FOCUS JUNE–AUG 2005

POST TSUNAMI UPDATE

PROGRESS REPORT

Recovery is underway in areas affected by the Indian Ocean tsunami that struck on 26 December 2004. Australian aid, pledged by the Government and through public donations, is going towards reconstruction. With high public interest in how the money is spent, the Australian Government is keen to document progress. Understandably, everyone wants to know the funds are managed well and directed to areas of greatest need.

‘Given the unprecedented generosity of Australia’s response we want to report regularly on our progress and, above all, show how Australia’s $1 billion aid package to Indonesia will be disbursed over the next five years,’ says the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer.

The Australian Government initially committed $60 million towards immediate humanitarian relief in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Seychelles. These funds were used for emergency food, health services, shelter, water and sanitation. As attention shifted towards reconstruction, the next stage in the recovery, Australia announced its largest ever single aid package – the $1 billion Australia–Indonesia Partnership for Reconstruction and Development (AIPRD).

Australia’s reconstruction efforts in Aceh are focused on essential areas of health, education and other government services. Renovations to the Banda Aceh hospital are underway. Aceh lost many hospital staff, health workers and teachers in the tsunami. Australia is assisting in the refurbishment of nursing schools, re-establishing pharmacy services, and training health workers and teachers. Basic supplies are going to schools. Thirty-six schools across five districts have received 80 tonnes of equipment.

At a recent meeting in Canberra, government ministers from both countries agreed for work to begin on a:
- $50 million ‘Aceh Rehabilitation Program’
- $10 million program to strengthen Indonesia’s disaster and management response systems
- $50 million Government Partnerships program over five years to assist Indonesia in economic, financial and public sector management. Australian and Indonesian government agencies will exchange skills and expertise.

Since the tsunami, Indonesia has suffered another natural disaster. An earthquake measuring 8.7 on the Richter scale shook Nias, off the coast of northern Sumatra. It killed more than 600 people, injured about 25,000 and collapsed almost all buildings higher than one storey. Australia immediately promised $1 million in humanitarian relief.

LEFT: Sri Lanka. Making way for rebuilding. Women with their bare hands pick up rubble. AusAID has supported cash-for-work clean-up operations post-tsunami on the east coast of Sri Lanka, through the Australian Foundation for the People of Asia and the Pacific (AFAP). Photo: Bronwyn Coles/AusAID

NIAS EARTHQUAKE

One survivor of the earthquake that shook the Indonesian island of Nias was a man called Hendra. For five days he was trapped under three floors when his home collapsed. His is a story of determination and cooperation among rescuers. Through a chain of events, involving several different organisations, including AusAID, and rescue workers from at least four different countries, he was freed. Amazingly, he suffered only dehydration and superficial wounds. His rescue shows what can be achieved when international agencies and countries work together.
The Indian Ocean tsunami swept away 600 patients, visitors and staff from Banda Aceh’s only remaining general hospital. Those who survived the horrifying ordeal – and the many who didn’t – were washed across the road. Sewage, human debris and mud flooded the hospital.

About 140 people or around 30 per cent of hospital staff are either dead or missing.

Australian Defence Force and Australian civilian medical teams, funded by AusAID, were immediately deployed to Banda Aceh. Further help quickly arrived from Germany, Singapore, Belgium, Japan and several provinces in Indonesia.

Now, several months on, the initial urgency of the crisis is giving way to the rebuilding phase. There is less need for emergency relief but a greater need to restore permanent services.

Interplast Australia and International SOS, a Jakarta-based medical group, are working towards restoration. Together they’re fielding medical teams to the seriously damaged general hospital in Banda Aceh. At the height of the tsunami relief effort there were over 680 organisations and military medical teams in Banda Aceh. Interplast–SOS is now one of only five that remain consistently entrenched within the hospital, offering ongoing support, training and clinical treatment.

The two organisations combine Australian and Indonesian expertise. At any one time the team is about 20 people, with most comprising Indonesian doctors, hospital administrators, nurses, a pharmacist and laboratory technicians.

Australian members change every three weeks and include a general surgeon, anaesthetist, clinical microbiologist, scientist and two nurses. Main tasks are reintegrating hospital staff, restoring local medical services and coordinating the contributions from various international donors.

The combined Interplast–SOS team is establishing excellent relationships with senior hospital administrators and other medical personnel. It’s a great help having so many Indonesians on the team.

One of the main challenges is coordinating large amounts of donor assistance comprising medical personnel, consumable supplies, equipment and engineering teams restoring water and power to the hospital. To help with this, the Interplast–SOS team is setting up a hospital coordination centre. It has negotiated with the German team to fix a surgical roster to share theatre time with Indonesian and Australian surgeons. The aim is to restore, as quickly as possible, surgical, anaesthetic and microbiology services to pre-tsunami levels.

Recently returned members of the first Interplast team have spoken about their incredible experiences. Scenes were confronting and conditions in the hospital difficult, but none regretted participating. Members had nothing but praise for the Australian Defence Force and for AusAID officers who continue to work under trying circumstances.

Like AusAID, several donors are assessing longer-term support plans for restoring health services to pre-tsunami conditions. Meanwhile, Interplast Australia and International SOS are supplementing much needed hospital expertise.

Agricultural researchers were part of tsunami relief efforts right from the start. Now they’re contributing in important ways to the mid and long-term reconstruction.

In Sri Lanka, researchers at the International Water Management Institute, based in Colombo, immediately pressed their four-wheel drive vehicles into service. They wasted no time heading to affected areas to save injured people. Within days, institute experts joined United Nations relief mapping efforts on 24-hour shifts, collecting location data and
Meryl Williams describes the disastrous impact of the Indian Ocean tsunami on agriculture, and the role agricultural scientists are playing in the massive reconstruction effort.

**THE HUMAN COST**

Sofyan’s wife was seven months pregnant when the tsunami hit but she managed to survive unscathed. Sofyan on the other hand sustained a leg injury from the debris. When he came into hospital he was terribly septic and nearly died from his infections. His leg couldn’t be saved and there was no alternative but to amputate.

After his operation his condition quickly improved and with the help of crutches and a wheelchair he is able to get around. Sofyan’s lack of full mobility however will prevent him from resuming his previous living as a sailor. This is how the tsunami has wrecked lives.

Sofyan and his family are typical of the people that Interplast Australia, with its Indonesian counterpart, International SOS, is helping in Banda Aceh. Most people are poor with few prospects.

When Sofyan was well enough to go home, Interplast Australia organised a gift of money so he could feed his family. It will help in the short term but finding ways to support him, and many others in the same position, is a challenge for all those involved in the tsunami reconstruction phase.

**FARMING AND FISH**

Mapping the extent of deaths and damage.

In Malaysia, staff at the WorldFish Center joined a consortium of United Nations and regional experts in assessing the impacts on fish stocks, fishing communities, aquaculture and coral reefs.

Experts from the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines visited several coastal sites in Sri Lanka to see firsthand the problems facing rice farmers coping with coastal soils flooded with saltwater. Directly after the disaster, the rice institute received several requests from national governments for seeds for salt-tolerant rice varieties. The International Potato Center in Lima, Peru, began propagating fast growing sweet potatoes, an ideal crop to provide high-energy food following an emergency.

International centres are now focusing on work with local partners. Researchers have returned to communities they know well and have a good knowledge of local conditions. For example, the International Water Institute is carrying out a needs assessment in the worst hit areas of Hambantota. This is a part of Sri Lanka where the institute has been working for the past 15 years. It’s also assessing groundwater salinity in three regions on the east coast of Sri Lanka to find out the status of the aquifer. The team is developing and delivering technical advice to operators on the ground. This will help the water institute determine the effects of the tsunami on groundwater and whether longer-term studies will be needed.

The International Plant Genetic Resources Institute has adopted the Sri Lankan village of Dodanduwa which bore the brunt of the tsunami disaster. It’s become part of the institute’s long-term poverty reduction research looking at income-earning activities based on coconut production.

Together the research centres are developing rehabilitation projects that embrace the entire landscape – from sea to upland forests – and look at the bigger picture for sustainable development. Their approach won’t just put disaster affected communities, which were already poor, back to where they were. They’re addressing the fundamental difficulties confronting poor communities that prevent them from making a productive and sustainable living.

Senior staff from ACIAR (Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research) recently met with Indonesian agricultural and fisheries research leaders in Jakarta. ACIAR and Indonesian research institutes are working together to help restore salt damaged soil and restock fisheries in northern Sumatra. With AusAID, ACIAR will continue to be a vital part of the long-term reconstruction efforts in Indonesia.

Researchers from Australian and international agricultural research institutes are set to bring their collective expertise to the enormous task of rebuilding for some time to come.

Meryl Williams is the Chair of the Board of the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research <ACIAR www.aciar.gov/>

LEFT: Not only must the land be cleared but also the soil has to repair. The tsunami’s saltwater has ruined great stretches of arable land. Photo: ACIAR.