



PARTNERS
International

Tsunami Briefing

February 11, 2005

Partners International is committed to timely and accurate reporting on what we are doing together with our indigenous partner ministries to relieve the suffering, and contribute to the recovery of lives and communities, of those affected by the earthquake-spawned tsunamis. Partners International is a church-planting ministry that already has local partners on the scene who are able to help in relief and development in a culturally and economically appropriate way, and for the long term. We will provide these briefings as relevant information becomes available.

This eighth *Tsunami Briefing* contains the reflections of Dr. Ben, Partners International's Area Director for East Asia, who in January led a medical team to minister on islands off Indonesia's west coast.

We are grateful for the privilege of ministering to the people of Indonesia and especially of Aceh during this time of great disaster and need. In a small way, we were able to show we cared about them in the name of Christ. It was our honor to serve them with the Indonesian Christian church planters we went with, and who were our interpreters—we thank them. Every day during the trip we were thankful for the prayers and support of many around the world. They were with us in spirit and we needed them!

The medical team of 14 visited 12 villages and refugee camps, and settled to minister in nine of them. In these places, we interacted with and treated most of the people living there as well as more from surrounding villages. The villages we visited were on the islands of Banyak, Simeulue, and Nias, and mainland Aceh, places close to the earthquake's epicenter. The islands are beautiful!

The people on the islands we visited were glad to see us. In some places, we were the first boats to have arrived since the tsunami. We were certainly the first Christians to have arrived in most of these island villages. There has been much destruction of houses and boats in these villages, but we were pleased to see that there were very few deaths or major injuries. The islanders had been taught by their forefathers to run to higher ground after a major earthquake, and when the sea starts to recede from the shores!

Their overall health care has been very poor in past years and, coupled with the relative poverty, there is much medical and physical need. There were many touching moments for each of us—a young boy with severe diarrhea who could not even stand up, needing fluids and medicines to stop the diarrhea; a lady with a broken arm needing to be plastered up weeks after the fracture; children near death with acute malaria which increased after the tsunami; old people with poor nutrition and now severely anemic with bleeding peptic ulcers; ladies who have neuropathy and anemia following pregnancies from lack of vitamins and iron; men helplessly watching their infected wounds getting worse with nowhere to turn for help; young girls with strange symptoms because they are doing the hard labor of adult men in order to earn a living, and who find their self-esteem in tatters; men having “heart” problems after the tsunami because of unexpressed grief, and the burden of responsibility to rebuild their homes and communities.

We listened to them; we cleaned their wounds; stitched up cuts; fixed fractures; gave medicine for infections, diarrhea, ulcers, and high blood pressure; and handed out vitamins and supplements. We tried to look in their eyes with the love of Christ; we prayed for many of them. For many this would be the first time a Christian prayed for them in the name and love of Christ. We even cried with them.

I recall Dr. Cheung with a lady with most likely an incurable tumor. As our Indonesian church planter and interpreter shared with her and then prayed for her, the patient started crying and praying to God herself. What a moment it was as I watched tears coming down the cheeks of all those huddled there.

I recall how our brother TK shared what that first day on the island meant for him as he talked about two young girls who had their ears pierced recently. Unfortunately, the earrings were a rusted safety pin for one girl and a nylon string for the other girl! It was a painful sight with pus around the swollen earlobes. TK held back his tears as he recounted how Drs. Chan and Neoh lovingly, patiently, and skillfully removed the rusted pin and the nylon string and cleaned up the pus-filled ears.



The medical team.



2,200 pounds of medicines and supplies packed for Indonesia.

The haunting look of one baby still stares at me today. I was stunned when the mother brought in this few-months-old baby. He had been ill for weeks, starting to go blue, fairly motionless, limp in his mother's arms, unable to cry much, dehydrated, at death's door step. She did not dare to take her child to the hospital for she has little faith in it and felt that going there would mean certain death. Our Indonesian church planter friends helped her, taking her child for X-rays and various blood tests. He was suffering from severe malaria and needed urgent hospital treatment which our Indonesian Christians arranged.

Each of us has many stories to tell, to reflect on. But we were glad we were there to help a little.

The trip was not easy! It was probably one of the hardest mission trips I have done in more than ten years of such trips. Many of the infrastructures we take for granted do not exist. For example, we had to reach the islands by two boats instead of by air because the simple air strips were damaged after the tsunami. And it was not the right season for boat trips! Within the first hour at sea, I was seasick—in a cold sweat, nauseated, and vomiting despite medications! It was the worst feeling of my life. I quietly told myself if this boat sank, I would not even try to swim because I was so exhausted! For the next 10 days, living in the boats, most of the team members were seasick most of the time!

We were told our trip to reach the first island would take 16 hours. It ended up as a 48-hour trip for one boat and 36 hours for the other! The trip was made worse by our anxiousness to get there and start working! With all these delays, we saw no patients for the first three days, something that made us feel almost as bad as the severe seasickness!

I imagine it was tempting for team members to express dismay and complain about the way things were arranged. But I admire my team members. They were good. No one expressed any complaints to me. They suffered quietly and waited patiently for the opportunity to spring into action. And spring into action we did. We were busy! By the end of the trip we had treated some 2,000 patients.

After the main team left, Iris [Dr. Ben's wife] and I went to Banda Aceh. We served in the surrounding villages and camps. We visited the devastated town—or what was left of it. You drive for an hour and all you see for miles are houses completely flattened. As I walked among the debris, I could smell the unmistakably nauseating sweet-salty smell of dead bodies under the debris almost a month after the tsunami. In one place, six bodies were dug out in the half hour I was there.

Among the dead, I cried inside for this people who have been brought down on their knees. When I talked to patients in the camps, touching those who survived, I watched their expressionless faces, many unable or unwilling yet to open up the emotional dam of grief, loss, and fear. It felt like part of them had died.

There is much to be done in years to come—houses to be rebuilt, jobs reestablished, water and basic needs restored, health care delivered, families resettled, grief to overcome, fear to conquer, life to be renewed. An extensive rehabilitation program has been launched in selected parts of Aceh by Partners International under the leadership of our Area Director in Indonesia with our Indonesian church partners.

Thank you for your prayers, encouragement, and support. There are many instances when I thank God for your prayers—when we had to get 1.2 tons of medical equipment and supplies on the plane; when our transportation for the islands and on the islands did not turn up; when officials were threatening to hinder us; when the earthquake's aftershocks caught us by surprise; when our van broke down in the middle of the night in rebel territory; when our car nearly hit a large truck on a curve; and when I was violently vomiting away! Your prayers carried us through, and the Lord marvelously answered prayers every day!

In the midst of all that, I am glad that we can minister to the Acehnese—to help them; to listen to them; to bless them with our touch, words, and love; to pray for them; to heal them; and to bear with them just that tiny bit the enormous sadness they are going through. What we have done was a tiny drop in the ocean. Yet I was encouraged to hear them say, "Thank you for coming. We were told Christians were horrible people. But in times when we need help most, it is the Christians who come."

Indeed, we are such a small candle in a large dark room; yet Jesus said "You are the light of the world and the salt of the earth." Thank you for being with us for this service to Aceh.