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Neighbourly Love?

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BANDA ACEH: A 10-metre wave of unimaginable force tore through much of South-East Asia on Boxing Day 2004, devastating the region. Zainal Abidin was a poor fisherman who tended ponds off the coast of his small village, Kampung Pande, just five minutes from Banda Aceh. Of his village of 1000, Abidin was the only person to survive. Abidin was left homeless with only the clothes on his back.¹

The tsunami is estimated to have killed 167,736 people, with another half a million left homeless in Indonesia alone. A third of the victims were children, too small to escape the tsunami's fury. There were chronic food and water shortages during the weeks following the disaster and decaying bodies threatened the spread of disease. To avert epidemics of cholera, diphtheria, dysentery, typhoid and hepatitis A and B,² bodies had to be located and disposed of quickly. Even after the initial terror of the tsunami, hunger and disease took a further toll on the victims.

Throughout Aceh and Northern Sumatra, crucial infrastructure was swept away by the tsunami. Concrete slabs were all that remained in many villages. UN Emergency Coordinator Jan Egeland described Western Aceh, the hardest-hit area, as "road-less", making relief efforts to remote areas extremely difficult. A breakdown of the Aceh civil service also

¹ O'Connor, Tim (8th April, 2005) "Tsunami Aid or Strategic Relationship", [Online], available from Internet: <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=3315>, (accessed 16th May, 2006).

² Multiple authors (21st May, 2006) "Boxing Day Tsunami", Wikipedia [Online], available from Internet: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boxing_Day_Tsunami (visited 22nd May, 2006).

impaired relief efforts in the first week after the tsunami with 1400 police missing.³

The desperate situation in Indonesia and other affected areas inspired hundreds of countries and organisations to donate aid totalling US\$10 billion. Australian aid played a major role in the immediate response. A\$100 million was spent in the emergency relief effort, and the Australian Government pledged Australia's largest-ever aid package, committing A\$1 billion.

The long-term reconstruction of Aceh, however, has become mired in controversy due to problems of corruption and 'clouded' transparency. Aid was extremely slow in reaching affected areas, and victims struggled to cope with the shortage of emergency aid. The Asian Development Bank estimates that more than US\$4 billion in aid is behind schedule. Another source says aid efforts have been hampered by corruption and poor communication,⁴ slowing the delivery of aid and contributing to looting in some areas. There are many examples of aid money being wasted and agencies being "ripped off" by contractors. Akhiruddin Mahjuddin, who heads the Aceh anti-corruption movement, gave, as an example, the purchase of a fleet of 100 fishing boats bought at double the real price. In all, as much as Rp708 billion worth of material aid such as medicines, donated by other countries, has gone astray.⁵

Criticism has been directed particularly at the Australian Government's aid program. According to Aidwatch's report,⁶ AusAID and the Australia–Indonesia Partnership for Reconstruction and Development are "the least transparent donor agencies". Half of the Australian Government's aid

³ Multiple authors (21st May, 2006) "Boxing Day Tsunami", Wikipedia [Online], available from Internet: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boxing_Day_Tsunami (visited 22nd May, 2006).

⁴ Wade, Matt (27th February, 2006) "Corruption undermines Aceh tsunami aid", *Sydney Morning Herald* [Online], available from Internet: <http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/corruption-undermines-aceh-tsunami-aid/2006/02/26/1140888748196.html>, (visited 16th May, 2006).

⁵ Dodd, Mark and Fitzpatrick, Stephen (26th April, 2004) "Wave of Corruption", *The Australian*, available from Internet [Online]: <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20876,18904589-28737,00.html> (visited 1st June, 2006).

⁶ Wade, Matt (27th February, 2006) "Corruption undermines Aceh tsunami aid", *Sydney Morning Herald* [Online], available from Internet: <http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/corruption-undermines-aceh-tsunami-aid/2006/02/26/1140888748196.html>, (visited 16th May, 2006).

package was provided as “soft” loans that have simply compounded Indonesia’s burgeoning debt. In fact, the Australian Government has so far committed a mere A\$156 million (or 17%) of the original amount promised.⁷ This compares poorly with other donors, most of whom are on track to meet their pledges. These include Norway, the Asian Development Bank and the European Commission, each of whom have met 95% of their promises.⁸

Australian non-government organisations have also been blamed for wasting money donated by the public. World Vision Australia spent 14% of donations on administration after promising to keep costs below 7%. Other Australian NGOs such as Red Cross, Oxfam, Care Australia and Caritas have all spent more than 7% of money raised on overheads.⁹ In addition, much of the Australian aid, both government and non-government, has been spent in other parts of Indonesia, with only 8% committed in devastated Aceh.¹⁰ Many critics believe that the Australian Government has used the aid package to “further the relationship between the Australian and Indonesian Governments ... and the needs of [those] affected by the tsunami ... are secondary”.¹¹ This has been attributed by one commentator to simple “political point scoring”¹² by diverting the money to other projects within the archipelago to win the Indonesian Government over.

⁷ Wade, Matt (27th February, 2006) “Corruption undermines Aceh tsunami aid”, *Sydney Morning Herald* [Online], available from Internet: <http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/corruption-undermines-aceh-tsunami-aid/2006/02/26/1140888748196.html>, (visited 16th May, 2006).

⁸ Clifford, Tim (26th June, 2005) “Promises, promises”, *Gulf News*, [Online], available from Internet: <http://archive.gulfnews.com/articles/05/06/26/170364.html> (visited 23rd May, 2006).

⁹ Kerbaj, Richard, (7th September, 2006) “Australian NGOs Overheads Cut Tsunami Aid”, Indonesia-Relief.org, [Online], available from Internet: <http://www.indonesia-relief.org/mod.php?mod=publisher&op=viewarticle&cid=12&artid=1621>, (visited 25th May, 2006).

¹⁰ Author unknown, (19th August, 2005) “Only 8 Percent of Australian Tsunami Aid Goes to Aceh”, Indonesia-Relief.org, [Online], available from Internet: <http://www.indonesia-relief.org/mod.php?mod=bank&op=readnews&bankid=71&artid=1557>, (visited 25th May, 2006).

¹¹ O’Connor, Tim (2005) “Aid With Strings Attached”, *Inside Indonesia*, Oct–Dec 2005, pp. 8–9.

¹² O’Connor, Tim (8th April, 2005) “Tsunami Aid or Strategic Relationship”, [Online], available from Internet: <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=3315>, (accessed 16th May, 2006).

However, the news is not all bad. Australian aid has funded projects such as the A\$50 million Aceh Rehabilitation Program, which aims to restore health and education services in Aceh. Other major projects which were underway by June 2005 included the A\$50 million restoration of the local government system, A\$62 million for a post-graduate scholarship program and A\$10 million to rebuild the Zainoel Abidin Hospital in Banda Aceh.¹³ Australian aid networks were also responsible for setting up water-purification plants and sanitation stations.

In addition, a community hall has been built in Desa Kahu, and 180 similar halls will be established with Australian aid. The community halls, many of which were destroyed by the tsunami, form a crucial part of village life. They provide a place for community gatherings and practical events, such as issuing identity cards, village planning and providing building approvals. "Painstakingly restore[d] maps" have been drawn through AusAID covering 15,000 parcels of land to resolve land ownership disputes and A\$2 million has been used to rebuild the Ulee Lheue Port, the major port in Banda Aceh.¹⁴ Thus, some major steps have been taken through Australian aid to restore some normality to the shattered existence of the Achenese.

Aceh's suffering as a result of the tsunami is beyond belief. The promised Australian response was immediate and substantial, motivated by great generosity and a genuine will to help. However, the translation of generous offers to real implementation has proved difficult. Little of the Australian tsunami aid package has been spent and AusAID has been accused of a lack of transparency. General aid efforts have been hampered by corruption and high overheads. Moreover, some commentators have suggested the Australian Government has been more interested in politics than in providing relief. Given the positive outcomes achieved by the small investment of Australian aid to date, overcoming these barriers and failings is

¹³ Author unknown (26th June, 2005) "Tsunami — 6 months on", AusAID [Online], available from Internet: http://www.ausaid.gov.au/hottopics/topic.cfm?Id=6879_7685_2451_2892_1821, (visited 25th May, 2006).

¹⁴ Author unknown (7th December, 2005) "Aceh Rehabilitation Program", Aus AID, [Online], available from Internet: <http://www.ausaid.gov.au/hottopics/aiprd/aceh/5.html> (visited 25th May, 2006).

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of utmost importance if the shattered lives of the likes of Zainal Abidin are to recover from the world's most devastating tsunami ever.



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