
RI BULLETIN

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Indonesia: Support Community-based Rehabilitation Efforts in Aceh

Nearly four weeks after the earthquake and the resulting tsunami struck the coast of Aceh, Indonesia with such devastating force, the survivors are starting to emerge from the shock and think about recovery. The early indications are that they want to rebuild on their own land in their home communities. The paramount task for the Indonesian government, bilateral donors, UN agencies, and non-governmental organizations is to ensure that the massive resources donated in response to the disaster support local initiative in the rehabilitation and reconstruction process.

The scale of the destruction is overwhelming. An estimated 3,000 villages and urban communities were destroyed or badly damaged. Half of the provincial capital, Banda Aceh, appears to have been hit by an atomic bomb. An estimated 1,000 teachers and 1,500 policemen lost their lives in the disaster, underscoring how difficult it will be to restore public services. As the Refugees International assessment team traveled along the coastal road from Banda Aceh towards Meulaboh, the driver occasionally stopped the car, pointed to a flat expanse containing nothing but mud and debris as far as the eye could see, and said flatly, "Three villages were there," or, "This was a military encampment." The road to Meulaboh from Banda Aceh remains impassable, with 37 bridges out and parts of the road washed away. There are still communities along the Indian Ocean coast that are completely isolated and can only be reached by helicopter.

Yet the earthquake and the tsunami spared much of Aceh from physical damage. Movement of people and goods, both within the province and between the province and the rest of Sumatra, has resumed, given impetus by the convoys of trucks moving relief supplies into the province. Parts of Banda Aceh appear perfectly normal, with undamaged roads and functioning markets and shops. Indeed, the capital does not have the air of a provincial town isolated and embattled by years of conflict, but rather feels like a town with resources that could be mobilized as part of the recovery process.

The efforts of the Acehnese to help themselves are impressive. RI visited one camp in a mosque compound in a community called Kueh about five or six miles outside Banda Aceh. In the aftermath of the tsunami, local village leaders had assessed the needs and determined that 275 people needed immediate shelter and emergency food supplies. Several local merchants stepped forward to provide management and financial support, with additional assistance provided by the Indonesian Red Crescent Society, political parties, private companies, and local government. With the exception of tents donated by the Taiwanese Red Cross, the entire effort was supported by local resources. When asked his motivation for getting involved, Sanusi Hussein, the merchant who had volunteered to manage the camp, told RI, "We do this for humanity."

The likely approach of the Government of Indonesia to the rehabilitation phase is unclear. Aceh is the location of a separatist rebellion that has simmered for almost 30 years and the relationship between the central government and the Acehnese is tense. While responding to the tsunami disaster may appear to offer an opportunity to the Government of Indonesia to create a new dynamic in the province, a more likely scenario is that the shape of the response will be driven by security concerns within a counter-insurgency framework. Thus, statements by officials in the Ministry of Social Welfare that it will be necessary to establish “temporary” camps for displaced persons, but that the transition phase to permanent solutions may take up to two years, raise the specter of camps and relocation as a form of social and political control. The danger is precisely that camps will become semi-permanent, exacerbating social and public health problems, while at the same time becoming potential breeding grounds for alienated Acehnese to become adherents to the rebel cause.

Another undesirable option is the building of permanent housing in new communities through centrally-planned projects. The Ministry of Public Works is rumored to be planning a major home-building program, which in turn raises fears that the government will repeat the errors of the transmigration program, which tried to move Javanese to less populated areas of the archipelago, but which ended up creating unsustainable communities through an ill-planned, top-down process. New communities are notoriously difficult to establish and this approach is not likely to succeed among Acehnese who already have ample reason to be suspicious of government intentions.

International agencies responding to the Aceh emergency have already anticipated these potential difficulties and have developed a statement of guiding principles on solutions for displaced persons which they have submitted to the Indonesian government. The statement urges the government to adopt the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, which are expressly intended to cover displacement due to natural disasters as well as displacement due to conflict. The thrust of the statement is that solutions to displacement in Aceh should be grounded in a consultative process with the survivors and that “families should determine the best solution to their displacement.” Family and community unity should be maintained. Participation in relocation programs should be voluntary and relocation should take place as close as possible to the previous homes of the displaced. The special needs of women and children should be addressed in the design of relocation programs, which should also address the needs of especially vulnerable individuals and families, including separated children, isolated elderly individuals, and families headed by single parents.

Open communication between the local government authorities and the displaced is essential if these principles are to be respected. Temporary relocation of the displaced out of makeshift camps in public buildings and private compounds will be necessary on a limited scale if life in Aceh is to return to normal. But for the displaced to relocate willingly, the movement has to be placed in a clear mid-term planning context. When will the displaced be allowed to go back home? How long must they remain in temporary camps? What is happening to their farmland or their shops? Clear answers to these questions will build confidence among the displaced that the government and international agencies are acting in their interests. Transparent communication can be facilitated through the effective use of radio broadcasts that keep the population informed about plans and programs going forward.

If these principles are respected, the preferred option for the majority of Acehnese will be to rebuild their homes in their communities of origin. This conclusion is based on eyewitness accounts of survivors, even in devastated coastal towns, starting to sift through the rubble to salvage building materials, from nails to wood to cement foundations. Acehnese have a tradition of strong local community organizations and there are existing programs, such as the World Bank’s Kecamatan Development Program, the United Nations Development Program’s Community Recovery Program,

and the programs of local NGOs, that have a proven ability to get resources into the hands of communities to allow them to make their own investment decisions.

The granting of these resources to communities and families for the construction of housing and schools can be complemented by cash for work projects, such as environmental clean up and road repair. Taken together, these investments will help stimulate the local economy and jump-start the recovery process.

Given the extent of the devastation in Aceh, and the very real emergency needs that remain in some communities, it may appear premature to be thinking about community rehabilitation. But with the possibility of camp construction looming and with the Government of Indonesia anxious to return the province to a normal footing in the interests of security, key decisions are about to be made that will determine the long-term fate of the 400,000 Acehnese displaced by the tsunami. The massive international emergency response can be a force for good or ill depending on how the resources are applied. Support for local initiative through proven community-controlled mechanisms is the best and most sustainable way forward.

Refugees International therefore recommends that:

- The Government of Indonesia adopt the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement as the foundation of their approach to solutions for Acehnese displaced by the tsunami.
- The Government, bilateral donors, UN agencies, and NGOs base their programs for community rehabilitation on the principle of families determining the best solution to their displacement.
- The Government and the aid community resist the temptation to initiate new community-based programs and to the extent possible work through existing programs with proven capacity to get resources into the hands of local people.
- Given the importance of families being able to make informed decisions about solutions to their displacement, the Government of Indonesia, with the support of international donors, communicate openly and transparently with the displaced about their plans for rehabilitation and recovery. The establishment of dedicated community radio networks to convey information about local conditions and the resources available to support community recovery will assist this process.

Vice President for Policy Joel Charny and Field Representative James McNaughton just completed a two-week mission to Indonesia to assess the impact of the tsunami and the initial stage of the relief effort.