

Indonesia - Saving Tsunami Victims - 10 min 35 sec [7 February 2005]

TIM PALMER: Thousands of helicopter missions have been flown, convoys of trucks roll across Sumatra and warships dot Aceh's coast. This is what the international community can throw at something on the scale of Aceh's tsunami. But on the ground in some of the worst-hit communities, the efficiency of the big aid groups is being called into question.

STEFAN TEMPLETON (CRISIS PARAMEDIC): I'd say their input has been tragically insufficient and mind-bogglingly slow in terms of the speed with which the small organisations reacted.

TIM PALMER: All along the most remote parts of the west coast, the lesson that's being learnt from such a widespread catastrophe is that when it comes to crisis response, small really is beautiful. And it doesn't come much smaller than this. The Sumber Rejeki, sailing out of Padang for the past two weeks, has kept some coastal communities alive.

SAM SHULTZ (AID VOLUNTEER): I call this gonzo aid work. We're just a group of people who live in Bali who've been in Bali for quite a while that just responded to this very quickly. There was no picking and choosing about who arrived; we just kinda took the group that came.

TIM PALMER: The gonzo aid group here is called the IDEP, Indonesian Development of Education and Permaculture. The volunteers became involved, like many Bali-based expatriates, after the Kuta bombings. Locally based, paying cash and speaking Indonesian, they took to the sea within days in tiny fishing boats or, in Sam Schultz's case, in the Noah's Ark-like splendour of the Rejeki, a ramshackle West Sumatran ferry.

SAM SCHULTZ: Well, we have the ability, because we're not bureaucratically dominated, to move very quickly and assess whatever seems to be the need. For example, we got our boat within a day. We filled it up within two more days after that, just by paying cash in the stores, what's locally available, and moving on it very quickly.

TIM PALMER: Here, \$9,000 a week buys you a ferry and 14 crew. Australia's aid agency AusAID was one of the few major donors to realise that small groups were getting in where large groups were failing. AusAID paid for the charter.

SAM SCHULTZ: AusAID has been doing miracles as far as I'm concerned. They're just looking around at people who are actually doing it, or look like they might do it, and they'll give people support. They gave us support. They paid for the first two weeks on the contract on the boat, have just extended it again.

TIM PALMER: The Sumber Rejeki's fourth aid mission starts from Banda Aceh. It's sailing for the hardest-to-reach places along Aceh's Indian Ocean coast. Aside from the Indonesian crew, the whole operation is incredibly slim. Sam Schultz has shelved half a dozen engineering projects in Bali. Stefan Zawada has left his new restaurant in Sanur in hold. Only Jonas Wihal from the major German aid agency Agro Action has any traditional experience of this type of work. He's based in Darfur in Sudan and says the extent of the crisis in Aceh is on a far greater scale.

JONAS WIHAL (AGRO ACTION): We have high-energy biscuits, salt, sugar, a few thousand eggs also, underwear for children and women, things like tampons for women have been - there's no market available, so these supplies were brought in.

TIM PALMER: That is the difference. The Sumber Rejeki, with its fast response targeted at specific communities, has been able not only to get in early but to bring the right aid.

SAM SCHULTZ: When we first arrived here, the only thing that was really here was noodles and water, and the people here at that point had already for 10 days been eating nothing but noodles and were getting sick from it, because obviously you can't eat instant noodles for that long and remain healthy. We were the first ones to bring in rice in large quantity and another mix of goods - cooking oil, all of those sort of things.

TIM PALMER: By the time the Rejeki steams into Lhokruet, it finds it's the first large boat to have been here since the tsunami. The survival rate here is horrifically low - probably under 10 per cent - but typical for this stretch of coast. Only a few refugees have stayed close to the sea, although the number has been bolstered by one baby delivered on the day of the disaster, not surprisingly named Tsunami. The dozen or so Indonesian soldiers here have had no communications with their command for the two weeks since they were dropped off, so they guardedly hand out small amounts of provisions every day, and they don't dare venture away from this headland. Armed GAM rebels are just 3 kilometres south, and 300 more are 10 kilometres inland. That means that several hundred people, mostly women, must walk the 24-kilometre round trip to this point then back to their village every day to receive handouts.

WOMAN: There are about 3,000 people up there. Many are sick; some have caught malaria or diarrhoea. It's cold up

there in the mountains, and there's lots of need.

TIM PALMER: It's a perfect distribution point for the Sumber Rejeki, but getting the aid on land in an area where nearly every fishing boat was destroyed by the waves isn't easy. Finally, a tonne and a half of rice goes ashore. High-energy enriched biscuits and a whole range of other supplies, right down to salt, which simply aren't being dropped off by helicopter runs, follow. Sam and Jonas set up a roadside depot.

SAM SCHULTZ: We're giving toothpaste, wash powder for clothing, a bar of soap; unfortunately, a very small amount of cooking oil, sugar, and a mixture of noodles, high-energy biscuits or rice, depending on what they can carry.

TIM PALMER: That's part of the objective. If the villagers are given as much as they can carry home, it's hoped they can get on with life beyond a seven-hour walk each day.

SAM SCHULTZ: I can give them larger amounts. The army, for obvious reasons, doesn't want to draw down their stocks too fast, so they only give them very, very small amounts, whereas I will give each woman a sack of rice. That's enough to feed her family for at least three or four days, and they don't have to walk 5 or 6 kilometres to get it.

TIM PALMER: The box is empty, it's time to weigh anchor again, and the Sumber Rejeki heads further south to Calang. As the ferry edges into the harbour, though, it's clear there are problems. 800 tonnes of aid aboard a car ferry are being unloaded a few boxes at a time into rubber dinghies. The Indonesian landing craft that have been here a week ago are gone.

SAM SCHULTZ: This has been incredibly difficult here. Every time we come here, there's a different way of unloading. Sometimes we're using local boats. The military has been very helpful with their amphibious tractors when they can, but they're very old equipment, they're breaking down a lot, they can only run them so many hours a day. The lack of landing craft here is just astonishing to me.

TIM PALMER: There's similar frustration ashore. Stefan Templeton and a French crisis medical team had been in Calang for 10 days before the UN arrived. He and the other small groups here have learned to make do.

STEFAN TEMPLETON: The only supplies come through between arrangements that are made between the smaller people, the smaller organisations on the ground. It's deals; it's all about humanitarian hustle. That's how it's done.

TIM PALMER: Hustling for what?

STEFAN TEMPLETON: Hustling for food. "I've got bed sheets; you've got mosquito nets; I've got some rice here."

TIM PALMER: The Sumber Rejeki crew has helped keep that hustle going. Sam's team brought water purification gear on an earlier voyage. But there's a sense among those here that the big agencies have simply forgotten Calang, the worst affected of all of Aceh's major coastal centres. Tetanus vaccine promised has failed to arrive. Helicopters would provide it, but there's no fuel for emergency evacuations.

STEFAN TEMPLETON: If you consider this a theatre of humanitarian war, the centre is here in Calang, and this centre and let's say the 70 kilometres on either side is really where the battle will be won or lost, and it's being lost for the moment, I have to say, in my opinion.

TIM PALMER: That's an easy opinion to reach when you see the conditions on the hills above Calang's devastated beaches. Perched on narrow ridges are thousands of people from surrounding villages, as well as the few hundred who survived and stayed here from a population of 18,000. Many, like Faridun, who lost her husband, seem frozen into inactivity and hopelessness.

FARIDUN (TSUNAMI SURVIVOR): Of course I'm scared to go back down by the sea. I'm scared the water will come back. I have a lot of children, three children to look after.

TIM PALMER: Back on the beach, Sam is working on a plan to overcome those fears. He has 1700 sheets of precious salvaged new roofing iron. The next stage is to build the houses and hope the people will come.

SAM SCHULTZ: It's gonna be like a domino effect. Somebody is going to build down on the beach, people here are going to see that it's comfortable. They feel it's very risky because they're all afraid of a new earthquake, a new tsunami, but once they see somebody doing it who's got a well, who's got a roof on their house, got a floor in their house, they're all going to want it, of course, particularly the women, and they'll start pushing their men in that direction.

TIM PALMER: Over three weeks, Sam and Stefan have helped take some of these communities from hunger and illness to a first tentative rebuilding. Now they're setting sail for home in Bali. The UN is in Calang now. It's hard to imagine that, person for person, any team here will match what's been done by the crew on the Sumber Rejeki.

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