

Australian tsunami aid: What about Aceh?

Wednesday, April 20, 2005

Tim O'Connor

Zainal Abidin is the only person in his village of 1,000 to survive the tsunami. Zainal is a fisherman from the tiny village of Kampung Pande, just five minutes from Banda Aceh in the sub-district of Kuta Raja. His family was killed. His parents were killed. All his friends were killed. He has one set of clothes. His house has been destroyed and he cannot read or write.

Zainal desperately wants to return to the life he knows. Before the tsunami he made his living tending fishing ponds by the coast. He wants to begin to restore some sense of normality in a life that has been devastated. Almost three months after the tsunami, he has still received no help from his government or from international aid agencies.

Why is Zainal forced to endure this living hell when the world has been so generous?

The devil, as ever, is in the detail of this generosity. When John Howard announced on 5 January that Australia would pledge \$1 billion to tsunami devastated Aceh, there was loud support. People were proud to be Australian: citizens of such a generous country, when our neighbours were in such great need. Why then has Australia only committed 'up to' \$50 million of this \$1 billion to Aceh? (*Australia Indonesia Partnership for Reconstruction and Development* - Joint Ministerial Statement March 17th 2005 - link [here](#)).



Thanks to Bill Leak from the Australian

The emergency response for most of the tsunami-affected areas was very efficient and plagued only by relatively minor incidents in relation to the scale of the operation. Australia spent \$100 million in this humanitarian response phase between AusAID and the use of the Defence Force. (*Appropriation: Tsunami Financial Assistance Bill 2004/05*, link [here](#)) The Australian Defence Force and Australian aid agencies were celebrated by the thankful Acehnese for establishing vital services such as water purification plants and sanitation stations. This was widely reported in the media in Australia.

The long term rebuilding though is appearing much more difficult as it becomes mired in political point scoring.

On 7 March a research note from the Federal Parliamentary Library (link [here](#)) questioned the method of accounting for Australia's aid commitment. The questions posed by the paper were significant and diplomatic.

Why does Australia's tsunami commitment directly reflect the objectives of Australia's aid program to Indonesia outlined by the Foreign Minister in his statement of May 2004 —seven months before the tsunami struck?

Why is Australia giving half the \$1 billion as loans? (Report *International Response to the Indian Ocean Disaster - A donor analysis: Focus on Australia*, AID/WATCH March 2005, link [here](#)) Australia traditionally gives aid as grants and Indonesia, one of the most heavily indebted countries in the world, is in urgent need of assistance not more foreign debt. Australia, pre-tsunami, gave \$160 million to Indonesia. According to the Treasury, Australia received, and will continue to receive, 'between \$75 and \$85 million annually' in debt repayments 'over the next several years' from Indonesia. (*Inquiry into Australia's relations with Indonesia submission 118*, Treasury, Jan 23 2003 - pdf link [here](#)) While this repayment has been shelved in the short term, it gives a clear indication of the complexity and differing interests of the aid giving process.

Why is the package that was widely credited as a 'tsunami aid package' being dedicated to other regions of Indonesia? Careful attention to the Prime Minister's statements indicates that this \$1 billion is not about aid to tsunami affected Aceh, but to the Australia–Indonesia partnership.

Undoubtedly, there are many areas in Indonesia where the money could be well used, but why did the government not correct the erroneous statements made in the media relating to the 'tsunami aid package'. They are usually not backward when it comes to challenging what they deem as negative media responses (see both the recent Costello/Gittins affair in the Sydney Morning Herald and Alston and the ABC over the Iraq war reporting, as prime examples).

The recent joint-ministerial meeting between Australia and Indonesia pledged up to \$50 million for Aceh. Most of this will go towards assisting in the building of a much-needed hospital in Banda Aceh. Certainly a hospital makes for better photo opportunities than a few fishponds on the outskirts of the capital.

This \$50 million is all we have heard about from the summit dedicated to the disaster-affected area.

What happened to the \$1 billion? The remaining issues discussed at the meeting were to do with terrorism and security, now items closely associated with the Australian aid program but not directly affecting the welfare of many in Aceh.

The ongoing conflict in Aceh, that has variously simmered and raged, has certainly exacerbated the difficulties in delivering effective aid programs. Deep enmity and suspicion exist on all sides, be they the Indonesian military, Acehnese freedom fighters, or the many civilians caught in the midst of this bloody sandwich.

Australia, with the international community, has refused to order and enforce a ceasefire in Aceh, deferring to the Indonesian Government's claim that this is an 'internal matter'. This has certainly not assisted with the complex aid delivery process and is something that Australia and its strategic relationship with Indonesia should be pushing harder for. The Achenese, long shunned by the international community, will not be holding their collective breath but such action is vital for any real effectiveness and long term development.

The closer relationship that has emerged in recent weeks between the two countries also provides Australia with the opportunity to ensure that Australian NGOs and other aid deliverers retain access for their workers and programs. Something which is not currently guaranteed, but both public and private donors will demand.

Much of the focus on accountability in relation to the aid money has been on the non-government organisations, which so many Australians supported. While this is understandable it should be remembered that this \$1 billion is also public money and the Australian people will demand that it is used as promised.

Hence, real questions remain as to how generous and effective Australia's aid program will be in assisting those in such desperate need in Aceh. Will Australian generosity turn to political expedience with more focus placed on the strategic relationship between Australia and Indonesia? I know what Zainal and many of his fellow Acehnese will be hoping for. Strategic relationships are likely to dictate what they will get.

About the author

Tim O'Connor is currently the aid campaigner at AID/WATCH, an independent organisation monitoring and campaigning on Australian overseas aid and trade policies and programs. Tim has worked in the development sector in India, Thailand, PNG and elsewhere in the Asia Pacific for

Government and Non Government aid agencies and is currently working on a book on the effectiveness of Australian aid.

Published Comments

What's your opinion? Tell us what you think by adding a comment to offer feedback on this story.

The overwhelming tsunami of generosity from all parts of the globe could also leave chaos in its wake, and we need commentators like Tim O'Connor to keep us informed about when, where, how efficiently and even if the money is being spent.

Jennifer Katauskas

Thursday, April 21, 2005

As Tim O'Connor reminds us in this excellent piece, much of the 'tsunami of generosity' (nice phrase Jennifer) is so encumbered with strategic and political restrictions that it may well end up being entirely useless to many of the people living in the devastated areas.

There was much glad-handing and self-congratulation that Australia had topped the 'league table' of international generosity. I suspect that, if you asked 1,000 people in the street about our Government's tsunami aid commitment, there'd be a general belief that there was a billion bucks being given to the Achenese to rebuild their lives.

\$1 billion was a nice round number for our Prime Minister to be able to announce with much fanfare and publicity. Much better than the \$200 million that \$1 bil over 5 years more realistically represents, not to mention the loan component or the overall more general nature of the aid.

As with much that the Howard administration involves itself in, the PR opportunity takes precedence over all else. If ever the detail gets out, it never makes as big a splash as the original spin, so, on balance, they're in front. Clearly they have a fairly relaxed relationship with their consciences.

Terry Murphy

Friday, April 22, 2005