

Aceh Five Years Later

Written by Xu Fei-li
Friday, 16 April 2010 16:05



On December 26, 2004, a horrific tsunami brought death and destruction to hundreds of thousands of people. The unspeakable devastation rerouted the lives of countless people in Aceh, Indonesia. Children were orphaned, newlyweds widowed, whole families wiped out—all in a heartbeat.

Despite the tragedy, the road to recovery has been made a little less arduous for 2,568 families in the region. In the wake of the disaster, Tzu Chi built permanent housing for them and offered a glimmer of hope for a new life. In the places they now call homes, they remember loved ones and seek anew the promises of tomorrow.

The rainy season was coming to an end in Aceh. On the eve of Eid al-Adha—or the Festival of Sacrifice, in the 12th and last month of the Islamic lunar calendar—pedicabs, scooters, and automobiles packed the streets of the shopping districts of Banda Aceh, the capital of the predominantly Muslim Aceh special region.

Older buildings stood next to new ones amidst the crowds along the teeming streets. Some of the older structures had survived the deadly waves, but newer ones had risen from the destruction after the tsunami. In the midst of this hodgepodge of old and new, sorrow and hope, the people of Aceh have shown tremendous vitality in recovering from the calamity. They have experienced great destruction, but now they are striving for a great recovery.



The events of that tragic day in December 2004 will be forever etched in the hearts and minds of everyone left alive in Aceh. Every resident can recall with perfect clarity the horrors of that day. In fact, telling the stories of those horrifying moments seems to be a necessary therapeutic step in the recovery of those traumatized. The stories are heartrending. Survivors tell of how water engulfed and washed away homes and businesses. They tell of how again and again one national death toll was topped by another before eventually hitting 230,000. They relate lists of survivors who lost one or more family members. Most tragically, they tell of the lives of their own loved ones who perished that day. But despite all the sorrow and misery, they know life must go on.

In addition to those that perished, the tsunami left nearly half a million people homeless. After the devastation, aid and love poured into the country from around the world. Twenty-seven United Nations agencies, 40 countries, and over 600 charitable organizations helped rebuild Aceh, at a cost of US\$6.4 billion.

As part of this international aid effort, Tzu Chi built permanent housing for 2,568 families in three communities: Great Love Villages I, II, and III, located in Panteriek, Neuheun, and Meulaboh

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respectively. In addition to the residential units, Tzu Chi also built nine schools (kindergarten through grade 9) and other public facilities in the three villages.



Aida Angkasa (安嘉) lives in Medan, the capital of Sumatra Province, which neighbors Aceh. A Tzu Chi volunteer, she has been shuttling between her home and Aceh, where she spends one to two weeks a month in one of the three villages. She handles applications for residency and helps residents settle into their new homes. She knows almost every family in the three villages.

"When the houses were being built, we gave priority to families with children," Angkasa said. "Initially, some people were not sure if they wanted to move in at all, but once they saw how nice the villages were turning out, they all wanted in." In addition to having typical rooms and facilities, each housing unit is rustproof and insulated against sound and heat. They even have front and back yards.

Residents have already started to build additions to their homes. "It shows that their finances are improving," Angkasa explained.



Great Love Village I, Panteriek

A row of temporary stalls mark the location of where the old marketplace in Banda Aceh used to be before the tsunami. The stall on the far right is called Tennis Meatballs. It is standing in for the original stall, which was wiped out in the tsunami. Jaminur, 43, has been running Tennis Meatballs for 17 years.

The day of the tsunami started like countless others for Jaminur. He rose at six o'clock, completed his morning prayers, and made meatballs with his wife, Paridah. Then he left home and took the meatballs to the stall. He went alone that day. His son, Jefri, would usually have gone with him, but he stayed home that morning because of a headache. Little did Jaminur know that he would never see his son or daughter again.

"I crossed the street to buy breakfast soon after I opened up the stall," Jaminur recalled. "That's when the earthquake hit." He was shaken out of his wits. Just as he was wondering whether he should stay put or run home to check on his family, the earth shook again. People shouted that huge waves were rushing in. He scampered with about 50 other vendors to the top floor of the building, just in time to see the streets below disappear under water and debris. He also saw bodies floating by.

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Dead bodies and debris clogged up the thoroughfares in Banda Aceh, making passage impossible. Jaminur couldn't go home. He wandered about in a daze and eventually found his way to a local mosque where he found his grief-stricken wife. She had been running with their two children for safety when waves washed the children away.

The couple's world was completely turned upside down that day. They had lost their house, their belongings, and most tragically, their children. They did not know how to carry on. The chaos and uncertainty of their lives began to ease only after they moved into the tent city in Jantho. There they waited to relocate to Great Love Village I, under construction in nearby Panteriek.

Jaminur and his wife took up residence in the village in 2006. They also borrowed seven million rupiahs (US\$740) to reopen their stall. But business was not what it had been before the disaster. Before the tsunami, the couple easily sold 200 bowls of beef meatballs a day. Now they were lucky to sell just 50 bowls a day. A typical day's earnings amounted to a paltry 100,000 rupiahs (less than US\$11).

Jaminur works hard and thinks fast. It wasn't long before he hit upon another source of income: He bought used cars, revamped them, and sold them. Soon they were able to buy furniture for their new home. Jaminur and his wife are among the most capable money-makers in the village.

But no amount of money can fill the void left by their lost children. "Even if I work day and night, I can hardly feel less pain," Jaminur said. Jefri, their son, was nine years old; their daughter, Lia, was only five. They sent photos of the children to TV stations and different organizations in Banda Aceh and Medan, hoping to locate them. But there was no news of them.

It took the couple a very long time to come to terms with the fact that little Jefri and Lia were not coming back. "We'll never know where the waves carried them," he said. They hung black-and-white portraits of the children on the wall of their new home, and they dug out the few old photo albums they had to remember them by.

Thankfully, Jaminur's wife gave birth to a daughter, Laisa Auliah, in 2007. This was fully two years behind the initial baby boom that followed in the wake of the tsunami.

"We're grateful to Tzu Chi for giving us a place where we can settle down and start over," Jaminur said as he prepared his meatballs one morning. He plans to open another stall right in the Great Love Village so that his wife can more easily work and care for their daughter.

It appears that the couple has finally freed themselves from the devastation of the tsunami and started their lives anew.



Great Love Village II, Neuheun

We followed Angkasa to Great Love Village II, located in Neuheun, 14 kilometers (nine miles) east of Banda Aceh, in Mesjid Raya County. The village is tucked in the hills, and cattle and sheep can be seen leisurely grazing by the roadside.

Angkasa led us to Suriani's place. About a dozen women wearing jilbabs (Muslim head scarves) welcomed us at the front door, humming traditional local greeting songs. Their sincere, warm welcome was abundantly evident in this simple ceremony.

These women have banded together and created a cottage industry making traditional Acehnese gold-thread embroidery for export. Each of the women takes home an average of 400,000 rupiahs (US\$43) a month. Suriani, the founder of the group, has even been recognized by the president of Indonesia for her accomplishments. She also leads a prayer group on Friday nights to help women in the village find new warmth and hope.



Suriani used a small gazebo by her house to display many fine works of embroidery, including clothing, door screens, tablecloths, and coasters. Glittery sequins enliven embroidered patterns of flowers and butterflies. It's no exaggeration to say that these ladies are the most creative amateur artists in the village.

The women chatted and joked with Angkasa, and for a moment I almost forgot that they were survivors of the tsunami. That is, until Dewi Puspita told us her story.

The day of the tsunami, Dewi was at her parents' home with her eight-month-old daughter, Sinta. It was her 29th birthday. Her husband phoned her to wish her a happy birthday. He asked her if she wanted him to come and take them home, and told her that he had a present waiting at home for her. Just after they hung up, she felt the earth shaking. The shaking didn't seem too bad, so she didn't think any more about it. She was blissfully unaware that in Banda Aceh, two hours away by car, her husband, his parents, and their houses had all disappeared in the chaos.

Later, Dewi and Sinta moved into a tent city. Dewi often held Sinta and wept herself to sleep. She dreamed of her husband staring at her from a distance but never talking. She did not know whether the dreams were trying to tell her if he was alive or dead. An elder told her to accept that her husband had died and to pray to Allah to grant him peace.

"Never could I have imagined that he would die on my birthday," Dewi said. "I will always remember his death every time my birthday comes around." The thought of losing her considerate and caring husband brought her to tears yet again.

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[Izu Chu Ojaiten](#)