

Between Life and Death: Surviving Aceh's Tsunami

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Deep under the Indian Ocean lies a fault in the earth's crust where two great tectonic plates collide; unseen and invisible they push silently against each other. On 26th December 2004 over 100 years of accumulated stress finally gave way and the seabed lifted to cause a massive geological event that would force billions of tonnes of seawater upward to create waves so powerful that it swept aside everything in its wake: buildings, ships, cars, and people. The Indian Ocean tsunami tore its way through countries as far apart as Somalia, The Maldives, Sri Lanka and Indonesia, and claimed over 200,000 lives, many of them children. What follows is the testimony of some of the survivors in Aceh in the northwest corner of Indonesia, at the epicentre of the quake. These are stories from ordinary people tragically caught up in extraordinary event that led many of them to say like Sahbandi a 50 year old survivor from Sigli...

I thought it was the end of the world... First of all came the earthquake, so I went outside and sat down on the ground with my neighbours. Then we heard an explosion, we thought maybe there was a fire, but then my son came running towards us he said something terrible had happened, he had been at the seashore and the sea had gone and where there was sea then there was land, and the land cracked and black water was pouring through it, and now the sea was coming. I grabbed my two grandchildren, one only 3 months old and ran. The water came, a huge wave that swamped us. It tore off my clothes, I hung on tightly to my grandchildren as we sank and surfaced, sank and surfaced; gasping for breath, but eventually the great water took them away. Finally, I reached an embankment where I saw my son. We swam to each other and we hugged each other in the water. Suddenly someone screamed that another wave was coming. We climbed a tree and waited for the water to recede. I went back to my village after 50 days, my house had gone. There was nothing left, nothing - only the clothes of my dead grandchildren scattered in some debris.

Irwansyah Putra Siregar, 33 year old worker from Calang: I was a volunteer helping to repair the foundations of our mosque when it happened. Following the earthquake I went home to my family. Everything was fine though, just a few broken plates. Then my brother-in-law came rushing in, he said "Get out quick - the water's coming!" When we went outside the water was all about us, the government complex was smashed, then came a great wave right in front of us. I thought we would all die. I ran with my wife and three children towards the mountain, but the water quickly swept around us. My wife held on tightly to my daughter and I held my two sons, but the youngest was ripped from my arms. I tried to get him back, but he had gone, God had called him and there was nothing I could do. Then I caught sight of my wife and saw her crying, her arms were empty, and my daughter too had gone. Then came an even bigger wave and rolled us all up, took us down and up again, my second son was taken by that wave. I held onto some timber and was swept to Kampung Blang village – about 6 km away – where I lost consciousness. When I wakened I was covered in blood, and thought I was the only one alive

in Calang. All around me were dead bodies, blood and dead bodies - nothing but dead bodies - it was the judgement day.

Ihsan Fadli, 24 year old driver, Meulaboh: My baby had been born that Sunday, my first born, so we were celebrating with a ritual meal. I was so happy. Then the earthquake came and I carried my son outside for safety. Then there were screams and shouts from down the street, and I couldn't believe what I saw - a dark wave as tall as a house rushing towards us. I gathered up my baby and ran with my wife and her family towards the lane, but the wave quickly engulfed us and my son was gone. I was carried by the water until it slammed me against the zinc roof of a house which tore off my finger, the blood poured from my hand. When the water went away, I climbed down. My house was gone, people everywhere were crying. After a while I found my parents, but I never found my wife and baby. Officially they are missing, but I know they are dead. I had been married only one year - I loved my wife, I still love her. Every day I say to the empty air "I love you, I love our baby."

Pardian Syahputra, 9 year old elementary school pupil, Banda Aceh: I don't remember it happening that well, but suddenly there was a big fishing boat from Lampulo in our street. It sailed straight into our house and smashed it to pieces. Then the water carried me wherever it wanted. My parents and my auntie were screaming for help, calling out to me, but the water carried me away. The water was dirty, full of garbage and stuff that was crashing into people. Then the third wave came and carried me further. I climbed onto a roof and was alone there all afternoon, very afraid to see the dead bodies everywhere, kids too. Then when the water went away, my father came and carried me down. He told me that my auntie and my mother were dead.

Mulya, 29 year old fish seller, Lampulo: I was at my stall when the earthquake struck, so I went home to see that my wife was safe. My family were there and we all stood outside, chatting with the villagers. Suddenly someone yelled that the sea was coming - it seemed to be 30 metres high. We ran with my brother-in-law, he had his family with him. He asked me to take his baby, which was 14 months old. So I took the child and we all ran together as the wave broke over us. It tore my wife from me and rolled me down under. I held on to the baby as tight as I could, but when I emerged my wife had gone. I was bumped about by timber and garbage; I thought it was the end of the day. I clung on to the baby as I was swept along. I said to myself "If this is doomsday, take my soul; but if not, please save us." Then a piece of timber hit me and shook the baby from my grasp. I saw it floating away, I swam desperately against the current and eventually got hold of it, but again I was being hit by wood, beams, cars, and debris. I climbed to the top of a tree, but still the water was rising. The baby had swallowed a lot of water and was still. I prayed to God for help and after a few minutes the child vomited up the seawater. After an hour the water subsided and someone came to help me.

Then I saw the baby's father. He took his child with tears in his eyes and hugged me to him.

Sri Rahayu, 30 year old housewife, Lamprit: I had just left the hospital where my son was recovering from an illness, my house was nearby. The earthquake happened and it was extraordinary, the dome of Lamprit mosque broke and the minaret shook. When I reached home I thought I could hear the sound of an approaching storm, a great wind blowing. I said to my sisters "Let's go inside the house, maybe it's a hurricane." But then the police came to tell everyone "The sea is coming, the sea is coming, run for your lives and pray to God!" When I saw the water, I couldn't believe it was true - over 2 metres high. I grabbed my son, who was five and dragged him along the street. I grazed and cut his legs, but I didn't care, I just wanted to save him. We ran back to the hospital and with some others climbed to the third floor. The door was closed, so we battered it down together. From there we could see the devastation below, water everywhere, roofs of houses floating away, cars and a small row of children from the bus stop. And as they floated; the people, they were hit by cars, wood, even fridges and televisions - it all moved so fast, it was terrible to see.

Zainab, 25 year old housewife, Samudra: I was cleaning my house when the earthquake came. I sat outside on the road with my sister and my nephews; my father, an invalid was still inside. Suddenly my cousin came running up the road saying "The sea is coming!" I grabbed my nephew who was 4 years old and wrapped him in a long batik cloth to carry him. No one would help my father, so I struggled with him too. When we reached the nearby field the wave struck us down. I floated with my nephew, who asked me if we were going to die. I managed to cling on to a coconut tree, my clothes were torn away and I was conscious that I was wearing only my underwear. I was very scared. Then I saw the leper from the village. He lifted a child from the water and placed him safely on some bamboo. The water was still rising and we needed to climb higher. I asked him for help, so he took my nephew and climbed up with him. As the second wave struck he handed me the child. My house was gone, but all of my family, even my father were safe.

Mawardi, 28 year old rickshaw driver, Banda Aceh: I was driving past the prison on the first day after the tsunami when I heard a man's voice crying out for help. Together with some others we found him, trapped beneath the first floor of the prison where the building had collapsed on top of him. We tried to move the bricks and the iron bars that held him there, but it was impossible, we needed a machine. So eventually we had to leave him there, crying in pain. I went back there the next day, but he had died during the night, alone. His body remained trapped there until January 3rd, and nearby another body hung from an iron beam. But at that time we didn't think about the dead. We were too busy searching for survivors and our missing relatives.

Maimunah, 90 year old, Pulo Aceh: I woke very early that day to pray, and noticed how red the sky was. That was not usual. I went outside and there seemed to be no wind, not even a breeze, and yet dark clouds were gathering on the horizon as if a storm was coming. Then the earthquake happened, so I went inside, woke my son and grandchild and told them we must climb the nearby hill. I knew that God was over the land and would punish the wicked on this day. We ran to the hill with other village friends, all the time urging them to go faster; I could sense the disaster behind us. From the safety of the hill we saw the huge sea wave destroy the villages; no earthly power could resist it. Eventually a fishing boat came to rescue us. I saw the majesty of God that day.

Aidil Taha, 52 year old fisherman, Alue Naga: I was at the seashore, fishing when the earthquake happened. The sea shook, the waves collided in all directions, so I laid face down on the sand to wait for it to pass. Then when it was over, I couldn't believe what I saw; I had never seen anything like it before in my life - the sea had disappeared. I could even see the coral that lay beneath the waves, and everywhere fish were stranded. So I rushed out there and picked up some big fish... and then I saw the wave. Of course I instantly dropped those fish and ran for my life, but the wave was massive and there was no way I could outrun it; it swept me and carried me up to Krueng Cut Bridge where I thought I would be safe, but then the second wave came and knocked me unconscious. When I wakened I was somehow hooked onto a tree at Simpang Mesra – about 7 km from my original village, and then came the third wave that stranded me on the second floor of a shop. I had a broken finger and was naked, but I was alive. God saved my family and me; we were all safe.

Sari Ekawati, 30 year old staff at Koperasi PLN Wilayah, Banda Aceh: I was helping my mother to cook; my brother was outside warming the car engine. But we all went outside when the earthquake struck; we thought our house would collapse. Then came the warnings, people shouting “The sea is coming!” I began to run with the others, and I saw my brother driving away with my parents in his car, but before they reached the end of the lane they were swept away by the waves. Then the water swept me up too. It was so dark, hot and muddy and I couldn't grab hold of anything; it just carried me along, though I did see three of my nephews clinging on to some wood debris. But then the next wave came and I couldn't see them anymore. When it was over, there were bodies everywhere; I thought the world was coming to an end; everywhere people calling out for help. My brother was saved, but I have lost my parents, nephews and the rest of my brothers and sisters. Their bodies have never been found; they are all dead. What can I say? I hope that God will guide me through the rest of my life - that's all.

Ir. T. Mulfizar, 47 year old head of forest department, Calang: Myself and my family, apart from my eldest son made it to high ground when the wave came, like a scream it roared all around us. The dome of the mosque looked like a

plate floating on the water. No one had a chance - the water was like a magnet; it rolled and sucked people in and under, it was black as ash, full of wood, metal, iron, fridges, cars, trucks, motor bikes - it carried it all, rolled it all along, in and under, and amongst it all, people dead and dying. I thought it was the end of the world. I thought it was judgement day and God was drowning the world. We stayed on the mountain for three days, about 2,500 people. There was nowhere else to go; everything else had been swept away. We found a bag of rice in the mud and ate it raw. Everyone was starving. Later, six of us managed to get to Banda Aceh by boat to ask for help. We went to the governor's house, he was praying at the time and I saw some leftovers from a meal. I was so hungry I scraped them together into one bowl, and because I felt so ashamed, I ate it in the bathroom. I reported that we needed rice and other food, and diesel. The social department gave us 200 boxes of instant noodles, but no rice; the Indonesian government's procedure was so complicated that even the National Logistics Agency Bulog, wouldn't give us any. Eventually we got some from the Red Cross. There were many such obstacles before we managed to get aid to those people, and all the while I was thinking of my son, who was missing. I tried to tell myself that I was luckier than some; I still had three other children and my wife, others had lost everyone; but he was still my son and something told me he was alive. And he was - I found him in Krueng Cala, but with a badly injured leg. I can't explain how I felt. I cried like I had never cried before, and screamed with the anguish of it all - my son was alive! He felt guilty because all his friends were gone and he cried too. Before I returned to the refugees, I took him to the hospital where his leg was amputated. But God had spared his life.

Juanda, 28 year old humanitarian worker, Simpang Surabaya: I was at work preparing for a meeting. We felt the building shake and went outside because we knew it was an earthquake. A friend had a motorbike and suggested we went into town to check that everything was okay. When we got there we could see that many buildings had collapsed, and people were standing around looking scared. From there we headed on to Blang Padang (a communal square), but as we approached, people were running towards us shouting "The water is coming!" There were people in cars too, speeding away, crashing into people, knocking them over, injuring them so they couldn't run away. Then we heard a terrible roar like an aeroplane's engine, and we saw the water. It was incredible, so high, higher than the buildings around us. When it was about 100 metres away from us we began to climb a water tower. But the wave was too strong and it swept me away high into the air. As I floated I saw electric cables above, so I grabbed hold and hung on tight as the water underneath me raged, carrying away everyone and everything. I was lucky, I survived and so did my family. But I am traumatised by it all, and every night I go to sleep I see it happen all over again: people being crushed by cars, the dead and the living being swept away beneath me while I hung there, helpless. There was nothing I could do to help, nothing, the water was too angry.

Albur, 45 year old Head of Sub District Pengasing, Central Aceh: I was manager of the social department of Central Aceh and was at home at Bebesan District at the time of the tsunami. I had never felt the force of a big earthquake before; it felt like God's fate, it felt like the wisdom of al Qur'an was visiting us; an introspective moment that spoke of God's grandeur. But no buildings collapsed where I was, although the electricity supply was interrupted. When it was over, the refugees came flooding into our district. At first it was about 600 people, but they kept coming, so I began to organise food and shelter for them. Many of them were taken in by local people; people were wonderful and all pulled together. When I saw those broken people stumbling into Pegasing I was very moved and was reminded how we are all one and the same before God almighty. We gave them food, vegetables, used clothes and money so that they could find accommodation when they needed to. I took some refugees into my house too, about ten people in all. There is one remains that has lost everything, all his family. I consider him my child now. My house is his home; he is my family.

Kopka Baharuddin, 48 year old Military personnel at sub district military HQ, Blang Bintang: I was at home that morning, waiting to go on duty later, so I was taking a bath when the earthquake happened. Everyone was in a panic. I got on my motorbike and rode toward the military office, but the ground still shook and threw me a few times. As I reached my office I saw the dark wave approaching. At first I thought it was a flood, just some sort of a flood, but then I saw how massive it was and threw down my motorbike and began to run. I managed to climb a tamarind tree and looked down as the water passed by full of garbage and dead bodies. I saw my house in the distance, rammed by the water and prayed that my family were safe. A man floated past me calling out for help, but there was nothing I could do, I saw a woman rolled under by a black wave, never to appear again, and I saw a child floating by sat on a spring bed, on top of the mattress, he just sat there, looking calm as everyone around were screaming for help. My family and friends were safe, but what happened to the people I saw swept by the water, and to that small child? I'll never know.

Abrip Sembiring, 50 years old policeman at Pulo Aceh police HQ: People were in a panic following the earthquake, and then someone was yelling that the sea was coming. I looked behind the office and saw that the seawater had gone and was amazed that I could see the bottom of the ocean. Then came the first wave - a wave so long, the like of which I had never seen before. I ran with everyone else to the hill. But the wave tore chunks out of the hill when it hit. When I climbed to the top; it was as if I was on an island; everything around me had become the sea; our land was sinking. I thought of my family and how much I loved them and prayed that they were safe. We stayed on the hill for two days. We ate what we could: roots, cassava leaves and we drank coconut water. We all prayed there together, but one Islamic leader said that it was judgement day, and that it was too late to ask for repentance now; we should have done that before when we had the chance, now it was over. It

was very strange to hear this. But I was thinking of my family and decided to try and find them. Some fishermen picked us up and took me to Lampulo area in Banda Aceh around 10 km from my original place. It was extraordinary as I made my way from Lampulo to Blower, my feet never touched the ground; I walked on garbage, rubble, broken timber, and all around me were dead bodies, many of them naked as the sea had torn their clothes away. Wherever I could, I covered them, but there were so many. When I arrived at Blower I couldn't find anyone at all, not a single person; the silence was like ghost town. When I reached Banda Aceh I learnt to my great relief that my family were safe and so began to help with the relief effort. We got clothes and mineral water, but there just weren't enough tents for everyone. But we were all like one big family and helped each other wherever we could.

Ayu Trie Utami, 18 year old student, Ulee Lhue: After the earthquake I was outside on the road with my family. Then the sky grew dark and was full of black clouds. At first I couldn't make out what was happening, but then to my amazement I could see that the black cloud was actually a huge wave. Before I could do anything it hit, and everything went dark... I thought I had died. When I wakened I was in front of Iskandar Muda University at Surien. It was all very hazy as I was drifting in and out of consciousness. I opened my eyes at one time, only to faint away again when I saw there were dead bodies all around me. After some time I returned to consciousness and found that I was inside a car. The water had taken me there. There were people nearby who were shocked and surprised when I opened my eyes. They thought I was dead, even though there were no wounds on my body. I have no idea how I survived, and why me - all of my family are gone, I cannot find any of them.

T. Alfian, 28 year old mechanic, Keudah: When the earthquake came I was a prisoner in the Banda Aceh jail for selling drugs. We sat around talking about the event, and then the second earthquake came. We heard a deep rumbling sound and then the prison officers opened the gate. But it was too late, the seawater had already flowed into the jail and I thought if I went out, the current would carry me off. So I went back in and climbed to the top of the high wall. But the water was so strong it pulled down the wall, so I somehow made it to the zinc roof, but yet again the water tore that away too, and I was at the mercy of the raging torrent that carried me away. At first I tried to grab a tree trunk, and then I hung on to a fridge. I managed to make it to a pine tree, but another wave came and swept me away yet again, taking me deep down under its flow. I surfaced at the Pante Pirak Bridge - about 500 meters away from the prison, but the water was relentless and carried me off yet again. After a while the sea became calmer and I was cast up on a dyke river behind Kesdam Hospital. I saw bodies everywhere and amongst them all, a small child struggling in the middle of the river, calling for help. But the current was still raging and I was too weak and exhausted, there was nothing I could do but watch as the water carried him away. Perhaps he is dead now. I will feel guilty about that until the day I die. I lay there choking as the water eventually receded and an old man arrived and gave me a drink. I vomited up the black

water I had swallowed from the torrent, took a breath and went to look for my wife and parents. They cried with joy and relief when they saw me, and we all hugged each other, grateful to be alive.

Aires, ten year old boy, Blower: I was at home taking a bath when the earthquake came. I ran outside with only my towel. We all sat together on the road, and then I went back inside and watched television. Then my mother rushed into the room and said we had to run as fast as we could to the mosque because the sea was coming. So I ran through the streets with my parents, brother and sister. Everywhere there were people running, motorbikes knocked some of them down, and the drivers didn't care if they hurt or killed other people because they just wanted to save themselves. But the sea water came and carried everything away - bodies, garbage, even cars and the motorbikes. When it was over we went to Taman Budaya (Cultural Park) where many of the injured were gathering. There were injured people everywhere; some were unconscious, some were being sick, many were bleeding and some had lost legs, had them torn off. Many of them were crying out for help, but nobody seemed to be doing anything for them.

Edy Syaputra, 24 year old Marine officer, Cadek: I was at a stall eating breakfast with friends when the earthquake happened. Suddenly people were running towards us. They said the sea had run dry, and then I saw that the nearby river was dry too. I climbed the concrete wall of the bridge and saw the wave in the distance like a great-coiled cobra rearing up, higher than the coconut trees. My friend pulled up on his motorbike and we raced towards Krueng Cut, but it was no good, the water trapped us. Then came the second wave, which washed us away in its wake. I didn't feel the third wave, but as I floated I saw many people hanging on to a huge tree that had been uprooted. I also saw people in the upper story of a big house. They had survived the first wave, but when the next one came it simply crashed and rolled up the house and swept them all away. At this time I decided to submit to the will of God because I thought it was the end of the world. I managed to grab hold of a coconut tree, and hung on tightly. Although I was injured I couldn't feel anything, and somehow felt very calm as I watched dead bodies and cars and even ships floating into the city. I sat high in the tree until about two o' clock, and then as the water receded climbed slowly down because now my injuries were causing me some pain. I walked through the muddy water and was even forced to step on the dead bodies that were everywhere; I had no choice. A child screamed for help and I carried him to Lamnyong Bridge. My brother was shocked when he saw me; he thought I was dead. But I was one of the lucky ones; all of my family had miraculously survived. Somehow the experience has brought me closer to God. I feel I want to do something to thank him for my survival and wonder what I was saved for; perhaps he will show me. But I pray that it will never happen again.

Juriah, 36 year old house wife, Sigli town: It was Sunday, so I was washing clothes when someone came and told me to run because the sea was coming.

I gathered up my son, who was two years old and ran, my other children running beside me. But I didn't really know where to run to escape the water. The tsunami rammed us and we were all separated from each other. I clung to my son, hugged him close to me, but the wave rolled us under and took him from me. I hung on to a mango tree as the rubble of destroyed houses and dead bodies flowed by. I kept looking for my family, but they weren't there. When it was all over and the army helped me down, I went directly to the hospital. My husband was there and so too were the bodies of two of my children who had died there. Three were still missing. Later we found their bodies too, washed up behind the jail. By God's mercy I at least could hold them once more before we buried them. My house was gone and everything in it. But what do I care? We can find property again, but our children are gone forever.

Doctor Arjuna, 30 year old doctor, Teunom: We escaped the deluge because we managed to make it to the mountain. There were many people there, but we didn't eat anything the first day, we just drank water from the river. We were really isolated in Teunom and couldn't be reached by land or sea. We got help eventually after three whole weeks when food was thrown down to us from a helicopter. But fights broke out over the food; it was sad to see people behaving in such a desperate way to each other. I was there for two months before I went home to join in with helping the survivors. But my house was smashed to pieces. My husband and I dug through the mud and managed to find some medicine, only sanmol for diarrhoea. That's all we had at the time. Then seven days later military doctors came and gave us four boxes of medicine, so I opened a clinic at SD Pasie Tuebe. We did what we could, but it was difficult because we only had one midwife and a nurse to help. But the medical help was not adequate, we were desperately short of antibiotics and multivitamins and medicine for the children. I never got anything from the health service at that time, only from the local marines. I felt so sorry that we couldn't help everyone; everyday I hoped that medical help would arrive.

Yusrizal, 23 year old university graduate, Aceh Jaya: All of my family were gathered together in Banda Aceh for a ritual meal because my mother was about to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. The earthquake of course interrupted all of that and we spilled out onto the street. When it had passed we came back inside. Not long after, however we heard a sound outside like a storm from the sea, then three explosions like car tyres exploding. I went outside to investigate and heard what I thought was a great wind; but actually it was the sound of the wave coming towards us; it must have been as high as 20 metres. I called to my family and we all ran; some used a pedicab, some motorbikes, but mostly we just ran. We were all split up when the wave hit us. The first wave was black as night and it smashed into the houses all around, but the second wave simply destroyed them, destroyed everything, left the whole area flat, like the end of the day. I had sometimes heard some of the elders quoting from the Qu'ran that this might one day happen: the world might one day come to an end, and now incredibly it seemed that it was. I met up

with my family on the mountain; we had nothing to eat for three days. We asked the army to shoot cows and buffaloes because we were starving. So we slaughtered the cattle and we all ate it, the army too. Then after over a month later help arrived. We had one box of instant noodles for each family, that's all there was. All that was left of our house was the foundations. Now we have to start from nothing, the same as so many people here.

Ali Hasmi, 40 year old Government Officer, Simeulu Island: It was a holiday Sunday, so I was at home when it happened. We had already had an earthquake in 2002, which was recognised as a national disaster, but I never expected anything like this. There was a story passed down from my parents and my grandparents of a tsunami in 1907; a massive wave had appeared following an earthquake then, but to my generation it was just a story. So when the earthquake came it wasn't that unusual because on Simeulu they occur frequently. My family went outside, but I remained inside. Then when I hear them screaming I rushed to the door, but the foundations must have moved and jammed the door. I managed somehow to force it open and saw that the earthquake was a big one. Everyone began to run towards the mountains; we knew the danger of the tsunami. That is why so few people died on this island, even though we were closest to the earthquake.

Zul Baili, 27 year old truck driver, Simeulu: My family were not with me on Simeulu when it happened, they were in West Aceh: my grandmother was there, my wife and children were there. I switched on the television, and to my horror I saw that Banda Aceh and Meulaboh were destroyed. I hoped that my family would be okay at Teumon in West Aceh as it was about two and a half kilometres from the sea. The next day I set out in a friend's fishing boat to find them. As we approached Ujong Karang, we found bodies floating in the water all around us. We took aboard as many as we could to bury later, but there wasn't enough room for all of them; they were all around us. Then I walked from Meulaboh to Lambalek; it took me two days. People fed me, gave me rice and shelter on the way there. All the while I was thinking of my baby and my wife, how happy we were together and hoping that they were all safe. After three days I reached Teumon. The villagers there said my family were at Pasie Tuebee, but something inside told me it wasn't so; I knew that were dead. I felt weak and drained, but carried on. When I reached there, my father-in-law greeted me with the sad news: "Your wife is gone, your children are gone." My scream is a silent one; it is with me each day. I tell myself that it must be God's will, and I must do his work from now on. But sometimes I wish I had gone too, how can I live without them?

Sayed, 18 year old, Military hospital, Banda Aceh: I was washed away to the bridge in town. Everywhere there were the bodies of the dead and dying. I tried to help where I could, but there wasn't much I could do. Later I went to Merduati to where my house is to look for my family. My house was gone, and I couldn't find my mother. But I found my father at the military hospital. The doctor said that he was fine; there was nothing wrong with him, even though

he had swallowed the black mud from the wave. The doctor gave him iodine and sent him away. There was another man there who had swallowed the black mud too. I spoke to him, but he was very weak. The next day at the camp where we were staying, my father's health deteriorated further, so I went back to the hospital for help. When I got there, the man from the day before was outside the front door of the hospital; he was dead. My father passed away later that day, too. Since then I've just been wandering around from place to place; I couldn't stay in the camp anymore. Sometimes I stay with a friend; sometimes I sleep where I can. I don't know what to do; I don't know where to go. Not one of my family have survived: cousins, aunts, father, mother, they are all gone. I am all alone in the world, there is only me. I have no one.

Ismail M. Syah, bureau chief of local newspaper Serambi Indonesia, Lhokseumawe: I saw the earthquake in Lhokseumawe, and then the water came. I could not believe my eyes and I took some photographs – I was thinking it would make a news story for Serambi. But when I tried to call the Serambi office in Banda Aceh to tell them I had a good story, the phone line was dead. I really thought this story I had written might be headline news, so I thought it was important for Serambi to print it. I decided to drive to Banda Aceh to deliver the story personally. I went with my friend for company, but as we drove the five hours from Lhokseumawe to Banda Aceh we could see that the disaster that had struck where we were was not just local, that it had devastated many parts of Aceh. We saw people just wandering around; their houses had been swept away. Everything was destroyed. We arrived in Banda Aceh about 10 o'clock at night – it was too dark to see anything. I was very scared. It was like a ghost town. The lights were out everywhere, everything was black. But from the outline of things, I knew much had changed in that city. The journey to the Serambi office was terrible: dead bodies and debris everywhere, and many injured people wandering or sitting. We could see that the Serambi office had been affected, but not clearly. I returned the next morning to see the degree of damage to the office. I was very shocked to see the building which now stood badly damaged, but more worried about my friends who worked there. My journey was over. I was still carrying my front page story, but it was not to be printed in Serambi Indonesia. Only silence greeted me as I entered the office; silence, and the ghosts of my friends who had been swept away by the tsunami to places as yet unknown.

These stories are the testimonies of the survivors of a disaster that is difficult to comprehend unless you have actually experienced it. The terrible reality of a force so great there is nothing you can do but hope to survive, reminds us all of how frail we are, how utterly at the mercy of the natural world around us that we so much take for granted, and how ties of friendship, family and loved ones are all that really count. As one of the contributors to this book poignantly remarks: *“My house was gone and everything in it. But what do I care? We can find property again, but our children are gone forever.”*

In a world of increasing materialism where people's worth is often measured by the make of car they drive, the clothes they wear, or the places they live; the voices on these pages spell out what is really important in our lives, and why a disaster can sometimes unite the whole world in a universal grief that recognises the bonds of human suffering. The humanitarian response and gifts of charity in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean disaster make us realise we all have more in common with each other than we ever understood. The day when some of us believed that the world was ending has left its orphans searching for a new beginning; let's hope their voices help us to understand how very human we all are, how regardless of our race, creed, religious or political beliefs we are all governed by the same human condition and how every single life is unique and precious.

A multi million dollar 'aid industry' has burgeoned in Aceh since the terrible events of 26 December 2004, bringing financial and material gain to many. Aceh has become a land of opportunity: fierce competition for lucrative reconstruction contracts between companies, NGOs and others has become increasingly evident; and foreign aid workers enjoy inflated salaries and benefits. Yet tens of thousands of people remain displaced in camps and other temporary housing, and hundreds of thousands of hearts are breaking for those who have been lost. The human cost of the events of only several months ago, that opened the door to such 'opportunity' and ignited the flames of greed for power and money in Aceh have been all but forgotten. This land of Aceh belongs to those who have already been returned to the land; their stories are in the stories of the survivors who saw their last minutes as they were swept away by the great force of nature.

