remembered. Although at present the majority of survivors are still living in temporary shelters, they look positively to the future when they will no doubt be able to pick up again the broken threads of their lives and continue building and achieving their dreams and aspirations. Life does go on. For the thousands who did not make it, let us bow our heads and pray that their souls rest in peace with the Almighty.

Tjandra Mualim
Editor & Translator

THE MINUTES BEFORE

In Indonesia's province of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (NAD), where the Islamic law is officially and comprehensively enforced*, Sunday early morning December 26, 2004 was as bright and peaceful like any other morning of the week. It was just another day filled with ordinary activities of motley types and purposes: fishermen busy embarking and disembarking, fishmongers buying and selling the catch of the sea, shop owners preparing their wares, minibus drivers revving their vehicles, people doing routine and extra work, people joyfully going to the beach for a picnic, and many other ordinary daily activities. There was nothing extraordinary, neither in the activities, the people's mood nor in the air.

For Halimatussakdiah binti Syam, a peasant woman of 75 years living in Peunaga Pasi village, West Aceh Regency, it was the beginning of yet another working day when she was as usual already busy in the coconut field to earn her daily living. *"That morning I was, as habitually, in the coconut field busy collecting the fruits that had fallen down during the night. The coconut field lies not far from our house and is located around 200 metres from the shoreline."* If collecting coconuts is Halimatussakdiah's daily routine way of living, lecturing is how Nurdasila binti Darsono, 47 years earns her living as she reminisced that *"At 07.45 that day I was driving from my home to Darussalam Campus to lecture at the postgraduate class of Accountancy at the Unsyiah University."* Also just on the way to work was farmer Zaini bin Nurdin Pante, 27 years, of Samatiga Subdistrict, West Aceh. He had left his house at around six in the morning and was walking to Suak Ni forest to tap latex from rubber trees, which was his way of earning a living.

Also already at work that morning was Abdul Rani bin Hasan Basri, 28 years, a teacher at a school of Qoranic studies in Jaya Subdistrict. *"As customary, after doing the early morning prayer at dawn, I was already in the classroom busy explaining the laws of ritual obligations to the female pupils. We were discussing the section on divorce."* In quite another setting, Harianto bin Leginem, a student of 18 years of Krueng Sabee Subdistrict was that morning doing his part-time job at the stone quarry site, busy noting the movement of transportation trucks.

Although still at home, Teuku Sajidin bin Teuku Ibrahim, 38 years, secretary of Suak Timah village, West Aceh Regency was that morning already busy drawing up a list of last week's communal activities to be reported on the following day. Many Aceh families, like the majority of Indonesians, have some sort of home industry activity either as their main or supporting sources of income, such as preparing cooked food to be sold in the markets or just in the front room of their houses which they have converted into simple stalls. On that early Sunday morning in his house Bukhari bin Abdullah, 45 years, a government official in Banda Aceh had together with his wife just finished preparing cooked noodles for their customers.

It being Sunday, young Taha Yasin bin Ilyas, an elementary school pupil of 11 years at Syiah Kuala Subdistrict, Banda Aceh, decided to spend the free day helping his father to plant mangrove trees. *"That Sunday morning together with some friends and village people I was walking towards Alue Naga, a district located just along the sea shore. We were on the way to the ponds to plant mangrove trees as part of a government reforestation programme where my father was directly involved."*

As usual on Sundays and holidays, many people were doing outdoor physical exercise and other types of sport activities. Muzakir bin Yakub, 35 years, a part-time worker at the local government office in Banda Aceh city was already at the Blang Bintang field. As a member of the committee that was organizing a 10-kilometre marathon competition he was busy looking after the sport event. A number of people were already at the beach enjoying the fresh morning air and cool sea water. With some friends Fedri Hidayat bin Imran, a student of 18 years from Samatiga Subdistrict, West Aceh Regency, was already at the beach; they were in high spirits. *"We were at Lhok Bubon beach, around 15 kilometres West of Meulaboh city, awaiting the arrival of other friends. On that day we were going to have a small party to officially disband a school committee we had established for some function."*



I depended for my living on the generosity of active fishermen

Fishing is one of the major business activities in the area and a great number of Aceh people are professional fishermen. Fishing communities have traditionally a strong bond among their members, perhaps because fishermen are daily confronting the not always friendly elements; they have become an extended family experiencing similar hardships and nourishing similar hopes for a better life. Helping each other has become a kind of second nature to most of them, especially to fellow fishermen who have grown old and weak. *"Since the last five years I have not gone fishing anymore because of my age, and since then I depended for my living on the generosity of active fishermen.*

On that day around 7 am I was as usual already at the Lampulo Fish Auction Market, Banda Aceh, awaiting the return of fishermen who would give me one or two fish which I would then sell to support my living. That morning I had just been given two pieces of thimpiek fish, a kind

of tuna, which I had immediately sold and was already back at the beach to await the arrival of other fishing boats." Syamsuddin bin Ismail, formerly a fisherman, 70 years, Baitussalam Subdistrict, Great Aceh Regency.

Many people were also still at home having breakfast, bathing and preparing to go to their respective places of work or pleasure, or simply doing ordinary domestic chores and relaxing like 23-year old Irma Dewi, S.Pi. binti Alfian Ibrahim, Banda Aceh, a young lecturer who was watching her favourite television programme while having breakfast with a friend who had just arrived from Bogor, West Java to look for a job. Some were even still asleep as they had just shortly arrived home from working in a night shift or a friend's wedding party where they lent a helping hand like Erwin bin Amiruddin, 32 years, Meuraxa Subdistrict, Banda Aceh who since he was 16 became totally lame and had to use a wheel chair to move around. The previous evening he attended a friend's party and that early morning had just laid down his body on his bed in his house. Some, although already awake, were still lazily and leisurely lying in bed like the newly married Intan Mayasari binti M.Jamil, 20 years, a housewife who was just chatting playfully with her husband on their nuptial bed in Banda Aceh city.

The peaceful and almost idyllic situation, a snapshot of ordinary everyday life in an area that had for decades been plagued by military conflict of international attention and concern, was suddenly rudely shattered by a forceful earthquake of 8.9 point at the Richter scale followed by a series of subsequent earthquakes of lesser force. Most people panicked and were terrified as they had never experienced an earthquake of such magnitude; they immediately ran out of the houses or buildings and just squatted down in a state of daze on the street, garden or field.

"At that time I was still fast asleep and suddenly I felt forceful jolts that violently shook my bed. I was shocked and brusquely woken up and immediately ran out of the house." Ali Imran bin Adam, a student, 19 years.

"I was serving some customers in my shop when the earthquake occurred. I was extremely shocked as my commodities started falling down from the racks onto my body. I ran out for fear of being crushed by the possible crumbling shop." Ismail bin Ibrahim, a trader, 28 years.

Hendri Syahputra bin Usman Hanafiah, a young fisherman of 20 years had just anchored his boat from a night of fishing. *"I was having coffee while still in the boat with some friends when the strong earthquake violently rocked the boat, terrifying all of us and the people at the Lampulo fish auction market, Banda Aceh."* Also having coffee was Nazaruddin bin M. Yusuf, a 28-year student who, to support his studies was also a part-time fishmonger. On the way to the same

Lampulo fish auction market he stopped at his friend's coffee shop nearby and was equally terrified when the coffee shop began swaying strongly.

"I was at home doing household chores. As the earthquake was so forceful, like I had never experienced before, I became very scared and together with other members of the family ran out of the house to avoid getting hit by tumbling debris." Rahmawati binti Musa Usma, housewife, 32 years.

"I ran out to the street and just sat down on it in front of my house while clasping my youngest child. Seeing the electric pole nearby shaking so violently I then ran to the edge of the river located about six metres from the house and tumbled down on the embankment. Then I saw my mother running towards me screaming, 'Don't sit on the ground, the dike may burst!' and one moment later she fell breaking her lips." Fitris binti Anwar, a housewife, 25 years.

"When the quake began to shake the earth I ordered my wife to carry our second child and get out of the house while I myself took our first child. We sat down on the street about three metres from an electric pole. There were already many people sitting and standing on the street; some were praying and chanting praises to God, some were screaming hysterically, some were sobbing; adults, teenagers, children, boys and girls, men and women. Then suddenly remembering that my mother-in-law was still in the bathroom, I rushed into the house again and carried her to where the others were." Suryadi bin Ismail, 36 years, a security officer.

Although some of the people had previously already experienced earthquakes, nobody had any prior warning of the forceful earthquake that shook them on that Sunday morning. However, some did have premonitions which seemed to indicate that a terrible disaster was going to happen and would destroy them; but at that time they could not understand the supernatural signs. Most of the forebodings involved children who being relatively more innocent and pure, have always been believed to be more susceptible to see future events which many adults, however, fail to understand.

"One week before the earthquake occurred strange things happened, like my eldest daughter Safira Nadia, 6 years, who kept on nagging to be allowed to bathe in the sea, then a gallon of drinking water which I was placing on the dispenser slipped and fell splashing down, not long after that my parents who lived in the village sent news of a glass jar filled with dried flowers and spices that suddenly exploded without known reasons, and the evening before the tragedy my daughter clung to me not wanting to be separated until well into the night. Were those happenings related to the terrible disaster occurring on Sunday December 26, only God knows." Efendi bin Idris Adami, lecturer, 37 years.

"Since early in the morning my 3-year old son kept crying, saying 'pain, pain' while pointing to the ceiling and climbing on any kind of furniture. His behaviour left me flabbergasted because he had never acted like that before."
Jasmadi bin Muhammad Yatin, farmer, 27 years.

An adult who also had premonitions was Rosmini binti Hamzah, a 40-year housewife who for two subsequent nights had the same rather frightening dream. *"On Friday and Saturday nights before the disaster, I dreamt being chased by a man and I ran all the way from a street in Podiamat village up to Krueng Cut bridge. When I arrived at the bridge the man suddenly stopped chasing me. Because I dreamt the same dream during two successive nights, I told my husband about it but he just brushed aside my concern, saying that dreams were just figments of imaginations during deep sleep"*. When interviewed for the second time some months later Rosmini told us how she was swept away by the waves from her house, passing Podiamat village and was eventually dumped by the waves on a dike at Krueng Cut river-following almost the same route as in her dream when she was chased by an unknown man.

A retired policeman of 66 years, Usman bin Hanafi had a restless night the evening before the disaster. He could not sleep almost the whole night. In the morning after doing the early morning prayer ritual he did his usual morning exercise: running a distance of approximately 2 kilometres from his house. That morning, in spite of having a restless night and insufficient sleep, he ran very fast and felt extremely fit and strong.

Cut Hayaton binti Teuku Banta Linggam, 22 years, a student living at Meuraxa Subdistrict, Banda Aceh, dreamt on the night before the calamity of entering the main mosque of Banda Aceh, Baiturrahman, where she met a female security officer. She asked the officer what kind of function was being held in the mosque, upon which the officer answered that she did not know. Then Hayaton climbed the walls and went up to the second floor of the mosque and on reaching the second floor she saw many people but there was not a particular function going on. People were just there and she also saw a bed on which were two pairs of dresses. Then she woke up. On the following fatal day she found all her siblings safe in the Baiturrahman mosque.

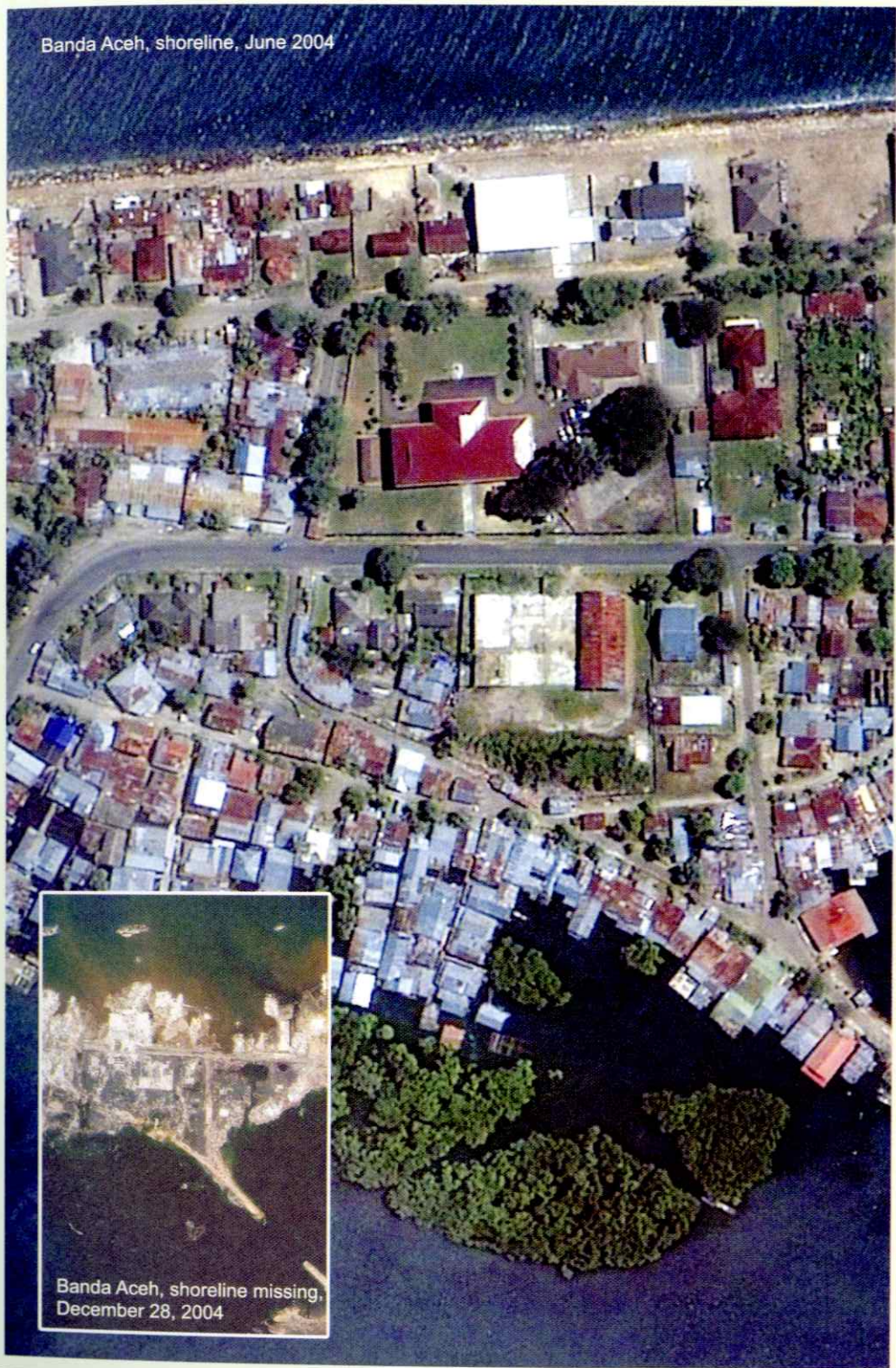
Whether or not those strange events were indeed supernatural premonitions, there were in fact immediately following the earthquake clear physical signs indicating that a more devastating disaster was soon to happen; but many people failed to comprehend the phenomenon's significance of the sea suddenly receding for a mile or two. This warning from nature that huge and destructive tidal waves would soon come sweeping down, instead made people curious and many of them rushed to the seashore, looking in wonder at the twitching and fluttering

fish in their death throes. Some of the people even started to pick up the fish but their joy was short-lived because not long after that disaster struck. The angry sea rushed to shore, obliterating everything and everybody.

Suddenly seeing such unimaginably high waves hurtling towards them at such high speed and force, people panicked and shouting "the sea is rising, the sea is rising" they ran uncoordinatedly to every direction, driven by their primordial urge to preserve their lives. However, nature that Sunday morning seemed determined to show off its might and to expose the vulnerability and mortality of men and animals. Waves between ten and twenty metres high lashed on the beach and well into the land destroying all that was peaceful and happy before: the TSUNAMI started to rage.

**)At present the Islamic law has been officially adopted by the provinces of Aceh and West Sumatra and the regencies of Garut and Cianjur in West Java Province, but only in Aceh province is the Islamic law strictly and comprehensively applied.*

Banda Aceh, shoreline, June 2004



Banda Aceh, shoreline missing, December 28, 2004

DIVINE RETRIBUTION

An earthquake of 8.9 on the Richter scale is indeed a strong hiccup of nature that is bound to produce immense physical damage. It was an earthquake of such magnitude that took place on early morning December 26, 2004 with an epicentrum lying approximately 4 kilometres under the ocean bed near the northern part of Sumatera, 149 kilometres South of Meulaboh, capital of West Aceh. It destroyed many buildings, houses, bridges and other types of man-made structures most significantly in Banda Aceh, the provincial capital and in Meulaboh. It also cracked the land in many places where pools of water soon gushed from below the earth. But it was what occurred soon afterwards, that produced the most destructive tragedy not only because of its great force but more so because it caught many people unaware.

When the earth stopped rocking and the people had somehow recovered from their initial shock, many of them started to clean their houses, collecting their broken furniture and picking up parts of their houses that were torn apart. They seemed determined to resume their rudely shattered routine daily life. Faisal bin Toh Jareh, a fisherman of 34 years who had just bought shrimps from other fishermen when the earthquake occurred, started to put the shrimps into his baskets that were strung together by a rope and half submerged in the sea. Yusri bin M.Ali, 36 years a fish trader resumed his interrupted bargaining with fishermen because he had to buy fish that day as he had already collected the advance money from prospective buyers. Many others even already started to assess the damage to their properties

"As nothing extraordinary happened following the earthquake, I went again into our shophouse to bathe and dress. Then I moved the motorcar and motorcycle out of the shop. I took my wife and youngest child and two workers who were already in the shop to accompany me to see my mother-in-law's house where my other children were staying for the night." A Dahlan bin Hamid, 44 years, reporter, Syiah Kuala Subdistrict, Banda Aceh.

"Together with my sister I was already busy serving customers in our stall in the market when the earthquake occurred. Although I was afterward very worried about my children at home, I did not immediately go home but remained with my sister in our stall looking after our wares." Murhamah binti Ahmad, 32 years, a trader, Meuraxa Subdistrict, Banda Aceh.

"I was in my shack about 200 metres from Uleelheuee beach when the earthquake occurred and not long afterwards I heard a loud bang coming from the beach. I thought it was a bomb and in my heart I remarked why people would explode a bomb right after such a strong quake. Then I remembered the new

house I was building located about 50 metres from my shack and I went to inspect whether or not it was damaged and how severe the damage was. I also went to my mother's house nearby and asked what was damaged. She replied that only the water thermos bottle was broken. " Razi bin Abdul Wahab, 45 years, a government official, Peukan Bada SubdDistrict, Great Aceh Regency.

Most of the people were discussing and debating the forceful earthquake and some of them already expressed their concern that a worse disaster would soon follow. M.Rizal Seurapong, 30 years, a farmer who together with a friend had just cast their fishing nets, remarked "This looks like the day of doom" but his friend strongly disagreed. On the terrace of his house, Dahawan bin Nurdin, 30 years, a trader asked an elderly woman what would happen after such a strong earthquake. She answered that since the earthquake occurred on a Sunday it would mean that many young people would die and added that because of the immense force, the sea might rise and overflow into the land.

Almost all of what the elderly woman said came true for not long after the quake shook the earth, the sea did indeed rise and not only overflowed into the land but did so with such a ferocious intensity that washed, dragged and destroyed everything and everyone. In the province of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (NAD) and Nias island approximately 133,000 people died and another 38,000 missing. The natural phenomenon that occurred immediately after the earthquake, that of the sea suddenly retreating up to a mile or two, was the prologue of the onslaught of big tidal waves, the Tsunami. It started with a series of loud explosions which some people mistook for gunshots which was heard quite regularly in NAD (at that time the peace agreement between the Government of Indonesia and the separatist Free Aceh Movement or GAM was not yet reached and gunshots were a common background sound for the people of Aceh since the mid 1970's) Some even thought it was the sound of warplanes.

"Not long after the earthquake I heard an extremely loud buzzing noise like that of a low flying warplane. The noise came from the sea and was clearly heard because our house was just 700 metres from the shore." Teuku Sajidin bin Teuku Ibrahim, 38 years, secretary of Suaktimah village.

Some people already understood that after such a forceful earthquake the sea would rise, but many others did not quite believe and almost all of them never suspected that it would rise that high and sweep along with such speed and intensity. Consequently they were all extremely shocked and unprepared.

"By Allah, I saw a huge coal black wave rushing to me." Romi Saputra bin Muhammad Lidan, 19 years, a student.

"Rushing from the sea a wave of around twice the height of a coconut tree, black and brimming with smoke at the top sped towards me." Rahmi Marlinda binti Muhammad Agam, 16 years, a student.

"I estimated the waves were rushing at 200 to 250 km per hour." A Dahlan bin Hamid, 44 years, reporter.

Chased by such high waves rushing at such high speed, it was impossible for everybody to escape because it all happened so very fast. Within seconds everybody was whacked down by the water and swept away relentlessly and helplessly by the angry sea. People were rolled over, dragged down to the bottom and seconds later thrown up to the surface only to be dragged down again, toppled over, smashed and tossed up again. They were swept along for miles together with broken walls of buildings and houses, motorcars, torn electric poles and tree trunks, and all sorts of debris. It was indeed an indescribably spiritually and physically painful torture of much violence, blood and broken limbs; and of loved ones being wrenched apart and swallowed by the angry sea.

"Some moments later I emerged from the water but suddenly a big wooden plank hit my head and my body was thrown backwards. It was at that time that my two daughters were wrenched apart from my arms and they drowned in front of my eyes." Nurbahri binti Yahya, 32 years, a teacher, Baiturrahman Subdistrict, Banda Aceh.

"In just a few seconds waves of more than twice the height of coconut trees smacked me down head first, rolling me into the water then spiraling me up and dragging me down several times." Noverizal bin Mahyuddin, 28 years, entrepreneur.

"The big waves hit me from behind and I was wrenched away from my children. I was drowned and rolled by the forceful waves together with all kinds of things like wooden beams, concrete blocks, sheets of zinc, motorcars, motorcycles and people." Jamilah binti Adam, 45 years, housewife.

"The waves hit the house where I was taking refuge and tore the building away from its foundation, and with me trapped inside it the house was milled around several times and after a while I was spewed out of the building. But after just a few minutes in the water I was crushed by a big wooden board that was being swept by the current. Suddenly I saw a mattress floating nearby and I swam towards it and climbed on it. Only then did I noticed that my whole body was covered with bleeding wounds and scratches." Harianto bin Leginem, 18 years, student, Krueng Sabee Subdistrict, Aceh Jaya Regency.

"When we reached what used to be the city's shopping area we saw many dead bodies on the street. Suddenly I was shocked when I saw my friend kissing a dead girl and was considerably moved when he told me that the dead girl was his own sister. Shutting my eyes and holding back my tears I murmured, 'Oh Allah, oh my Lord'". Nazaruddin bin M.Yusuf, 28 years, a student, Baiturrahman Subdistrict, Banda Aceh.

For most of the survivors, what they experienced was regarded as a divine, supernatural ordeal, a kind of profane purgatorial torture, through which they had, only by the Mercy of Allah, survived.

"I had run for just about a hundred metres when I was whacked down by the waves from behind which sucked me down and milled my body under the water until I was hurtled up to a hill with coconut trees. I grabbed a tree and climbed up. The water rose speedily. After I had climbed about half way, a second wave hit me this time from the front. The current was so strong that my feet clasping the trees were wrenched apart. I was ripped completely naked and had only my 'sarong' which I then wrapped around my neck. I desperately tried to cling to the tree and kept on climbing up. When the third wave swept down I was already at the top of the coconut tree, about twenty-five metres high.

I heard calls for prayer echoing from mosques and prayer-houses prompting me to also sound the call for prayer. Then the fourth wave hit me but it was not as forceful as the previous ones. Suddenly I heard somebody crying for help; it turned out it was my nephew who could not continue climbing up to the tree top. I told him to tie his body to the tree and as he was wearing a sarong he managed to do that.

In a while I saw the fifth wave rushing, it was the biggest from all the other previous waves and I thought that my time had come. Fortunately the wave never broke nor surged to the shore of the hill where I was and with the receding calls for prayer the wave also began to retreat to the sea.

When the sixth wave arrived, I saw three fishing boats carried along by the waves; one of the boats hit a coconut tree, broke up and sank down while the other two passed the trees undamaged. The seventh wave came but was not as huge as the others. After I estimated that the water was more or less two metres deep I decided to swim to the coconut tree where my nephew had tied himself and I tied him with a rope I found floating around. Then I returned to the tree on the hill and slowly dragged my nephew asking him to hold tightly to the rope as he could not swim.

A few moments later a boat came up to us and the people helped us climb into the boat while at the same time the eighth wave came up, very slowly and not so high but the water was coal black and full with foam. The boat took us to Cot Ploh." Samsuddin bin Waki Tam, 39 years, a farmer.

"When I saw the rushing water turn into my direction I could only pray and leave everything in the hands of Allah. I could do nothing since both my legs became lame some sixteen years ago. Together with my house I was dragged by the water and shortly after that I was unconscious.

When I regained consciousness I found myself floating with the help of some wooden debris next to a two-storey house where a friend of mine was already on the balcony. He shoved a wooden plank to me and with his help I managed to drag my lame body to where he stood. But not long afterwards a much bigger wave hit us and together with all the furniture of the house both of us were washed away and twirled around by the rushing waves and flung into the open sea.

My head was above the water while my whole body was limply dangling under the water, with my both arms I embraced a wooden beam. For several hours I floated in that position in the open sea. I felt very calm and had no fear at all; I only felt very cold. Around 1 pm I was saved by a fishing boat that happened to be in the open sea when the disaster occurred.

When the fishermen told me the position of the boat I realized that I had been carried away by the waves for about seven kilometres and that I had been in and out the sea several times. Then I asked them to deliver me to the Army or Police because I was certain that both security forces were busy helping the victims. I was eventually handed over to a warship and was taken to Sabang port where they put me in the Naval hospital, although I suffered no serious wounds.

About three weeks later somebody from my area came to Sabang and I was allowed to return to my place with him. The Navy hospital people said that should I fail to find anybody of my family, I could then give them a call and I was welcome to return to the hospital. I thanked them most profoundly for their concern. But I did find my father and brother although I lost all the others." Erwin bin Amirudin, 30 years, unemployed, Meuraxa Subdistrict, Banda Aceh.



I could do nothing since both my legs became lame some sixteen years ago

"When the water subsided until about the waist of an adult, I decided to walk back to my house. I had not walked far when I saw a velvet-covered box of about 30cm x 30cm floating following me. I took and opened it and was shocked to find diamond rings, gold bracelets and necklaces inside. I was very much afraid that the jewelry would turn into snakes, so I quickly closed the box and let it float in the water again. Then my feet touched something and when I retrieved it, I saw it was two plastic bags full with banknotes of Rp. 50,000. I sensed that I was again being tested and that if I took the money I would not survive so I released back the two plastic bags into the water." Ramalisa Mutia binti Mustafa, 23 years, student, Syiah Kuala Subdistrict, Banda Aceh.

"Although I was dragged with great speed by the rushing water and the swiftly swirling debris, I was very much conscious when the water smashed me against the wall of a house. I was able to place myself in such a position that both my feet pointed to the wall so I was able to prevent being crushed against the wall. Then I was swept around the house and within a few minutes the house was hammered by the angry sea and just collapsed. I found myself trapped and squeezed by timber boards and sucked under the water; three times I swallowed water which tasted very bitter and burnt in my stomach.

While still under water I was dragged further still at great speed but suddenly I came to a rest like in a sort of limbo and my body was not moving at all. I looked up and saw daylight so I struggled upwards and succeeded to reach the surface; it was then that my head struck a nail and felt a shearing pain running from my neck to my forehead. My feet didn't touch soil so I treaded water and started to scream for help but nobody seemed to hear me. I was under a big pile of debris.

I violently shook a piece of zinc roof and after about ten minutes somebody who was looking for survivors noticed me and dragged me out of the rubbish. He laid me down on the timber and debris that before pinned me down under the water. I felt I broke some of my ribs. After shortly resting on the debris, I felt extremely hungry and thirsty. But I thank Allah that I survived although later I discovered that I lost my wife and two daughters." Muzakkir bin Yakub, 35 years, not-yet-appointed local government official, Meuraxa Subdistrict, Banda Aceh.

THE PRESENCE OF POWER OF ALLAH

Going through and eventually surviving the terrible ordeal made the victims more acutely aware of and closer to the presence and power of the Almighty. Many of them were also reminded of their sins, of their vulnerability and of being just helpless and mortal beings. At the initial stages when they were hit by the huge black ocean wall most of them thought it was the end of the world and of their lives, and when they were being rolled, dragged and tossed by the waves many of them resigned their souls into the merciful hands of Allah and it was because of their strong belief in the Almighty and their acceptance of whatever Allah deigned to give to them, come what may come, that their lives were spared.

"I stopped running and still strongly holding my son I surrendered myself to Allah while clinging unto a coconut tree. I saw my parents' house hit by the waves and still with my parents in it the house was swept away. My son asked, 'Mama what is this? Rifal is afraid Mama, where is daddy?' I only answered, 'Son, this is the end of the world, and this is the time we must part, maybe at the other end we will meet each other again'.

Just after I finished talking, the waves hit us again throwing me a few metres away and I was squeezed between wooden boards and trees and got caught under the debris. My son whom I had previously strongly held to my body was torn away and forcefully thrown against an electric pole. I saw him floating among the debris waving his arms to me and calling, 'Mama, Mama' but I could not help him and only managed to say, 'Mama cannot help you now my son, if Allah wills it, you will be safe but if Allah has other plans, do wait for Mama overthere'." Cut Nila Sartika Dewi binti T.M. Jalil, 35 years, a housewife.

"When I regained consciousness I found myself afloat at sea; I must have been swept by the retreating tide. As I was floating along with broken building walls and wooden boards, I tried to collect some wooden boards to keep me afloat. Suddenly I felt at the tips of my feet a spiraling sucking whirlpool of wooden blocks, and I broke my leg

My body was suddenly dragged down into the water. I kept on trying to raise my head above the water surface while in my heart I kept on saying 'Allahhuakbar' (God is Great – ed.) and suddenly I was lifted up until my head rose above the water and I was dumped on a pile of wooden debris. Then I lost consciousness for the second time and only woke up around noon. I found myself afloat on the debris in the middle of the sea among waste and other materials." Nanda binti Zaini, 31 years. Entrepreneur. (When interviewed again a few months after she related her story, Nanda elaborated that when she was sucked down into the water she evoked the name of Allah several times, and each time

after she called out the name of Allah she managed to raise her head a few centimetres above the water and this she repeated a number of times until finally her whole head was above the water. ed.)

"I was continuously being tossed and rolled by the water but all the time I strongly clasped my son to my body. Sometime afterwards something hard hit my ribs and I was seized by a terrible pain and unfortunately at the same time my son Rohid was wrenched apart from me. At that time I thought that all my children and also my wife were already dead and that soon I too would be dead

Involuntarily I gulped some of the seawater. I lost the will and courage to save myself, 'why should I live now that my wife and children are already dead', I said to myself. Somehow, as if somebody was pushing me up, I found myself suddenly floating between all kind of debris and I realized, Allah still wanted me to live, my time had not yet come." Supardi bin Darsi, 30 years, entrepreneur.

"I was tossed up to the surface many times and dragged down again but I didn't lose consciousness and desperately I tried to control myself and not to gulp the dirty water. In my heart I kept thinking of Allah and chanted praises to Allah. All the time I never thought of my family and instead was only thinking and suffering the painful tormenting ordeal, and was fighting against the muddy water that kept rushing to me at such a high speed." Syamsuddin bin Ali, 55 years, an office messenger.

"I was being dragged by the current until my body was smacked to a big mangrove tree. Pieces of wood and debris kept pushing against my body from all directions. I was frightened that I would experience a long enduring torment and thought that it would be much preferable to die quickly and so I deliberately drank the dirty and oily water until four times so I may quickly die. The water felt salty and very sticky in my throat. But I did not die and so I put my life into the hands of Allah. Whatever would happen to me, Allah, I accepted." Surya Darma bin Abdul Manaf, 21 years, a fisherman.

"I was smashed again by the waves and dragged down to the muddy bottom, then was pushed again to the surface and found myself floating in a rubber plantation, stuck to a fallen tree. Suddenly my wife emerged in front of me still holding our son who was already dead. I told her to release our son because he was already dead so she could have more chances to save herself. My wife just kept looking at me silently and did not let the body of our son go. Suddenly a coconut tree struck and pinned me and also my wife. I tried to push her away from the tree but instead she just catapulted away and was swallowed by the sea.

I was in great pain and I said in my heart, "Oh Allah, don't take my soul now in the water, take it when my body is again on shore' and somehow I managed to free myself from the tree that was pinning me down. I was then dragged towards the sea and while being rushed I saw a tree which was still standing.

I grabbed it and climbed up to the top. Then I saw an otter swimming towards the same tree and I said, 'Hi otter come here quickly and climb the tree, perhaps only both of us are safe.' Teuku Sajidin bin Teuku Ibrahim, 38 years, secretary of Suaktimah Village.

"Still clinging to the round piece of wood I was sucked down to the bottom of the filthy water for about five minutes and was then spewed up again together with the piece of wood which I still strongly clasped to my breast. The pain was unbearable and I thought such must be the pain when your soul was being wrenched away from your body, like what was written in the Quran." M.Rizal Seurapong, 30 years, a farmer.

"When the water lifted me up, my hair got caught by something. I could not release it and I remained under water and swallowed quite a lot of water. In my heart I said, 'Allah, if Thou wish to take my soul now, I am prepared and just take it and don't let me suffer like this'. Suddenly I was free and my head emerged from the surface but I was kept being rolled over by the waves until my neck was caught by an electric cable and I stopped being dragged away by the water.

I then dived below the cable and managed to free myself and continued being swept by the still rushing sea until I was dumped at a two storey house. Soon a pile of broken walls and wooden beams surrounded me and pressed me against the house. From my neck down to my feet I was pinned by the onrushing debris. There was nobody else around me.

Suddenly a very big wave rolled towards me and I thought my time had come. I was dragged down under the water and could not reach the surface because something heavy pinned me down. Again I swallowed a lot of water and I was in great pain; my throat ached terribly because of swallowing the black water. I implored Allah to swiftly take my soul. But suddenly I felt as if somebody was lifting me upwards to the surface, and the current took me to another house where I grabbed the iron gate and in the end with the help of a man I knew I managed to climb on the roof where a number of people had already assembled." Fitria binti Anwar, 25 years, a housewife, Syiah Kuala Subdistrict, Banda Aceh.

"With my chin above the water and the rest of my body submerged in a squatting position, I was dragged by the current. Above my head a pile of heavy debris was pushing down my head while the current below was pushing me up. I was strongly squeezed and suffered great pain. I screamed, 'Allah, I can no longer bear it, please take my soul'. I truly felt that my time had already come but suddenly another wave swept me along and I was free. My whole body was injured, the worse were my temples and calves. I am saved but the Tsunami took my wife and all my children." Di Irwan bin Di Ajis, 32 years, a driver, Meuraxa Subdistrict, Banda Aceh.

"At that time I was able to push my head above the water surface while the rest of my body and legs were underwater, pinned by timber boards and

broken trees. Then I saw a fishing boat floating not far from me, near Medan Hotel. The boat was pushed by the waves and finally stranded against the building. I ripped and tore off my clothes and managed to free myself from the clutching boards and trees and climbed on the wooden debris. Then by strongly grasping the fishing net dangling from the boat I hoisted myself up on the boat.

In the boat I just sat and looked around while continuously chanting the confession of the Islamic faith and thinking of all the sins I had committed and for which I had not yet asked forgiveness. Sometimes I also thought about my 8-year old son and wondered where he was. For about an hour I remained sitting in the boat with a completely blank mind, not understanding what had exactly happened." Darmiati binti Adam, a 35-year housewife, Kuta Raja Subdistrict, Banda Aceh.

"While being rolled down by the waves I never stopped asking Allah's forgiveness for all the sins and wrong deeds I had committed. I was convinced that my time had come. While swallowing the dirty water several times I kept on trying to free myself from the crushing waves and only by the Grace of Allah I managed to surge to the water surface where I could breathe normally." Suardi Fajri bin Samsul, 18 years, a student, Baitussalam Subdistrict, Greater Aceh.

Most of what the survivors had gone through were indeed unbelievable and some could even be termed as miracles where the intervening hand of The Almighty was most evident. Take the case of Aisyah binti Ahmad, a grandmother at the very old age of 102 years who despite being dragged, drowned and catapulted several times by the raging water for several kilometres, managed to survive the ordeal. When she saw the waves rushing to her compound she did not retreat into the house but quickly step in the wooden gazebo her children had built in the garden. The strong waves easily pulled the wooden structure off from its



The old woman strongly clung to one of the wooden beams . and remained on board the wooden structure

foundation and swept it away and over the one and a half metres high compound wall together with Grandma Aisyah in it. The old woman strongly clung to one of the wooden beams and remained on board the wooden structure which was dragged through, up and down the water like a rudderless rowboat until it was finally smashed apart. She was then rolled down by the black water for approximately one kilometer all the time clinging to a piece of wooden beam.

"When I was tossed about by the water, I didn't think of anything or anyone in particular. I surrendered my soul into the hands of Allah. For several hundred metres I was three times spiraled up and sucked down but I remained unharmed and didn't feel any pain. I was then tossed to some floating debris and managed to stand up. Eventually two students swam to me and they carried me to safety. My clothes were also still intact although I only had a sarong and a traditional 'kebaya' on my body. On the other hand I saw many people completely naked, their clothes torn away or just shreds clinging to their bodies." Grandma Aisyah binti Ahmad, 102 years and still very much alive, Syiah Kuala Subdistrict, Banda Aceh.

Postgraduate lecturer Nurdasila binti Darsono at the University of Syiah Kuala can until today not understand how a two-meter high brick wall collapsed towards her but didn't squash her down and instead she found herself lying flat on her stomach on the wall. She was eventually saved.

Then there is the story of young Taha Yasin bin Ilyas, 11 years, an elementary school pupil.

"Together with wooden boards, zinc roofs and all kinds of debris I was rolled over by the waves; sometimes my head was up, many times my feet were

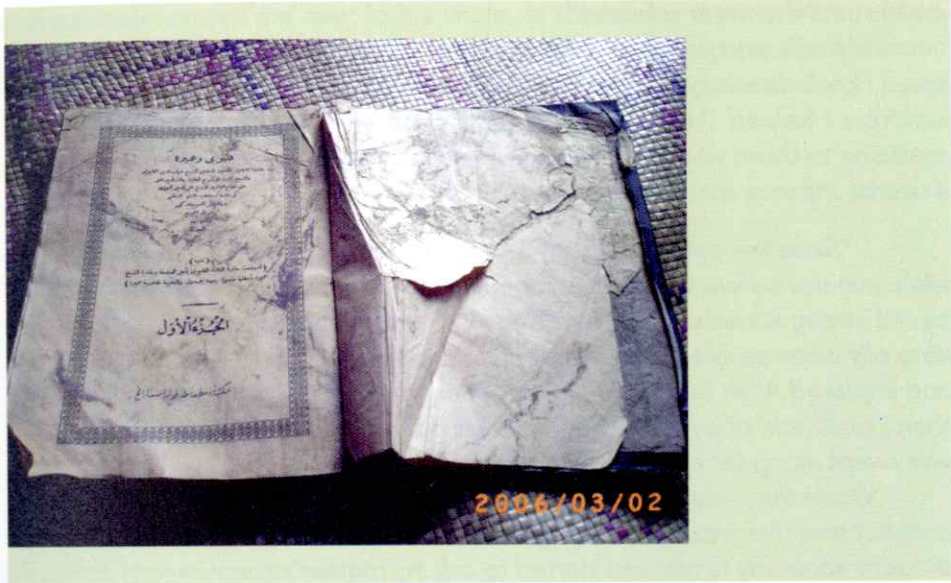


I saw quite a thick book floating among the debris and Thank Allah, I succeeded to grab it.

up. All the time I tried to break through the surface and after a while, Thank Allah, I was able to float with my head above the water. Looking around me I saw among the several items floating nearby a pillow which I then grabbed. Then I felt being swept towards the open sea where soon I was floating with the pillow clasped in my arms.

Feeling that the pillow became filled with water and was slowly drowning I started to look for other bigger and firmer things that would help me keep afloat. Not long afterwards I saw quite a thick book floating among the debris and Thank Allah, I succeeded to grab it.

When I looked closer at the book I saw that it was a book of prayers and religious verses and suddenly I felt my strength returned and felt no more fear. Soon after I also found many cartons of drinking liquid with which I assuaged my scorching thirst. When the water had finally receded I gingerly walked among the many dead bodies, still clasping the book. For more than ten days I held the book close to me." (The book is now still with young Taha and curious enough, on the inside cover was written that the book was printed by a printing firm in Central Java, by the name of Tahaputra, or 'Young Taha')



Grandma Halimatussakdiah binti Syam, 75 years, who was working in the coconut field when the earthquake happened, quickly went back to her house and joined her husband and her son who not long afterwards arrived with his wife and four children. They decided to flee in her son's motorcar but could not drive for long because another motorcar was blocking their way. While still inside the car they were eventually swept by the waves and were soon riding the waves like in a boat for about 500 metres. "Suddenly the car stranded smoothly on the roof of a house with all the eight of us still inside and unhurt. But soon the next wave arrived and hurtled the roof with the car on it for several hundred metres and not long after that the car sank and all of us landed on the roof and was then

tossed about in the strong current. Although all of us were swept and hit several times by the fierce waves we managed to remain on the roof and survived the ordeal totally exhausted and wounded. About noon we and several other people were rescued and evacuated by a team from the Indonesian Armed Forces."

Sahdan Marpaung, 40 years, from Samatiga Subdistrict, West Aceh, a member of the Indonesian Armed Forces was surprised that he could float along although fully dressed in combat attire, wearing heavy army boots and holding a heavy rifle and his daughter. "While being swept and tossed about by the waves I kept holding my daughter strongly in my arms while continuously saying 'Lailahailallah' (there is no God except Allah – ed) and suddenly we both were thrown on top of a tree that was also being swept by the current. There were however two cobra snakes on the tree which made my daughter screamed with fear. I calmed her down and we both remained on the tree together with the snakes until the water subsided.

My wife and son also survived and knowing that my whole family were saved I knelt down and deeply thanked Allah. Afterwards together with the other survivors I helped the victims. We gave cloth to those who were naked and medicine to those who were wounded and helped the people to take refuge in a nearby mosque that was still erect."

"Since the water hit and swept me, I didn't see any of my family members while minutes before we were all together. When I was being rotated and milled by the strong waves with my feet shackled by wooden boards, and gulping the dirty oily water several times, I kept on asking forgiveness to Allah for all my sins and implored Allah to quickly take my soul. I truly wished to be dead soon. But then I took hold of a rather wide wooden board and I strongly held onto it and was swept along for about one and a half hours.

When the water finally subsided and was only knee-deep, I leaned on a coconut tree that was still standing erect. I felt sick and vomited and suddenly I thought about my family and started to call my mother's name several times. To my utter surprise my mother appeared not far from me and almost immediately I also saw my father emerging from under a pile of debris. All my brothers and sisters also survived and we embraced each other crying and thanking Allah for His Mercy." Sharla Emilda binti Muhammad, 19 years, a student, Teunom Subdistrict, Aceh Jaya.

Mysterious and unexplainable things also happened like what was experienced by 12-year Raina Parmitalia Dinda binti Syarifuddin. "While standing outside our house I was hit by the water with such a force that swept me into the house again where the water quickly rose. Inside the house I saw a mattress floating and with great difficulty, because of my broken arm, I managed to climb on it. When the water subsequently calmed down, and I saw several people

already walking on the muddy street, I went out of my house to look for possible surviving family members and friends.

Suddenly an old man wearing white clothes, a white turban around his head and carrying a fishing net approached me and asked me to join him. I refused, saying that I still had a grandmother in Rukoh village upon which the man answered that nobody in that village survived and asked me to follow him to another village. I looked closely at the man and saw that he was completely dry unlike all of us who at that time were completely soaked. The man had two parcels of rice, one of which he gave to me and sensing he was quite alright I finally joined him.

On our way we met my uncle who was unharmed because before the earthquake happened he was already away from the village. The old man immediately handed me over to my uncle, as if knowing that we were related. Before my uncle could thank him, the old man was already gone which seemed to me rather strange as he had just seconds ago stood beside us".

The principal Mosque in Banda Aceh after the Tsunami



STRANGE ENCOUNTERS

Besides human beings, animals were also swept and milled by the angry sea and encounters of a curious nature between man and animals occurred in the churning sea.

"I was thrown against a huge tree and hemmed in by debris. Then about two metres from me I saw a big snake, about the size of a young nut tree, approaching me with its mouth already open. I said in a loud voice, 'Hi snake, you are also Allah's creature like me, and we both want to save ourselves.' The snake stopped for a second and then moved away.

When I then wanted to climb the tree, I saw another equally big snake staring down on me; the snake looked more ferocious and ready to strike at me. I said the same words which made the snake turn away and it quickly slithered up to the top of the tree." Dahawan bin Nurdin, 30 years, entrepreneur, Syiah Kuala Subdistrict, Banda Aceh.

Many of the survivors had similar stories.

"When I was floating in the water, I saw among the debris surrounding me a vehicle inner tube floating towards me. Not long after it came near enough for me to grab it and for about an hour after that I was able to keep myself afloat by strongly clinging to that tube. After a while I gradually felt the tube wriggling, and realized how slippery and rather soft it was, then suddenly from below the murky water a strange thing surfaced and after a few seconds I realized that it was the head of a snake with its mouth open ready to swallow me. I was extremely shocked and terrified and spontaneously pushed away the animal. But the animal kept pushing me towards a floating boat then suddenly disappeared." Jamilah binti Adam, 45 years, housewife.

"Together with heaps of debris and waste I was dragged to the back of a government building, where I was squeezed against the wall with only my head above the water which I estimated was about six metres deep. In that awkward position I suddenly felt something slithering against my groin. The thing felt slippery and spongy. Because of my unfortunate position and especially because



I suddenly felt something slithering against my groin

of the strong current, I just grabbed and clung to the strange thing which started to move against the current towards an iron tower that supported a water tank. When I had a closer look at the thing that carried me to the tower, I realized it was a snake but I wasn't afraid and the animal seemed not unfriendly. Indeed it seemed as if the snake deliberately helped me reach the tower which I immediately grab and when I looked down, the snake had already disappeared." Addli bin Muhammad, 50 years, a gardener, one leg suffering from elephantiasis.

"I was swept by the current into the kitchen of a house where I grabbed the iron bars of a window and for about half an hour I was able to keep my head above the surface. All the time I was praying and reciting the Islamic articles of faith and chanting praises to Allah. Suddenly two snakes appeared from below the water; one slithered from my left armpit to my fingers and the other did the same from my right armpit. I was frightened and wondered whether they were real snakes or incarnated beings. In a steady voice I said to them, 'we are all servants of Allah' and soon afterwards the snakes disappeared." Rohana binti Hasbi, 31 years. an elementary school teacher

"When I regained consciousness I got hold of a piece of wood floating nearby. Suddenly the water churned and dragged me towards the open sea where I was pushed towards a broken building full of human corpses. I got hold of a bunch of debris which kept me afloat. When I tried to touch the bottom of the building with my feet I stepped on the head of a corpse that was stuck between the fallen building walls. For several hours afterwards I hang onto the floating debris of waste where a monitor lizard had in the meantime settled, clinging also for its life. Instead of being afraid I talked to the animal for some time but could not remember what I said." Fetty Erlina binti Alwi Ibrahim, 22 years, student.

The encounters with animals, especially with wild animals, are indeed strange and almost unnatural in that those animals seemed to have lost their predatory instinct. In such a horrific circumstance human beings and animals alike became merely vulnerable creatures of God. It was as if a primordial bond was remembered and they became united by the same catastrophe that descended upon them.

Suryadi bin Ismail, 36 years, a security officer at the Lampulo fish market, Banda Aceh told how after praying to Allah he could safely walk past a row of 15 monitor lizards that were just lying on the bank of a fishing pond. He also reminisced *"Arriving on the rooftop I knelt down and prayed, 'Allah I have lost my children, my wife and quite a quantity of belongings, but Allah, I have not lost Thou."* After I finished my prayer, two white turtledoves nestled in front of me and allowed me to caress them; as if they wanted to tell me that I was not alone."

REGRETTABLE BEHAVIOUR

Thrown suddenly into such a terrible catastrophe of extraordinary proportions that obliterated normal responses, it is not unusual for people to react in many strange and unnatural ways, sometimes unfortunately also irresponsibly, like plundering and pillaging. But many were able to resist the temptation.

"The next morning after the disaster I walked to town and saw people taking things that belonged to other people. They argued, 'Since we have nothing anymore, we are forced to take other people's things.' I saw people took gold, clothes and other things. I myself found a plastic bag with new clothes and since the clothes on my body were torn apart I took one and wore it, I also took a piece of sarong which was wrapped around a corpse. Before taking the sarong I said to the corpse, 'Excuse me, I take this sarong to cover my nakedness because for me the laws of decency still apply whereas they don't apply to you anymore."
Daniel Ermanda bin R.M.Daud, 21 years, student.

"I realized that the jeans I was wearing was torn along the whole length of my thigh and seeing some pairs of trousers hanging around the house where I was swept into, I hesitantly took a pair and changed in one of the rooms. The house had several rooms where I saw many luxurious things like mobile phones, walkman, computers, a refrigerator, television and many other furniture. I saw many people unconcernedly plundering those items." Ramalia Mutia binti Mustafa, 23 years, a student.

"I heard two men near me busy trying desperately to retrieve their car which was thrown under another car, and remembered the words of my religious teacher saying, 'on the day of doom, people will be busy looking for their beloved earthly belongings'.

Then on my way from the Great Mosque Baiturrahman I saw many people plundering things from the broken shops. I could even hear them say to each other, 'this is my area, you must look for another area and don't be afraid, today all the things will be sold', meaning all the things will be cleaned up by them. Near the mosque I also saw people taking away other people's motorcycles.

I must confess that I also took a pair of brand new sport shoes but they were already on the street; I did not take them from a store and I took them because I was completely barefoot and had to walk for miles to where my house was." Murhamah binti Ahmad, 32 years, entrepreneur, Meuraxa Subdistrict, Banda Aceh.

There are indeed many stories going around of people hacking off hands and fingers from the mutilated bodies before the corpses were buried, plundering gold rings, bracelets and other jewelries, but it was mostly done by people coming from outside the stricken area. The majority of people of Banda Aceh, Meulaboh and other towns that had been destroyed by the Tsunami did not participate in such unlawful and barbaric actions because they strongly believed that such actions were not only sinful in the eyes of Allah, but would also bring misfortune to them one way or another.

COMRADESHIP IN DESOLATION

Thrown suddenly into such horrendous calamity, the primeval instinct for self survival emerged in everybody and became the force that guided and propelled them to their safety. Naturally and understandably, people did become selfish but at the same time many also became inspired by the atmosphere of desperate solidarity that seemed to surround them and willingly extended a helping hand to their fellow victims. Yusri bin M.Ali, a fish trader of 36 years and possessing only one leg (he lost his left leg in an accident years ago) managed to help several people to safety. When he saw several children helplessly clinging to a tree he became very sad because he knew he could not help them all and had to make a difficult choice. Seeing that one of them, a boy of around 4 years old, kept on saying 'Lailaha Illallah' (there's no God other than Allah) he decided to pick the boy who then desperately and with great fright kept clinging to his neck as they were swept away by the sea. Eventually they managed to climb up the roof of a mosque and joined a crowd of survivors who were already there. Here is his story:

"Around 2 pm I saw the water had already subsided exposing quite a number of corpses in deplorable conditions. On the roof of the mosque I held the child upside down a few times and shook his body to drip the dirty water out from his body. I even sucked out water and mud from his nostrils before we finally fell asleep. When we woke up some time later, many of the people had already left the rooftop.

I then decided that it was time for us to descend from the mosque's roof and I tossed the child up into the air while at the same time I jumped down into the water which was about one metre deep, and caught the child. I did that because with just one leg if we jumped together, I reckoned I might fall or the child might hit something and be drowned. After catching him in my arms I put him on my back and started to swim until I reached a place where the water was only a few centimetres deep. Then I crawled further because I could not walk, having only one leg. After dragging my body with the child on my back for some twenty minutes we met a Chinese man who gave us some cookies and water.



Then I crawled further because I could not walk, having only one leg

Then I handed the child to somebody from my village. The man carried the child until we reached a road intersection where he put down the child. At that time we heard rumours that the sea was rising again and everybody started to run, leaving everything behind them. I could certainly not leave the child behind and carried him again on my back. It was only at that time that I suddenly remembered my own family at home about whom I never gave a thought since the outbreak of the tsunami in the morning until that afternoon.

At that time I already got hold of a bicycle and after paddling with one leg for some time, we finally reached my village and stopped on a football field. Suddenly my wife and my three children appeared. I was so overwhelmed with joy and totally surprised, and then I lost consciousness.

The next morning I and my whole family evacuated to another village, taking along the child I rescued; indeed I took him everywhere I and my family went. Three days before *Idul Adha*, (the day of ritual offering in remembrance to Abraham asked by Allah to offer his own son *Ismail*), which was some weeks after the tsunami, the child was collected by his father. When he was taken to his son, the father stared speechlessly at the child for a few minutes, then fainted. Afterwards he told us that he had lost his wife and all the other members of his family whose remains he had already buried except this child. In his loneliness and not knowing whether or not this child survived, he became extremely stressful. He was naturally very happy that he had finally found his only surviving son.

I sincerely returned the child to his father. As a sign of gratitude the man wanted to give me some money which I politely refused. After all we had endured the same disaster; moreover it was not me who saved the child but Allah. Perhaps, if I didn't save the child, I too would not survive this terrible ordeal.

Some months afterwards a foreign NGO donated me a motorcycle which was already modified to my physical condition."

"From the hill where I stood I saw a number of people being dragged away by the strong current into the direction of the sea. They were sitting and clinging on wooden planks and mattresses, all screaming for help. I felt I had to do something, so when I saw a length of electric wire being swept by the current I snatched it and at one end I tied a jerrycan for them to hold but they were too far away and the wire was only about 10 metres long. Helplessly I watched them carried away to the sea. Suddenly a child of about 11 years was flung by the waves and fell some metres from where I was standing. I tossed the jerrycan to him and managed to drag the child to safety." Junaidi bin Zakaria, 29 years.

"After desperately trying hard I succeeded to break through the water surface where a lot of debris and garbage were floating, and grabbed a tree trunk where a boy of around 16 years was already sitting. As I was about to climb on the tree trunk I suddenly heard the voice of a girl imploring me to help her. I told her to hang on while I climbed and assured her that I would then help her. 'I'm so afraid' the girl said. 'I know, I too am afraid, but please wait.' With the help of the boy already on the tree trunk I managed to sit on the tree, then took the girl's hand and pulled her also on the tree. The three of us were rushed along Krueng Aceh river heading to Pante Perak bridge. A few moments later I saw a boy of about 12 years old floating near us on a pillow. I held out a tree branch which he immediately grabbed and he too eventually climbed on our tree." Zufriza bin M.Amin, 19 years, student.

"There were already two people on the tamarind tree; they were very badly hurt, their legs were broken and there was not a shred of cloth on their bodies. I immediately gave them my shirt although I had then only my trousers. Together we then awaited the water to subside." Irfansyah bin Daud, 20 years, student.

"Squeezed and dragged among the rushing timber boards, I desperately tried to avoid being hit by onrushing boards and in my heart I prayed, 'Allah please help me. If Thou wish me to survive, give me the strength to extricate myself from these boards'. Suddenly I could drag out one leg from the wooden boards, and I said, 'Thank You Allah' and in a while I managed to also drag the other leg and was then completely free from the wooden boards.

Afterwards I sat on a pile of floating garbage and began to recite the Yasin verse, (chapter 37 of the Koran often read while someone is dying), I also recited the confession of faith and kept on praising Allah. Moments later I heard the voices of people who were looking for bodies of their relatives. I called out to them. The pile of garbage I was sitting on was about one and a half metres high. At that time I had lost my sarong and was wearing only my blouse. I asked them to give me clothes and they handed me a towel which I wrapped around my waist. I was then taken down by them from the garbage pile." Syaribanun binti Idris, 42 years, farmer.

"When I reached the surface I saw a motorcar being swept by the current at great speed towards me. I prayed, 'Allah, please don't let the car hit me' and I was suddenly sucked down the water thus avoiding being hit by the car. I was then swept by the waves, up and down the water for quite sometime, before I fainted.

When I regained consciousness I found myself among a pile of wooden boards and building debris; only my head and arms were above the water while my body and legs were pinned by wooden and concrete debris. Slowly I was being sucked downwards and my neck felt like being strangled making me difficult to breathe. I submitted myself to Allah and was already prepared to die, praying that the Almerciful would accept whatever few good deeds I had performed in my life.

Suddenly I heard the voice of a young man calling out, 'Don't give up sister, keep your strength, I'm coming to help you.' He then crawled on the wooden planks and debris and when he reached me, he took my right arm and with great difficulty managed to drag me up from the wooden boards and concrete debris that pinned me down. I never saw the young man again and can only hope that he too survived." Nurbahri bin Yahya, 32 years, a teacher, Punge District, Banda Aceh.

"I climbed half way up the floating wall, my face and torso on it and the lower part of my body submerged in the water. I spread my arms and felt extremely weak. Lying prostrate on the wall I saw a dog and a cow not far from me; both animals were looking at me with imploring eyes. The body of a young girl came floating by and got caught among the debris. There were also some dead bodies floating around me. Then I also saw a boy of around 6 years sitting on the ruins of a building, his head and cheeks covered with blood. Two women were clutching on a tall tree and a little girl was swimming while clasping a pillow. They were all calling out for help.

'Patience, patience,' I said, 'I must first regain my strength.' Suddenly a young man swam to me and asked whether I was a heart patient and when I denied he then said that we should help those people now. I repeated that I must first regain my strength but then realized that I should not delay helping them and remembered how some minutes before when I was being sucked down by the water I implored Allah to save me so that I could save other people.

So, together with the young man I helped the people around me: the little girl holding the pillow, the two women hanging on the tree, the little wounded boy. I put the little girl's body on a higher pile of ruins." A. Dahlan bin Hamid, 44 years, a reporter, Syiah Kuala Subdistrict, Banda Aceh.

"While swimming with the help of a wooden board towards the hills I saw a young woman of around 23 years standing on a pile of debris, completely naked. She asked me to save her and find her some clothes. Since I could not find any clothes I gave her the wooden board to cover her nakedness and while swimming dragged her to a floating tree.

I then continued swimming and just before reaching the hills I met a boy of around 5 years sitting on a pile of debris, crying for help. I was at that time already very exhausted and weak and thought that I might not be able to reach the hills if I also helped the boy. But then I thought if I didn't help him he might be an incarnated angel so I decided to help the boy. Strangely enough he was not wet at all and was still fully dressed. I asked him whether he could swim and he answered that he could not.

So I took him along with me and continued swimming. But after about 100 metres the water suddenly and swiftly ebbed away, dragging me and the boy under piles of debris. I nearly let him lose but then said in my heart, rather than release the child let me die together with him if my time had already come. Suddenly we both were swept free from the debris and we eventually reached the hills. There were already many people on the hills, including my wife. In the end I lost my two children, parents, grandparents and a number of close relatives." Jasmidi bin Muhammad Yatin, 27 years, a farmer, Sampoiniet Subdistrict, Aceh Jaya Regency.

"While on the tree I saw a mother and her son being swept away by the rushing current. They were crying out, 'Help, help...' Not long afterwards they got stuck on a pile of wooden boards but then suddenly both disappeared before I could do anything. Soon they suddenly emerged from under the black water just two metres from where they disappeared. I and another man climbed down the tree and rescued the child first then the mother and put them also on the tree." Dedi Yusman bin M. Yusuf, 20 years, student, Johan Pahlawan Subdistrict, West Aceh.

"After being swept away by the remorselessly angry sea I was eventually hooked on a sago palm tree of about 15 metres high. From up the tree I saw people walking on the street and I cried for help. A man answered, 'Can't help you yet because the water is still deep, there's no boat'. For about fifteen minutes I remained on the tree top, crying. Then two men swam to me and one of them put me on his shoulders and he swam to the shore. With the support of the man I walked to the Cot Ploh Mosque where I coughed and vomited mud and black water." Rahmi Marlinda binti Muhammad Agam, 16 years, school pupil, Samatiga Subdistrict, West Aceh.

"While on the tree top I heard the cry for help of somebody; it was a man of about 35 years floating in the filthy water, strangled by timber boards. Slowly I climbed down, swam to him and untangled him and together we swam through the still swirling water to a hill, where I then sat down next to somebody. We didn't speak a word, indeed all of us just sat with unseeing eyes looking at the lashing water.

About half an hour later the water subsided and people began to walk down the hill and started to look for their missing loved ones. I myself hoped to find my wife, son, in-laws and other relatives. I scrutinized the dead bodies while at the same time helping people as best as I could. Suddenly I saw another wave rushing hungrily to our direction and I swiftly climbed again the hill where I met the man I had rescued, still sitting on the same spot where I left him. He just sat there, naked and with unseeing eyes. I gave him my shirt and asked him to cover his nakedness; he took my shirt but just wrapped it on his shoulders.

Later in the afternoon I left the hill again and walked to the direction of the city. On my way I met some people I know who told me of seeing my wife alive but I could not meet her that day. It was only on the following day that I met my wife. I never saw my son and other relatives." Zuhdi bin Rusli Ahmad Banta, 32 years, teacher, Pukan Bada Subdistrict, Great Aceh.

"When the big wave knocked us down, sucking both of us under the water, I still firmly gripped my five-year old daughter but suddenly my child was just wrenched away from me. Fully conscious I saw her body sank gently disappearing into the black water and I just prayed, 'Allah, if Thou hath forgiven all my sins then please take my soul, but if Thou hath not yet forgiven them then save me and let me live so I can atone for all my sins and do the good deeds as Thou commandeth'

Suddenly I was catapulted out of the water onto a tree from where I could see piles of timber and wooden frames of houses, while I could not see any standing house or building. The angry sea had swallowed everything. When the water finally receded, I climbed down the tree and walked rather aimlessly searching and hoping to find my husband and daughter. I closely examined the dead bodies I saw but recognized no one. Then a stranger directed me to a hill where quite number of people had already assembled. It was there that I met my husband.

With great emotion we embraced each other and we cried because we had lost our only child, our daughter." Rahmawati binti Musa Usman, 32 years, housewife, Sampoiniet SubDistrict, Aceh Jaya.

Many more however were less fortunate.

"We were standing on the terrace on the second floor of a house and watched with awe the rushing waves that washed away people, cattle and building ruins. Then we saw a young girl being swept away around one metre from where we stood. The girl pleaded us to help her. Immediately a young man jumped into the rushing water wanting to help her but he was rolled down together with the girl and they both disappeared." Bustami bin Abu Bakar, 37 years, entrepreneur.

"We were carried away by the water and were stuck on a coconut tree that remained standing in spite of the lashing sea. Suddenly a corrugated sheet hit us and my feet got pinned between some wooden boards but we all still managed to keep afloat by holding tightly to a tree trunk that was hurtled by the waves to our direction. Clinging on my left side were my mother and my child, while on my right side were my wife and my lame brother. My wife was eight months pregnant and she was also helplessly squeezed between wooden boards. When I saw fresh blood sprouting from their breasts and faces my heart broke as I could do nothing to help them". Zainal bin Nuridin Pante, 27 years, farmer.

"Tightly clinging to a fallen tree, I saw around me so many people screaming for help while desperately trying to reach wooden boards, trees or anything that could help them keep afloat, and a feeling of heavy despair descended in my heart. Spontaneously I cried: so many people failed to reach safety and I couldn't help them." Chairil Anwar bin Ismadi, 23 years, student.

"Suddenly the water became very calm although it was still moving, so I swam to the roof of a house that was floating in the water and climbed on it. Then I saw a man of about 20 years old floating not far from the roof; I dragged him and helped him climb on the roof too.

While we were floating on the roof we heard somebody imploring for help. It was the voice of a woman who was trapped under the zinc roof where we were sitting. We both tried to help her come out of under the roof but before she could do so the water retreated very strongly, dragging the roof with us on top of it and the woman under it to the open sea. The woman lost her grip on my hand and was immediately swallowed by the waves." Ermawan Wijaya S. bin Supardi, 26 years, Meuraxa Subdistrict, Banda Aceh.

"After the big wave lashed at us, separating my mother from me I could still see her standing where she had stood before. My mother was struggling against a pile of wooden boards that kept on pressing against her. I held out my arm but could not reach her and then I saw her drowned in front of me." Ali Imran bin Adam, 19 years, a student, Meuraxa Subdistrict, Banda Aceh.

"Another much bigger and forceful wave hit me and my already unconscious son of two years still tightly clasped in my arms and we both were sucked under the water. In the depth of the water, however, I could still look around me and saw above on the water surface wooden boards being swiftly swept by the current. After I uttered in my heart the two confession sentences of Islamic faith, I felt my body with my son being propelled upwards and reached the water surface.

We emerged among the wooden boards and I saw a sofa floating nearby. With my last energy I was able to reach the sofa and put my son's body on it and pushed it to a higher location. Suddenly the water rushed back towards the sea, dragging me and the sofa with my son on it at high speed. I panicked and didn't know what to do. Then I heard somebody shouting, 'Sister, grab the tree, grab the tree'. I became alert again and I saw a fallen coconut tree on the roof of a house. By grabbing the leaves I managed to avoid myself and the sofa from being dragged by the rushing water. Then I took my unconscious son from the sofa and carried him to the roof of the house.

After the water subsided and appeared relatively calm, people began to descend from the roof and walked through the water which was still about the height of an adult's hip. With the help of others I climbed down carrying my son and also waded through the water but could not walk far as I was truly exhausted. So I decided to rest in a shophouse near the Telephone Office where a number of women who managed to save themselves had already gathered.

With their help I changed my son's torn shirt with a sarong somebody gave me, and desperately tried to revive him; I even gave him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation but all was to no avail. My son, my still pure only child of two, did not survive. I resigned to Allah's will and accepted my son's demise. Looking at his still face I said in my heart, 'Forgive me my son, I have done all I could to save you but Allah has other plans'; and my tears poured down." Afriana Dewi binti Baharuddin, 43 years, government official.

"I saw a Chinese woman climb the iron gate of her shop but before she was half way up the strong current of water whacked the gate with her body on it and both disappeared. I also saw a Chinese man with long hair running to a side street and I followed him but soon found myself surrounded by the rushing water. In the side street there were four dogs swimming and a Chinese girl was clinging to one of the dogs. The water kept rising and I was nearly drowned but I dared not touch the dogs and instead just resigned myself to Allah; not long after that I fainted.

When I regained consciousness I found myself on a pile of floating debris and saw among the boards and walls a mother and her daughter treading water and with the help of some wooden boards they kept their heads above the water. It was the same girl who was clinging to the dog. Both of them were heavily wounded; the girl had a broken leg presumably having been hit and pinned by the wooden debris. I could do nothing to help them.

I also saw a child of around eight years desperately clinging to an electric pole with his right arm while his left arm was already lopped off, a stream of

blood running from the stump; the child was screaming with pain, crying for help but I could do nothing.

After the second wave subsided I climbed down and walked on the muddy street and saw across the street a man of about 40 years in the throes of death, gasping 'water, water'. I saw that his body was virtually broken into two pieces, lying under a motorcar. I looked for some drinking water and finally found a bottle of mineral water. With some difficulty I crossed the street and together with another man I helped the dying man drink the water, all the time assisting him to recite repeatedly 'Lailaha Illallah Muhammaddarrasulullah' (there is no God but Allah, Muhamad is the prophet of Allah – ed) After drinking some water the man died peacefully.

In another corner of the street I saw a Chinese woman pinned under concrete debris. Her face was heavily destroyed, her nose was gone. For several hours I just witnessed the process of her dying.

I also saw a man running out from a nearby mosque, hysterically shouting, 'no more wife, no more children, what for do I live' and he dived into the rushing water and was swallowed by the angry sea.

Not far from me I saw a fat woman sitting on the street while holding a completely naked dying man in her lap; his eyeballs were rotating wildly. It was a truly frightening sight. I looked for some clothes but the man refused saying that his body felt very hot and he just asked for water. Luckily I found again a bottle of mineral water and gave it to him. After he drank some of the water, he too died peacefully." Murhamah binti Ahmad, 32 years, entrepreneur, Meuraxa Subdistrict, Banda Aceh.

"I saw two girls of around twenty years old squatting in the destroyed garden; they asked me to help them. I decided to first help the younger one who looked terribly weak and almost her whole body was covered with mud. She only had her underpants. She said, 'Brother, take me wherever you go, take me with you'. I nodded and washed her body then asked the owner of the house where we were for some clothes. In the meantime the other girl had already gone.

After she was more decently dressed she asked me where we were going and I answered, 'Wherever Allah is going to lead us'. We walked about six kilometres, the girl kept clinging to my neck. Since I very much wanted to see my house I entrusted the girl to somebody but assured her that I would return as soon as possible.

I took a lift from a police car and was soon at my area but found that my family house was completely destroyed; what was once a housing area was just

waste land with only some foundations and a few broken walls jutting above the soil. Confused and dejected I went back to where I left the girl and found her still sitting at the same place.

That night I slept beside the girl in a hospital together with many wounded people. Around 2 am a grandmother passed away and was transported to an area near my house. I asked the hospital staff to take us along and at dawn we arrived at the place where my house once stood. We just sat there, not knowing what to do.

In the morning an elderly woman approached us, it was the girl's mother. After tearfully embracing each other, the mother thanked me several times and took her daughter with her. When parting, the girl said, 'if it is our destiny, we will certainly meet again'.

I lost the only place I could call my home all this time which was the house of my sister and her family. Now she is gone, also her husband, my brother-in-law and all my three nephews. I miss them terribly but strangely I don't quite miss the girl I had helped." Romi Saputra bin M.Lidan, 19 years, student, Jaya Baru Subdistrict, Greater Aceh.

UNEXPECTED REUNIONS

The forceful waves had relentlessly separated and uprooted families but there are also a number of people who had been unexpectedly reunited with their loved ones whom they thought did not survive the disaster; like the story of the father who was eventually reunited with his only surviving son who was saved by the one-legged trader Yusri bin Ali. And there are other similar happy stories.

"I reached a traditional Acehnese house which was still standing solidly and where about 250 people had taken refuge. When I arrived at the house the people were in the process of collecting and arranging bodies of the dead. It was then that I thought about my children and wife. Afterwards when we were walking towards Rukoh mosque I met somebody I knew walking from the opposite direction; he said, 'Am, your wife is safe, she is in Rukoh mosque.' Hearing that I rushed to the mosque where I found my wife lying among the corpses. I talked to her but she just remained totally silent. Her head hang limply, her ribs were broken and there were wounds and scratches on her body which was also covered by mud. I remembered she was pregnant, then I carried her to another mosque, passing a graveyard." Amrizal bin Abdullah, 37 years, entrepreneur.

"On the way back to my house I saw many corpses that had turned blue scattered on the road and field. Then I met a friend of mine who told me that at the nearby soccer field he saw the dead body of a woman who resembled my mother. Immediately I ran to the field to ascertain whether the body was indeed my mother. But the body was lying with the face downward and I dared not turn it around. I was, however, convinced that it was my mother and so I held her arm and cried, asking her to forgive me for all my misdeeds.

Suddenly another friend appeared and told me that my mother was alive because she managed to climb on the ruins of a house and was now with some hundred others taking shelter on a hill. I only half believed what my friend said but nevertheless went to the hill and, Thank Allah, I did meet my mother and my sister. With tears streaming down we embraced each other.

Feeling extremely hungry and thirsty I went around to look for food and water. At the foot of the hill I saw so many dead bodies and I burst into tears, thinking that my father would be among them. Suddenly a truck drove by full with people and I thought I saw my father's face among the wearied faces of people in the truck. Spontaneously I ran after the truck and, Thank Allah, my father was indeed among the people.

I am truly grateful to Allah because our whole family remains together, something which many others are not able to experience; so many lose one, two

or their entire families." Nikmatul Akbar bin Firdaus, 19 years, student, Mesjid Raya Subdistrict, Aceh Besar.

"Around 4 in the afternoon I felt strong enough to walk and went to my grandmother's house, some 3 kilometres away. On the way I had to wade through so many dead bodies each of which I inspected carefully but none resembled my family members.

When I arrived at my grandmother's house, I saw my father standing outside. I was overwhelmed with joy and embraced him. Soon my mother and younger brother also came out of the house and they hugged me fiercely because they thought I had perished. I dropped on my knees and thanked Allah for reuniting me to my both parents and brother, and many other family members." Fedri Hidayat bin Imran, 18 years, student, Samatiga Sub District, West Aceh.

"Together with many others I took shelter in the Grand Mosque Baiturrahman where inside many corpses in deplorable conditions were already laid out. When the time to do the midday prayer came I did so in one of the mosque rooms. With my thoughts still wondering where my family members were, I suddenly saw a young woman who resembled my sister but I was not sure especially since on closer examination I saw that her clothes were different than those my sister wore when we started running for our lives. The woman stepped closer and suddenly uttered a cry and embraced me; she was indeed my sister.

After she told me that all of us were safe I thanked Allah because while so many lost their loved ones, Allah deigned to save all of us." Cut Hayatoon binti Teuku Banta Linggam, 22 years, student, Meuraxa Sub District, Banda Aceh city.

"After a while I found myself afloat in the black and muddy water. My mother cried for help but I could not even stretch my arm to reach her as both of us were being swept by the strong current. Suddenly my younger sister emerged from the water in front of me. I grabbed her and put her on my shoulders. I was only wearing my underwear while my sister was wearing only my T-shirt which I gave her to cover her nakedness.

Eventually the current dumped us at the foot of a hill and we crawled to higher grounds. Unexpectedly, on the top of the hill I found my father, with a broken knee and some broken ribs. We managed to carry him to a village some four kilometres away. There I heard that my mother, although dragged by the current for quite some distance, survived together with my younger brother. So our whole family were saved and we are now living in one of the many refugee camps." Armanaidi bin Abduraman, 21 years, trader, Jaya Subdistrict, Aceh Jaya.

"I sat beneath a pine tree that survived the raging sea and vomited. I suddenly thought of my children and prayed, 'Ya Allah, safe all my family members' If not, I thought, I would prefer to commit suicide because why should I live without my family' Then suddenly I from the pile of debris not far from where I sat, my daughter came crouching toward me. Immediately I asked forgiveness to Allah for having such wicked thoughts." Rosmini binti Hamzah, 40 years, housewife, Syiah Kuala SubDistrict, Banda Aceh city.

"While being rolled and tossed by the waves I thought of my mother who at that time was already in the Haj Dormitory, seeing off my family members who were going to do the Haj pilgrimage. The following waves dragged me further away and while being milled by the rushing water I remembered the sins I had committed and asked Allah for forgiveness. Eventually I was dumped on the wall of a house but before I could do anything, a big wooden beam hit me hard and I screamed of pain.

Somebody standing on the roof of the house heard my scream and dragged me up. There were already many people on the roof and I recognized some of them being my friends. After the water subsided I decided to go to the Haj Dormitory to look for my mother. On the way I saw so many dead bodies and feared that my mother would be one among them.

On reaching the dormitory I could not help crying because of the many dead bodies I saw. With determination I examined each of the dead bodies, hoping and fearing at the same time. Then I saw in the distance a woman who resembled my mother; I called her name, and 'Thank Allah', it was her. I rushed to her and embraced her and we both cried." Rizky Fechrizal bin Darwin Nusi, 19 years, student, Syiah Kuala SubDistrict, Band Aceh city.

Scene after the Tsunami



TO END AN UNFINISHED TRAGEDY

More than a year has passed since the fateful last Sunday morning of 2004. Many people lost their dear ones in the tragic event; some were able to recover and bury the bodies, but many more had never seen with their own eyes the bodies of their loved ones and must therefore with great emotional pain learn to accept the painful and so doubtful reality. Until now, many of them still cherish hopes for miracles that would somehow reunite them to their loved ones, many of them still regularly see a familiar face flashing by in the crowd only to dissolve in the harsh reality of the present. Such expectations and illusory recognitions are understandable but everybody should be strong enough to draw a final line and close their individual sad book of an unhappy story. It is indeed an extremely difficult but necessary exercise that must be undertaken.

Most of the survivors have, in the meantime, picked up again the torn threads of their lives, and have begun weaving yet another tapestry of their individual lives. One of the many survivors who has bravely done so is Nanda binti Zaini 31 years, a housewife now living in Ujung Batee Subdistrict, Banda Aceh. She lost her husband and her two children in the Tsunami, but now she is remarried, to a fellow survivor who had lost his wife and all his children except one daughter of around 6 years old. They became acquainted in the refugee barracks and their feelings for each other grew stronger after Nanda, who then started to look after the man's only surviving daughter, began to feel close to the child who also gradually became quite attached to her.

Her fateful experience has taught her that parents should never regard their children as being their ultimate possessions, because she is now convinced that children are essentially the possessions of Allah and are just temporarily entrusted to the parents by their Maker. Perhaps in the near future she will also again have children of her own whom she will no doubt rear up with equally loving care as she is now looking after her stepdaughter.

"After all, life must go on and it's not good to keep on thinking of the past." Nanda said as a matter of fact while serving us coffee and fried bananas. She has now opened a modest eating place in the garden of their house at a public housing estate. Her drowned husband was a house builder and her present husband is a mason whose only surviving daughter was shyly observing us while helping the woman she now called her mother. We wish them all the best in rebuilding their shattered lives.

To remarry is, however, not an easy decision to take for many as they are still traumatized by their dreadful experience: of suddenly being robbed from their husbands or wives and children. Like the school teacher Nurbahri binti

Yahya, 32 years of Baiturahman Subdistrict, Banda Aceh. For her caring and teaching children has become a much stronger calling now that she has lost her husband and all her three children (one son and two daughters). Months after she had physically recuperated from the tragedy, and encouraged by her relatives and friends she decided to teach again at the same school where she had been teaching. But she confessed that she was at times still traumatized by her tragedy. *"Whenever I feel overpowered by sadness, I just cried and let my tears flow because afterward I would feel somewhat relieved and this gives me the strength to continue teaching and also to continue with my life."*

Her determination to resume teaching was a couple of months ago made harder when the municipal education service asked her to also teach, as a part-timer, at the school which her son attended before the disaster. Her first response was to refuse the request because she was afraid that she would not be able to bear being daily reminded of her deceased beloved only son. But when she realized that many of the teachers at that school had perished she consented and she is now already also teaching at her son's previous school.



When interviewed again recently she told us how during the first weeks of teaching at her deceased son's school she frequently cried, especially when many of her pupils still called her 'mother of Reza' (her son's name) instead of 'teacher'. But Nurbahri is determined to keep on teaching, both at her old school and at the school of her deceased son, because she is convinced that by teaching she would be actively helping the people of Aceh shape a new and better future.

"I have accepted what Allah has decided for me. I'm now much more determined to teach because I'm convinced that by teaching the children I participate in creating a stronger foundation for their future which in turn is also the future of Aceh," she told us when interviewed again recently. With a calm and resigned look in her eyes she showed us a photo taken about two weeks before the disaster, of herself together with her husband and her three children. The photo was taken at a wedding ceremony of her close relative and was given to her after the Tsunami had destroyed all her belongings and her loved ones.

Now she always carries the photo in her handbag and when she feels depressed, she looks at it and her strength to live and teach resurges.

To further enhance her teaching ability she has now enrolled in the teachers college to take her master degree in teaching management. Nurbahri binti Yahya is a courageous and very determined woman indeed. She has certainly drawn a final line to her painful tragedy and is determined to open a new page in her life. We wish her all the strength and success.



she is convinced that by teaching she would be actively helping the people of Aceh shape a new and better future.

Life is still very hard for Rosmini binti Hamzah, 40 years, now a single mother who must still take care of her two teen-age children; a son and a daughter. She has lost her husband, who used to be the sole breadwinner for the family. A long scar could be seen crossing from the back of her head to her front cheek. This was because during the ordeal she was violently rotated by the water against a barbed wire fence which tore the flesh of her head. The gaping wound was only properly treated and operated four days after the disaster and now leaves a clearly visible scar.

She is now working as a helper in an eating place. *"But how much can one earn as an eating place helper, while I now must support my two children all by myself"*, she said without complaining, without accusing; just stating a fact. Luckily her son has now graduated from high school and is trying, still without success, to find a job. His younger sister is still in school. In the refugee barrack the three of them live very modestly but grateful that they are alive and they are all still hoping that the future will be better. When there is still hope, life, however hard it may be, is still bearable. Let us wish the very best for Rosmini and her two children who have accepted their much harder new lives.

One-legged Yusri bin M.Ali, 36 years, who managed to save many people and especially four-year old Abang, is now the owner of an open-air eating place, specializing in barbecued fish. Yusri has not lost any of his immediate family members; his wife and all his children survived the ordeal but he has a strong bond of feeling to the four-year child he saved who is the only surviving child of a father who has lost all his entire family.

After the Tsunami, some Turkish people who heard about his story of saving the four-year old Abang, became impressed and donated some money to Yusri. That is how he can now open and manage a pleasant open-air fish-barbeque eating place located conveniently at a road junction popularly known as 'intimate junction' frequented by young and old especially during week-ends. His eating place is thriving and Yusri is convinced that the change of his fate was largely due to his perseverance in helping the young boy. He can still vividly remember how with the child on his back tightly clutching his neck, he clawed through the mud filled with debris and corpses and dragged himself and the child to safety which was approximately where the 'intimate junction' was located.

We enjoyed eating his delicious and liberally seasoned barbequed fish and we all wish Yusri a better future. Who knows one day he can own a good permanent fish restaurant.



there are many gaps in the walls made from wooden boards

Danil Ermanda bin R.M.Daud, a student of 21 years, is now living together with his only surviving brother. He lost his mother (his father passed away two years before), brother and sister and other close relatives. He is not too happy with the new house financed by a foreign NGO but built by a local contractor because it was not professionally constructed. Because of the careless workmanship, there are many gaps in the walls made from wooden boards and so the

wind can freely blow through the house. The ceiling is leaking and the overall finishing has been done too hastily and imperfectly.

Nevertheless, he is grateful to Allah that he and his brother have survived and both are now resuming their studies at the university. Together with some friends and colleagues he is thinking of doing some small business which they

hope would provide them with some steady income to support their lives. They are optimistic that their future will be better. We join in their optimism because we also realize that for the people of Aceh, especially the surviving victims of the Tsunami, optimism and a great deal of courage are needed to close their tragic story and to face the future.

Muzakir bin Yakub, 35 years, a temporary (not yet officially appointed) local government official in Banda Aceh is recently remarried. Having been an athlete, and recently a trainer in canoe rowing, his body was not too severely injured although he did break two of his ribs. In spite of being whacked down, dragged and rolled over by the waves, he managed to remain conscious throughout the ordeal and most of the time kept standing or swimming erect. But the loss wife and his two children delivered a much harder blow.

About a month after the tragedy Muzakir was so pressed down by sadness that he traveled thousands of kilometres to East Java

to his relatives where he stayed for a couple of months. After he had emotionally recovered, he travelled back to Aceh and resumed working, still as a temporary government official. A couple of months later he decided to remarry, to the sister of his colleague and his wife is now already expecting a baby. Life must and should indeed go on. We wish Muzakir and his new family a better future; hopefully he will soon be officially appointed as a local government civil employee.

"The terrible Tsunami had carved a very deep and gnawing grief inside me, especially because I had always been very close to all my family members; perhaps this is because I am the youngest. Now, with both my parents dead, also my sister and brother, my only surviving other brother decided to move back to Banda Aceh so we can be together and help each other resume our lives; because after all, life must go on. I can only pray that the souls of my deceased beloved ones would be accepted by The Almighty." Pocut Yulita binti Teuku Anwar, 20 years, student, Syiah Kuala Subdistrict, Banda Aceh.



A couple of months later he decided to remarry, to the sister of his colleague

"I have lost my both parents and my brother but by the Grace of Allah, I still have my other younger brother and for that I'm deeply thankful to Allah. Now the two of us must fulfill the hopes and dreams of our deceased parents. I must become both a father and a mother for my younger brother and I promise never to surrender to this daunting reality. I am determined to take care of my brother, give him the opportunity to follow a proper good education so he can grow into a useful member of the society.

I will always pray for the souls of my father, my mother and my other brother. May Allah forgive all their sins and misdeeds. However, I can't yet eradicate the small hope in my heart that they may after all be still alive and that one day a miracle would happen and we could be together again." Merlinta Anggilia binti Arilin, 19 years, Kutaraja SubDistrict, Banda Aceh city.



Destruction caused by the Tsunami



WHAT THEY SAY

The Tsunami of December 26, 2004 that destroyed Indonesia's province of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (NAD) and the surrounding areas had left not only a trail of physical destruction and emotional sorrow, but it had also shaped a more profound paradigm of thinking among the people. Several months after the tragedy, a number of Aceh inhabitants had been asked to voice their comments on the Tsunami and although they had submitted varying reactions, some common general themes can be observed.

The majority of people believed that the annihilating big tidal waves were a warning from Allah, admonishing them to change their sinful ways of life and return to the proper corridors of piety as regulated by the Islamic doctrines. The disaster was also seen as a divine tribulation to test the people's perseverance in their faith. Many also believed that Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam, which has always been regarded as being Indonesia's Veranda of Mecca where the love and fear of Allah go hand in hand, has during the last decades been tarnished by widespread corruptions by the population in general but especially by the authorities that marginalized and oppressed the ordinary people. It was therefore time, they said, for Allah to cleanse the area and the people.

On the other hand, many others had their belief strengthened in the love and mercifulness of Allah, their Creator who still loved them and would never make them suffer any ordeal harsher than their ability to bear. They strongly believed that the calamity was the very sign of Allah's love for them and not an omen of them being abandoned. It was like a punishment delivered to an errant child by its loving father; it was a necessary pain to make them realize that they had strayed away and must, therefore, redirect their steps.

"The Tsunami is a divine warning to the people who are beginning to forget Allah and are leading immoral lives. However, it is also a clear sign of Allah's love to mankind, still giving them an opportunity to conduct introspections and ultimately return to the laws as stipulated in the Qur'an and Hadith." TS Sani bin TM Usman, 40 years, a government official, Banda Sakti Regency, Lhokseumawe.

"Before the Tsunami, many among us didn't think of Allah anymore, forgetting to be grateful to Allah for all the divine gifts bestowed upon us. Almost all of us had been busy thinking of accumulating money and material wealth, not a few among us even committed corruption to amass worldly wealth."

Our leaders paid no attention to the people's welfare, even the educated and groups of pious people behave likewise, forgetting to teach the people how to live according to religious laws and regulations. Prior to the natural calamity, we could no more distinguish between government officials and criminals."

At times, officials could turn into criminals and not infrequent had criminals been promoted as officials.

As this occurred so rampant, Allah sent the Tsunami to persecute the people of Aceh. Unfortunately, being a general punishment it also persecuted good, law abiding and Allah-fearing people.

In the future, in order for the people of Aceh not to be punished again by Allah, they need to change their behaviour. Officials and leaders should practice justice, traders should also conduct their business in a just manner, and the ordinary people must also lead a disciplined way of life. Each of us has to return to his or her proper designations and duties." Darwis bin Musa, 54 years, a fisherman, Ulee Kareng District, Banda Aceh.

"The earthquake and Tsunami are warnings to Muslims in Aceh that they should return to the rightful path. It is a divine decree to those people who have become apostates, become ungrateful and even lied to Allah as well as to their fellow human beings.

Why has Aceh been chosen? The answer is because government officials and the people of Aceh dared to claim themselves to be hundred percent Muslims but much of their behaviour deviate from Islamic teachings. It is a most deplorable reality." Amsidar bin Achmad, 52 years, a fisherman, Muara Batu District, North Aceh.

"The Islamic law has been officially implemented in response to the wishes and demands of the people of Aceh, but in everyday life the people of Aceh themselves don't practice it and instead blatantly violated the Islamic law. Not only was corruption rampant, taking the lives of fellow human beings was also committed frequently; moreover immoral behaviour among the young and adulteries among the adults were also a common phenomenon.

The lesson which the people of Aceh can learn from the calamity is that it has taught them to be aware and acknowledge the sins they had committed. As people with a heightened sense of religiosity many of them have, because of the Tsunami, returned to the path blessed by Allah." Khairul Yacob bin Ilyas, 48 years, a politician, Meukek Subdistrict, South Aceh.

" Hopefully we all can learn from this terrible disaster that we should wholly and comprehensively return to the laws of Allah in our daily lives." Edi bin Azhari, 23 years, a farmer, Syiah Kuala Subdistrict, Banda Aceh.

Some people commented on the impact of the sudden influx of foreigners and outsiders which before, although not unwelcome, were used to be accepted

with a certain degree of alertness and sometimes suspicion. After the Tsunami, a more relaxed attitude and accommodative behaviour towards foreigners and outsiders become more apparent.

"Perhaps Tsunami is Allah's way of freeing the people of Aceh from oppression and injustice because after the Tsunami, the people of Aceh is free from 'sweepings', (arbitrarily conducted 'clean-up' investigative actions aimed at discovering errant and immoral people, sometimes especially directed to foreigners and outsiders – ed.) and now people from outside Aceh and even foreigners can freely visit Aceh" Alwi bin Ibrahim, 34 years, an entrepreneur, Mesjid Raya District, Aceh Besar.

"Of particular notice is that after the forceful earthquake and destructive Tsunami, many foreigners have come to Aceh. Everywhere in Aceh we can meet foreigners. The presence of foreigners in Aceh, although most of them are of a different faith and religion, is a blessing in disguise for the people of Aceh. Those who are well versed in the English language, can get well paid jobs. Those who possess good houses can rent out their houses at good prices. The foreigners need cooks, drivers and other types of personnel, providing jobs for us with good salaries." Ibrahim bin Hasan, 62 years, a trader, Syiah Kuala District, Banda Aceh.

"In just three days after the Tsunami, foreign assistance began to flow into Aceh. The international world came to rescue the people of Aceh; they buried the dead bodies, cleaned up the debris, distributed food, medicine, money, clothes and restored the supply and distribution of potable water. They also distributed tents for the homeless refugees and assisted in the building of barracks; free medical service was also provided.

They also donated educational materials to the children and some of them even built schools and houses for the victims. All these are tangible expressions of the spirit of solidarity among the peoples of the world towards the people of Aceh. For all those attention and help they certainly deserve our gratitude." Maulida binti HM Djalil, 27 years, female police, Krueng Sabee, Aceh Jaya.

"The Tsunami has brought substantial changes in many sectors, especially in the health sector where medical service to the public has significantly improved. This is a direct result flowing from the assistance provided by foreign organizations with their medical personnel of high international competence. Another positive impact is the creation of new jobs for the people of Aceh." Agus Fauzi bin Ibrahim, 30 years, a nurse, Meurahdua District, Pidie.

"The Tsunami has open Aceh to the international community and this is a sign of Allah's blessing and love to the people of Aceh who had been shackled for so long. The foreigners who came could directly see the social, economic and

education condition in Aceh. Many of them have been most impressed by the education tradition and system applied at our Muslim schools, and also by our openness and hospitality; they discovered that Aceh people firmly uphold human values.

However, in facing the arrival of so many foreigners to our area we must also wisely arm ourselves with our religious values and not to be influenced by their religion and way of life." Waled Nu, 55 years, a Muslim religious teacher, Samalanga Sub District, Bireuen.

Some people, however, voiced their deep concern about the negative impact created by the presence of foreigners, or rather of Aceh being so openly exposed to the outside world.

"The Tsunami has brought many members of foreign NGOs into Aceh allowing them to know and observe the people of Aceh. Although they did provide good paying jobs to quite a number of Aceh people, their presence, however, may have a negative impact if besides providing assistance they also try to convert the people of Aceh to other religions or erode the people's faith." A. Manan bin Yusuf, 28 years, building contractor, Baiturrahman District, Banda Aceh.

"After the Tsunami many young people of Aceh have fallen into immorality. They proudly wear free and easy (Western, "un-Islamic" – ed.) clothes; they proudly go hand in hand with members of the opposite sex and some even behave like married couples in the public. They have adopted patterns of behaviour which are clearly forbidden by Islamic law and morality. In order to curb this immoral conduct the authorities should play a greater role in upholding the implementation of Islamic law." Amalia Maulidar binti Syarbini Hasan, 17 years, a pupil at a traditional Muslim school, Kuta Baro Subdistrict, Greater Aceh.

"After the Tsunami the social behaviour of Aceh people have become out of control, especially the young who without feeling ashamed are behaving immorally in public. We can often see young couples happily relaxing in burger cafes not responding to the call for evening prayers when it is being voiced." M. Irwan bin Ahmad, 35 years, a soldier, Kuta Alam Subdistrict, Banda Aceh.

"We should be vigilant when accepting humanitarian aid from foreigners. Who knows they have their own hidden agenda. Some of them who provide assistance may have bad intentions, some of them may try to erode our faith." Adi Purnama bin Ali, 27 years, a trishaw driver in Banda Aceh.

"The working methods implemented by foreign NGOs will sooner or later erode our traditional spirit of voluntary mutual help. Foreign NGOs should

consider the cultural impact of their aid programmes. We are definitely grateful to them as they have assisted and enabled the Tsunami's victims to resume their violently broken lives, however, efforts should be made by the foreign NGOs to work in harmony with the local culture." Budi Arianto bin Shodiqin, 32 years, staff of a local community organization, Lueng Bata Subdistrict, Banda Aceh.

On a more practical note a woman judge, Rosmawardani binti Muhammad, 51 years of Banda Aceh city, drew the attention on the impact caused by the loss and destruction of important and especially legal documents. The consequences of the loss of legal documents have not yet been completely solved and prove to be a most difficult obstacle not only in handling property matters but also in more personal issues, such as the identification of children and parents.

The Tsunami has most significantly afflicted children. Many children have lost their parents, their siblings, as well as their other family members. They suddenly find themselves trapped in a thick mist of traumatic veil, groping towards an uncertain future. A number of those who still have one or both parents or immediate family members are now living in emergency barracks situated far from their original sites of dwellings. But quite a number of them have nobody to turn to and are living as orphans with an uncertain future. Many of them are in safe but secretly guarded temporary houses within as well as outside Aceh, which are administered by foreign and domestic NGOs.

People are not allowed to freely visit them since it is feared that unlawful people would claim and take them away. Only their photos are distributed widely and those who think that they are eligible to claim as their parents or immediate family members, and can show official documents supporting their claims can request permission to personally visit the respective child or children. However, it should not be forgotten that as many official documents and photos have been destroyed or lost, it is extremely difficult for anybody who recognizes a child's face to make the claim, or even to pay a visit to physically ascertain a fleeting hope.

"We are truly concerned when we learn that during the first few days after the Tsunami, many children have been lost and we don't know where they are now. We are worried that those children who are still alive are being turned into apostates. We pray that the Tsunami which has swept through Aceh would not erode our faith nor that of our children." Radiah binti Karim, 60 years, a housewife, Syah Kuala District, Great Aceh Regency.

"This huge calamity has instantly made thousands of children orphans. They must be taken care of and it is our moral obligation to prepare and ascertain their future. Hopefully, we all can learn from this terrible disaster that we should

wholly and comprehensively return to the laws of Aliah in our daily lives." Edi bin Azhari, 23 years, a farmer, Syiah Kuala Subdistrict, Banda Aceh.

In Aceh, as in almost all areas of Indonesia, there is always a minority group of people from Chinese descent among the population; the majority of them are non Muslims. There is no official record of the sufferings endured by them, but it is certain that quite a number of them have also perished. Some of them who have survived have submitted their personal views on the meaning and impact of the Tsunami.

"Tsunami is God's warning to mankind especially to those who have committed many sins. God has never been truly angry with us, on the contrary it is us human beings who have forsaken God. Therefore, we should stop being greedy and instead should pray more often and more sincere. Let us not forsake God just because we are busy accumulating material wealth. We must help each other, and not remain selfish.

After the Tsunami, the most impressive event is the arrival of huge numbers of foreigners who come to help us indiscriminately of our ethnicity or creed. Although I myself have lost my house and a very great deal of material wealth, I remain grateful to God because I have been saved from the terrible natural disaster. Now I live in the Dewi Samudera Buddhist Temple, awaiting the completion of my new house which is being built with assistance from the government. Although the new house will be much smaller than my previous own house, I am very grateful that as a member of the masses, as a proletariat, I too am being taken care of." Maria Oei Mi Ha, 61 years, a housewife, Kuta Alam District, Banda Aceh.

"The Tsunami has certainly brought a substantial impact to the afflicted areas. It created extensive and profound destruction in all aspects of public life: social, cultural, educational and of course economic. Public service by the government became totally lame. There were no co-ordination between the government and civil societies, both at national and international levels, with the result that a great portion of the aid could not be properly channeled to those who truly needed it. This was all due to the destruction of the then existing logistics distribution system and the lack of an integrated way in handling the refugees.

Another impact is the significant decrease in the economic activities usually conducted by the Chinese-Indonesians in Aceh, which supported 60% of the province's economy, due to the exodus of these people following the destruction of 'Peunayong' and Aceh Market areas.(commercial areas – ed.)" A. Chiang, 22 years, an entrepreneur, Banda Aceh.

For decades the people of Aceh had endured hardship and violence because of the war waged by separatist movement. For a long time many parts of the area were not totally safe and the number of casualties on both sides had been growing: government soldiers as well as Free Aceh Movement (GAM) guerillas, and naturally a great number of the ordinary people had also been killed. When the Tsunami occurred, Aceh was still in a state of war which was fortunately brought to a speedy end in August 2005 when a Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of Indonesia and the GAM was signed and peace has officially descended on the area. Many also believed that the Tsunami had precipitated the long-awaited peace.

"The Tsunami was Allah's will, a divine blessing in disguise, making people who were previously enemies become brothers and sisters with the signing of the peace agreement between Aceh Freedom Movement (GAM Gerakan Aceh Merdeka – ed.) and the Government of Indonesia. This is of special significance to us who live in the rural areas. Peace has abolished the fear which the rural people had been forced to accept as a matter of fact in their daily lives; now they can conduct their individual ways of living and earning their lives in a safe and peaceful surrounding." Cut Ali bin Amin, 50 years, a fisherman, Blang Mangat District, Lhokseumawe.

Fortunately, amidst the grief and despair that still grip the people of Aceh a positive and hopeful note for a better future begins to be heard; there is at least a growing and encouraging feeling among the people of Aceh to look for the silver lining behind the dark clouds of the tragedy, although they are also critical at the still many shortcomings especially on the side of the government.

"Months after the Tsunami no significant changes can be noted especially in the conduct of the political elite, the bureaucracy and government officials. Hypocrisy is still rampant in Aceh. Nevertheless, there is an extremely magnificent blessing in that we are now living in safety and peace. Therefore, everybody, people from all walks of life should have a strong and determined commitment to really change themselves, to become just and honest, implement good social conduct and be diligent in order to create a better future for Aceh, for the happiness of our children and grandchildren." M. Jamal bin Yunus, 50 years, politician, Ulee Kareng Subdistrict, Banda Aceh.

"The Tsunami has also increased the concern and attention of local and central governments to the Aceh people. Nevertheless it should be mentioned that the government is rather slow, especially in matters pertaining to the provision of houses, education facilities, potable water and environmental sanitation." Yafitzam bin Yusuf, 36 years, Indonesia Red Cross volunteer, Banda Sakti District, Lhokseumawe.

"Months after the Tsunami, development activities in the stricken areas have not yet been impressive. Many of the victims are still living in tents and barracks and their children are forced to study in temporary school buildings. The government through the Agency for the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction of Aceh should speed up development activities, especially the construction of houses. Welfare improvement is already met by the many expressions of solidarity shown by many parties who have compassion and sympathy for the people of Aceh." Pujo Basuki bin Sugiman, 32 years, NGO member, Krueng Sabee Subdistrict, Aceh Jaya.

"It is undeniable that there is always a silver lining behind the cloud of disaster. One of the blessings of the Tsunami is that the people of Aceh are now enjoying peace. They have been freed from fear and there are no more intimidating pressures from other groups of people. In short, Aceh with all its positive sides and shortcomings is now already known by the world community." Abdul Aziz bin Jafar, 36 years, a Muslim preacher, Pidie Subdistrict, Pidie.

"The positive impact is that Aceh will most probably progress swiftly since it is now already widely known to the international community. Assistance and investments are being geared to Aceh. In addition, the peace which we have been striving and hoping for so long has at last descended in Aceh, and the separatists have realized that the people of Aceh are now living in great uncertainty because of the terrible disaster." Junaidi bin Amiruddin, 27 years, a soldier, Kuta Alam Subdistrict, Banda Aceh.

"We hope that the people of Aceh would become more patient and resilient; at the same time they should keep trying to rise up again and pursue a normal life like before the earthquake and Tsunami. They should not keep on hoping and depending on outside assistance and pity. Sooner or later, all the assistance will stop and when it does, the people must at least be ready to meet their own needs themselves. We hope the people of Aceh would conduct introspections, reassess their ways of life, feelings and values; they should improve their conduct, render assistance among themselves, maintain high moral standards, fortify their spiritual well-being against apostasy and implement good behaviour." Mawardi bin Ibrahim, 39 years, reporter, Syiah Kuala District, Banda Aceh.

"Let us turn this Tsunami into an opportunity to improve ourselves while at the same time propagate our faith to other people, so they too may change and improve themselves. Through spreading our faith, we can improve the character of the Aceh people and make them think and behave according to the teachings of Allah." Mustafa bin Usman, 44 years, Muslim religious teacher, Sakti Sub District, Pidie.



Victims of the Tsunami



A few days after the Tsunami

29 12 2004

CLOSING NOTES

A strong Islamic scent can be sensed in the recollections of very gripping tragic personal experiences of the Tsunami's victims as well as in the commentaries. For non-Muslim readers, some of the scent may perhaps be too strong and reactive in nature. But then it should be noted that the people and province of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (NAD) have always been of a special and Islam-oriented character. At the birth of the Republic of Indonesia (the country with the largest population of Muslims in the world but officially a non-Muslim state) the province was named simply "Aceh" and been given the status of "Special Territory", partly because of its very strong adherence to Islamic morals and values. Understandably it has also always been regarded and respected as the "Veranda of Mecca".

For political reasons and in an attempt to persuade Aceh people to increase their sense of belonging to the basically pluralistic and more inclusive Republic of Indonesia, while still preserving their indigenous and Islamic social character, it was then given the official name of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (NAD). "Nanggroe" in the local language means region or land while "Darussalam" literally means 'abode of happiness'. The official name is meant to underline the province's traditional social values and strong affinity to Islam.

Indeed, in order to better understand and appreciate the stories and commentaries the readers, especially the non-Muslim readers, should always bear in mind this special characteristic of NAD and its people. Hopefully, as such a better and perhaps more sincere empathy for the victims of the Aceh Tsunami could be generated and fostered. After all, it was a human tragedy of enormous proportions that had occurred in NAD, obliterating and perhaps at the same time amalgamating all ethnicity, creed and faith. The swift response of the international community to assist the people of NAD should therefore be seen and accepted within the perspectives of a universal human joint endeavour.

It is undeniable that the Tsunami has forcefully exposed the province and people of NAD to the international community and attention, with all the negative and positive consequences. This is a truly extraordinary event in that a virtually closely-guarded society has been suddenly and provocatively put on the international stage in a most vulnerable situation. One can say this is the Will of Allah. It is therefore imperative for everybody, the people of NAD and the people of Indonesia as well as the international community to react to this natural disaster and to its surviving victims with all their sufferings and hopes in the most sincere and unprejudiced manner; and with great sensitivity.

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