

REBUILDING ACEH: FROM THE SURVIVORS FOR THE SURVIVORS

In the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami that devastated several countries on the Indian ocean, on January 6th the ASEAN countries held a special conference in Jakarta attended by 26 countries and international organizations. This is clear evidence of the international community's concern for the people of Aceh and North Sumatra. So much solidarity and sympathy will give us, the unfortunate people of Aceh, at least some hope and renewed spirit to keep on struggling, to hang on to life and to give our best with all the strength that we still have left in us. But how and where to start when we are still preoccupied with thoughts of finding our loved ones still alive somewhere, mixed with the unbelief that our loved ones and property have been taken away from us in the blink of an eyelid? All the help and warmth with which the international community has surrounded us may give us the strength we need to continue and to regain Allah's blessing. This is our most sincere hope.

The biggest challenge now is to make the international community understand who are the victims of the earthquake and the tsunami. All aid pouring in is directed towards the IDPs (internally displaced persons) in the refugee camps. This is understandable because the IDPs currently represent the largest group and have the greatest need. Often all they have left is their life and the clothes on their back. These groups are being prioritized and there is nothing wrong with this perception and direction of assistance. However, it would be fairer not to overlook those survivors who have fled to their surviving families or friends in and outside of Aceh and also not to forget all those who have fled to the villages where they were born. It should be remembered that before this catastrophe hit us many of the victims in urban areas such as Muelaboh, Calang, Lamno, Banda Aceh, Sigli, Biruen, Lhok Seumawe, came from the rural areas in the vicinities. The majority of these survivors are not in the refugee camps but have fled to their villages and or to the houses of family and friends whose houses were spared by the disaster. These groups are also suffering from tremendous trauma; people have they lost their mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, loved ones and all their possessions. Their future is as grim as that of the IDPs in the refugee camps. It is a trait of Acehnese culture for people in time of dire need to rely on the family. Rarely will an Acehnese seek help outside this closely-knit institution. Let alone in a case as extreme as the present one where the support, assistance and solace of their extended family is the first thing they need and seek to overcome the trauma of their losses. The family is a cultural and strong institution in Aceh and descendents from three generations away are still considered immediate family. So it is understandable that surviving families will seek each other out and share the little they have left while trying to find solutions. This has resulted in many surviving family homes in the surrounding neighborhood or villages becoming unofficial refugee places for those relatives

who have lost their house and belongings. Their number is far from small and they too will face great challenges in reorganizing their lives.

Forgotten victims

As an Acehnese and having witnessed all this first hand in the aftermath of the disaster, I ask, would it not be fairer to spare a thought and resources for those groups of victims who fled to close friends and families or back to their villages in Aceh and outside? Maybe by assisting and mobilizing these people, the reconstruction of Aceh can truly begin as they have a relative good chance to stand up again and rebuild their families and their home environment with the support of the strong Acehnese family ties. These groups of survivors have a good chance to become actively involved in handling the aftermath of the disaster and becoming local catalysts for reconstruction and to motivate others to take an active role in rebuilding their lives and not just become passive victims waiting for a charitable handout. If they can be led and given opportunities these family or village groups can become local motivators to take action. From the survivors for the survivors. Why? Because these groups of refugees at least have a relatively comfortable place to sleep, they have access to sanitation, basic food and water and most important they have family support. And so they are better equipped to act calmly and rationally, although grieving. However, if these groups are neglected, how long can the hosting families endure the added burden? The logistics get worse by the day. Food supplies decrease and feelings of helplessness set in. Their loved ones (often the food provider) have gone, their faith dwindles and they begin to feel guilty for being alive. Where can they go? A food distribution command post will not give them priority because they cannot say from which recognized IDP camp they come from so they will not receive the temporary assistance they require to subsist while they regain control of their lives. We have observed that these groups may exceed those of the IDP in temporarily refugee camps out in the open fields.

Involving the survivors actively to take charge of their lives.

It is not impossible to mobilize these groups of survivors in an effort to reorganize their lives again provided they receive some of the attention the IDPs are receiving in the camps. We are convinced that it is a real possibility to set up aid programs by the survivors for the survivors, like the family-based based assistance program our group is setting up now; an activation program based in villages where refugees have fled and where a basic infrastructure and sufficient sanitation still exist. These groups of refugees, when given the right help and leadership, together with the aid provided by institutions or other humanitarian organizations, will have a good chance to revive rapidly and become the main motivators of the Acehnese spirit and resilience. What is needed now is to hear them out, allow them to grieve, show empathy and together with them identify their own needs. Then, provide activities to divert their attention from distressing thoughts, and help them to seek work (economic revival of the survivors) from all the aid directed to Aceh. We must prevent the survivors of the earthquake and tsunami to become victims a second time when the euphoria of assistance and

humanitarian solidarity will peter out. If during this period the Acehnese remain the passive recipients of billions of dollars of humanitarian aid, their self-recovery process will remain hampered, especially for those people who used to work in sectors that no longer exist, such as industries and trade. How will they take care of their families in the future? The people who have fled Aceh to join their families will eventually return to Aceh for a variety of reasons, possibly because they have no other choice, because of an emotional bond or culture, family reasons, or maybe because of the overwhelming efforts to revive and rehabilitate. It is understandable that in an emergency of such magnitude foreign parties may be involved and I am convinced that their sincere efforts to help our brothers and sisters in Aceh will be of great value. However we must remember the role of the Acehnese themselves, so as many possibilities as possible should be presented for them to be directly involved in the medium and long-term recovery program. Aceh must be rebuilt by the survivors, from the survivors for the survivors. Many of them have skills and higher education and they should be utilized for the reconstruction effort. Maybe it can start from the groups of refugees who fled to families, friends and villages or even those who fled in great numbers outside of Aceh. These groups can be mobilized and they can form new groups in their immediate environment, while developing positively in a program that involves all survivors for their collective good and future. History has taught us that our faith and Acehnese culture has made us strong and enduring while seeking solutions for our survival. These characteristics of faith, culture and resilience will be our basic capital for reconstructing our future. Thank you world.

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Azwar is presently in Aceh with the first group of volunteer family-based motivators. The program has been conceived and financed by a group of friends of Azwar and their networks inside and outside Indonesia. To all who have contributed generously to this effort, wherever you are, thank you!