
RI BULLETIN

A POWERFUL VOICE FOR LIFESAVING ACTION

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Indonesia: Shelter and Jobs Needed Now in Aceh

The reconstruction program in Indonesia's Aceh province needs to shift into high gear to provide shelter and livelihoods to hundreds of thousands of people whose homes and property were destroyed in the December 26 tsunami. The greatest needs of survivors are shelter and a means of earning a living. They desperately want to get their lives back to some degree of normalcy, which will not be possible while they live in tents and other temporary shelters and depend on aid handouts and temporary jobs.

The tsunami killed at least 150,000 people in Aceh. In some seaside villages, such as Calang, the destruction of buildings was near total and an estimated 80 percent of the people were killed. In the cities of Banda Aceh and Meulaboh, wide swaths of housing and businesses near the sea are still devastated, although a few people have begun reconstruction of their homes and offices and marked the boundaries of their land with signs and red and white flags. Earthquake aftershocks are still frequent and some experts predict that additional killing earthquakes such as the one that hit the islands of Nias and Simeulue in March 2005 will strike the region. Fear of future tsunamis does not seem to have deterred people from moving back to their original properties near the sea, and even the UN compound and non-governmental organization offices in Calang are located only a few steps from the ocean.

The international aid community, Indonesian and foreign military units, and the Indonesian government moved quickly to meet the humanitarian needs of tsunami survivors. Humanitarian needs are being met by an army of government and relief workers, but most reconstruction plans are still on the drawing board. According to the government, the number of persons displaced by the tsunami has actually risen from 580,000 in March to 595,000 today. Most of the displaced are living with relatives or host families, an arrangement that is growing less and less comfortable as time goes on and families desire their own housing. Many of the displaced are living in shanty towns of tents that seem to be everywhere. Others live in government-constructed barracks which, according to officials, are a temporary solution for up to two years to meet housing needs.

The government's construction of barracks after the tsunami aroused international suspicion that survivors were being herded into what might become permanent camps. With a separatist insurgency operating in the province, Aceh is a sensitive political region for Indonesia and the Indonesian military presence is heavy. However, residence in the barracks thus far has been voluntary. Refugees International did not find any survivors who alleged they had been pressured or forced to move into barracks.

The great majority of the people that RI talked to wish to move back to their former homes, even if their homes are only a few feet from the sea and susceptible to future tsunamis. While a few thousand new houses have been built for the displaced, far more shelter construction is needed immediately and it should be a top priority of early action by aid agencies and the government. Planners talk about a five- or ten-year reconstruction period, far too long to expect people to wait. Resources are adequate to accelerate the construction of housing. The World Bank just announced a \$250 million program that will construct or reconstruct 50,000 homes, plus support infrastructure and community redevelopment.

The second crucial element in restoring normalcy to tsunami survivors is getting them back to work. A recent study by the International Organization for Migration reported that only four percent of the people had received assistance to help them earn a living. The great majority of the people of Aceh were formerly fishermen, farmers, or small merchants. While many merchants are rebuilding or repairing their shops through informal credit mechanisms and fishing boats are being built in many small shops, little is being done to help farmers replant their lands.

The coast of Aceh is turning from brown to green as vegetation recovers from the great inundation of the tsunami which swept as much as five miles inland. While some land was washed away or is still flooded, much farm land could be reclaimed soon according to environmental experts. The impact of salt water on the land was not as bad as expected. Many tree crops, such as oil palm and coconuts, are salt resistant and even many rice paddies can be reclaimed and replanted as salt leaches away in heavy rains. Few international aid agencies are working at the farm level to restore agriculture, a failing that should be corrected immediately. The farmers need seeds, tools, and technical assistance to overcome problems caused by the tsunami.

Another need which is not getting attention from the aid community is the restoration of support industries for fisherman and farmers. The fishing industry is one example. In addition to boats and nets, fishermen need ice to preserve their catch. All three ice plants in Meulaboh were destroyed by the tsunami. Donors should quickly find ways to encourage re-investment and create employment in essential industries, most of which are privately owned. Oil palm extraction and rice mills are also industries which probably require early attention.

The psychological impact on the society of Aceh by the death of so many people in seaside communities was immense, but a first step in the healing process is returning control over their lives to the survivors. The Indonesian government and the aid community should move forward urgently to provide people in Aceh what they so desperately want and need: a place to live and a livelihood. In contrast to the situation in most humanitarian emergencies, resources are adequate to accomplish ambitious goals. Between government donors and private contributions, more than \$14 billion have been pledged to respond to the consequences of the tsunami emergency.

Refugees International therefore recommends that:

- The Indonesian government and international community adopt an accelerated goal of getting every displaced person in Aceh in a permanent or semi-permanent shelter at a location of his or her choice in less than 12 months.
- The government and aid community reclaim and help farmers replant as much land as is technically possible over the next 12 months. Thousands of farm families will benefit from the early restoration of their livelihood.
- Donors find ways to assist in the reconstruction and reestablishment of essential private-sector owned industries in Aceh, such as ice making, oil palm extraction, and rice mills.

James H. McNaughton, Larry Thompson, and Wayan Sri Siantari visited Aceh in May 2005 on behalf of Refugees International.