

Padang Earthquake

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation

Wednesday, 23 December 2009 00:00



Indonesia, located on the Pacific Ring of Fire, experiences thousands of quakes and volcanic eruptions each year. Running the length of the island of Sumatra, the Sumatran Fault, between the Eurasian and Indo-Australian plates, is like a gigantic pressure cooker that could explode at any time.

And it did. On the afternoon of September 30, 2009, a 7.6-magnitude quake shook the earth. Not far from the epicenter, in the provincial capital of Padang alone, more than 230,000 buildings were damaged and more than 1,100 people were killed.

With aid and love pouring in, optimistic victims are rising courageously from their ruined homeland to face tomorrow.

Our plane started its descent, and we looked out the windows. It was nighttime, but we hardly saw any lights. It was eerie because we were above Padang, the capital and commercial center of Sumatera Barat (West Sumatra). How could a large city of about 900,000 have so little light at night?

It turned out that except for essential facilities, the whole city had been blacked out in the wake of the earthquake just days before. There was little traffic in the streets.

Barely a month earlier, on September 2, another quake had hit Java, causing more than a thousand deaths. Still nursing the wounds from that calamity, the country was little prepared for this even stronger tremor.

On that fateful day, it was as hot, stuffy, and busy in Padang as any other recent Wednesday afternoon. But ten-year-old Alfatira seemed to sense that something was amiss. After school let out, her dad, Anuar, picked her up and dropped her off at the cram school as usual. But instead of heading straight through the door as she would usually do, she kept turning back to look at her dad. Anuar stared back at her until she disappeared into the building. Then he went away.

At 5:16 in the afternoon, the 7.6-magnitude quake hit and shook the ground for 15 horrible seconds. The epicenter was very close to Padang, where more than a hundred commercial buildings collapsed along with many other weaker structures.

After the quake, Anuar rushed to the cram school to look for Alfatira. He panicked the moment he saw what had happened to that building. The first floor had collapsed, and the second and third floors were badly damaged. The cram school was on the third floor of the building.

Concerned family members waited anxiously outside as rescue workers went in for survivors. They found Alfatira, conscious but legs stuck in thick rubble. She was rushed to RS Tentara Dr. Reksodiwiryono, a local army hospital. At the time, only one other person had been found alive in that building, and the fate of the rest of her classmates was still in question.

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Two days later, Alfatira, right leg already amputated, underwent another operation to save her left leg. Fighting back tears, Anuar said to his daughter before the operation, “There is a possibility that you’ll lose that leg too.” Alfatira was silent for a moment before saying, “I’m only worried that I might not see you and Mom again.” Anuar could not hold back his tears anymore.



Aid pours in

Wounded victims like Alfatira crowded hospitals in Padang. Aid organizations hurried in to offer relief.

A Tzu Chi disaster response team with over 30 volunteers went in from Jakarta on a chartered flight. The rest of the space was jam-packed with tents, generators, medical supplies, cooking oil, and other daily necessities.

Between October 1 and 11, a total of ten such teams arrived at the area to help. Members came from various parts of the nation, such as Lampung in Sumatra, Medan, the capital of North Sumatra, Jakarta in Java, Pekanbaru, the capital of Riau, and Singkawang in West Kalimantan Province.

Local Tzu Chi volunteers from Padang, of course, were there too. An earthquake in 2003 in Tanah Datar near Padang had severely damaged 30 towns. Tzu Chi volunteers from Jakarta went to help, and they set up a contact office in Padang, which has grown to more than a hundred volunteers.

Volunteers from the Tzu Chi International Medical Association (TIMA) staffed two clinics (one mobile) to treat the wounded. Two hospitals—RS Tentara Dr. Reksodiwiryo and RS Katolik Yos Sudarso—graciously provided operating rooms for the TIMA team to perform operations.

October is the beginning of the rainy season in Indonesia. To shelter themselves from the rain that could fall at any time, aid workers pitched tents as their command centers. Many disaster victims used whatever they could find to improvise canopies over their heads.

In Chinatown, Ong Siong Ai, helped by a volunteer, stumbled into Himpunan Tjinta Teman, a local social service organization that was working with Tzu Chi and serving as a site to distribute daily necessities to quake victims. Ong, who had a stroke three years ago, lived alone on the other side of town. Although his house was still standing, he had no water or food in the house. “I’m glad that you’ve come through with aid,” he said with relief and gratitude. Agus Salim, 67, shared Ong’s sentiment. His legs had been injured by a falling wall, which made it difficult for him to walk. “My wounds are no longer red and swollen. Now what I need most of all is food and water.”

Volunteer Tjokro had joined Tzu Chi just three months before the distribution, and he had been helping victims non-stop since the quake. Presently he was busy handing relief goods over to recipients. “Though it has kept me very busy, I feel that I’m helping my fellow citizens through

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this difficult time. I'm glad that I'm able to do what I've always wanted to do."



Up the mountain to deliver aid

Only one day after the quake, volunteers arrived in Padang Pariaman, 20 miles from Padang, to survey the damage. The military had set up a temporary camp of tents and had reserved the first tent for Tzu Chi volunteers as the command center for their relief mission.

The quake made many survivors skittish. Although their houses were standing and the nights were getting chilly, many survivors opted to sleep out in the open air. Many of them suffered insomnia and had no appetite.

Ali Bahar lived beside the camp. His house had just some minor cracks from the quake, but he and his family all slept outside on the front porch. After morning prayer, he would let volunteer workers stationed next door take showers in his home. He said, "It is Allah's blessing that my family is well. Therefore, I want to give as much as I can to help others."

Mudslides blocked off the adjoining mountain county of Kabupaten Agam, preventing people there from getting urgently needed medical care. TIMA physicians learned of their plight on October 4, and they promptly sent an advance team on foot up the mountain towards Malalak Barat in the Agam district. They made it to within six kilometers (3.7 miles) of their intended destination before terrible road conditions stopped them from going any farther. Even so, they did meet a few villagers from the other side of the blockage and learned more about their situation. TIMA physician Wang Run-jin (王潤金) said, "Many children have diarrhea from drinking dirty water. There are no medical professionals up there, so residents can only rely on traditional medicine. We must try to go up again tomorrow."

Early the next morning, physicians started off with plenty of medical supplies. Military personnel and earthmoving equipment went along to help them through the debris. The usually clear creek had turned into a muddy torrent. Brownish dirt, wet and slippery, covered the road at places, some as deep as one meter (3.3 feet). Soldiers cleared the road and the convoy advanced slowly. Eventually they got near the entrance to Malalak Barat, but they were unable to move any further. Fortunately, a villager came to guide them in via a path that villagers had made earlier.

The news of doctors providing free services attracted many residents. Because most young people had gone to work in big cities elsewhere, only the elderly or children went to the clinic. For some of them, that was their first-ever visit to a doctor. "The most common complaint today has been dizziness and discomfort from the colds that they caught from sleeping outdoors," said Dr. Ryan Ardhi Lesmana.

There were over 700 families in the area, and seven people had been killed in the quake. "You are the first group to reach us from the outside," said Darminto, a representative of the area. He expressed his gratitude to the Tzu Chi volunteers who had climbed the mountain to reach them.

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Risma, a TIMA nurse, said, “Despite the disaster, villagers are optimistic. Their warmth has erased my fatigue.”

TIMA teams also went to other far-off places like Padang Halay and Hulu Banda to offer help. In addition, volunteers set up a distribution station in Kampung Dalam county and passed out 3,500 packs of emergency supplies to tide victims over the difficult times. Dr. Wang Run-jin said, “What they needed the most was emotional support. We personally handed the relief goods to them to show them that we cared.”

By October 11, 2009, 11 days after the earthquake, the TIMA clinics and house calls had performed a total of 3,798 treatments. In the meantime, Tzu Chi volunteers distributed daily necessities like water, rice, instant noodles, biscuits, cooking oil, comforters, tents, and detergent to 7,426 families. Emergency cash was given to 122 families. Volunteers also supplied rice, vegetables, fruit, generators, and tents to government-sponsored shelters.

More than 20 days had gone by since the quake. Disaster areas still bustled with vehicles and airplanes carrying in aid. Despite the aid, local people were not sitting idly by. They had resumed or started new activities to support themselves. Stalls were being reopened for business, and there were no long lines waiting at gas stations. Although Zaidin, a resident of Padang Pariaman, was still living in a shelter, he had resumed his scooter repair and barber businesses. “I can’t live on handouts forever,” he said.

Granted, it was just the beginning of their long recovery. But residents kept an eye out for what their neighbors needed and helped each other. They had taken the first steps towards recovery. Love from around the world would also accompany them and help them stand up again.

The medical team at the army hospital that performed the second surgery on Alfatira, the girl whose right leg had been amputated, successfully saved her left leg. She was now recovering at a larger hospital and learning to stand again.

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