Mounting concerns over fate of tsunami victims in Aceh

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Poor coordination, disorganised logistics and the militarisation of resettlement camps have created a potentially dangerous situation for the survivors of the December 26 earthquake and tsunami in Indonesia's Sumatran province of Aceh.

The extent of the devastation among Aceh's 4.1 million people is still being revealed. According to the latest official figures well over 230,000 people died in the disaster. Nearly 120,000 bodies have been recovered and another 115,000 people are missing, presumed dead. The final toll may yet exceed 280,000 as some listed as missing are not included in the above totals. The real figure may never be known.

The staggering death list is only part of the story. The United Nations World Food Program on January 31 reported that there are 417,000 displaced persons in camps in Aceh, while another 260,000 are staying with families. The massive destruction of housing is compounded by the elimination of livelihoods. The UN International Labour Office has estimated that the tsunami destroyed 600,000 jobs in the province.

On January 23, the *Washington Post* reported a World Health Organisation (WHO) survey of the relief effort. WHO found that while food and medicine have reached most large population groups, a lack of coordination was still hampering relief efforts one month after the tsunami struck. Many of the aid agencies were failing to coordinate their efforts and properly prioritise aid delivery.

The survey also noted that relief efforts, particularly in remote areas, remained restricted by the damage to infrastructure. Government officials reported that 44 of Aceh's health centres had been destroyed and 50-70 percent of their staff killed. Along the vital coast road that leads into the worst-affected areas, 57 bridges had been demolished or damaged. Access by sea was being hampered by ruined ports, making delivery by air essential, yet air drops to small remote groups of survivors had not been possible. As the helicopters of American and foreign military contingents are already being withdrawn, these operations will depend on aircraft organised by civilian aid groups.

As of January 31, WHO reported a high risk of major disease outbreaks—notably epidemics of measles and malaria—in Aceh because of poor conditions in the refugee camps. The camps lack sufficient toilets and supplies of clean water. Children are especially vulnerable.

UNICEF described as a "critical emergency" the situation revealed by its survey in the provincial capital, Banda Aceh, that 12.7 per cent of children were malnourished. The organisation fears that outside the capital the situation would be worse.

The principal responsibility for coordinating relief efforts in Aceh lies with the Indonesian armed forces (TNI), which has over 35,000 troops in the province and is moving in more. Since a renewed offensive against the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) separatist organisation began in 2003, the military has held a tight control over the province and its administration.

However, the TNI's priorities do not lie in aid. A report in the *Age* newspaper on January 30 described the situation in the west coast town of Calang. It was one of the hardest hit towns, with only 800 of its 10,000 residents surviving. The paper reported that "mountains of aid supplies" were piled up by the army on the beachfront and were not moving anywhere. When a photographer began to take pictures of the chaotic scene, an army captain told him not to "disgrace our country". One of the local residents supervising the aid told the *Age* that the army had confiscated the best of the food supplies.

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The military's role in providing "security" at the barrack-style settlements now being set up to replace the existing ramshackle camps is causing anxiety among many survivors. A *New York Times* report noted that many fear that the military may be repeating earlier efforts to concentrate villagers in the encampments in order to isolate the local population from GAM fighters.

A February 2 article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted concerns among relief workers that the hastily constructed barracks will pose the same health risks as the existing camps. The paper reported that in the Lambaro camp being constructed outside Banda Aceh, barracks designed to house 100 people each were being built over open drains with pools of stagnant water. These conditions may lead to outbreaks of dengue fever and malaria.

Survivors began to move into the first of the camps this week. Each of the barracks contains 12 one-room compartments with a single door and window and separated by thin walls. Facilities are limited. There is electricity and access to running water and shared bathrooms.

Rosnidar, a 22-year-old survivor, told the *Financial Times*: "If you have been living in a tent this is better. What can I do? I have no choice. I have to stay here. If we want to build a house we don't have money and we don't have land." So far just 273 barracks have been built in the province. By March 15, officials say that the figure will reach 803, enough to house 9,730 families, but still a small fraction of what is needed.

The refugees were transported by army truck and government buses to the camp. While the government insists the camps will be under civilian control, police were stationed at the entrance and groups of heavily-armed soldiers were present. Aceh regent Rusli Muhammad claimed the troops were "just monitoring" the camp for separatist rebels.

Talks between GAM leaders based in Europe and representatives of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's government recently broke up in the Finnish capital Helsinki without any formal agreement on a ceasefire to assist the relief effort. The head of the Indonesian delegation, security minister Widodo Adi Sucipto, told the media that there could be no progress on ceasefire without an agreement on a wider framework.

In Jakarta, Yudhoyono made it clear that this "framework" would leave Jakarta's authority in the resource-rich province intact. He said the government had offered GAM an opportunity to "terminate the conflict peacefully, of course in the framework of the unity of the Republic of Indonesia and by adopting the special autonomy status."

Even as the Helsinki talks were in progress, the TNI announced that it had killed four GAM rebels in east Aceh. The military claimed that they had entered a village to "disturb" the villagers. GAM officials said the four were killed when they took advantage of the ceasefire talks to visit their families. A further round of negotiations is expected at the end of the month.

Despite the rising death toll and dangers to survivors, the situation in Aceh and other tsunami-affected areas is rapidly slipping from the international media headlines. One does not have to look far in the pages of the financial press to see why.

An article on the *Bloomberg* website on January 25 noted that the economic effects of the tsunami on big business would be "minor". South Asian economies are expected to grow 6.25 percent in 2005, only slowing 0.05 percent because of the disaster. A UN report noted that damage to industrial and port facilities was limited "and offshore oil and gas fields were spared".

The article quoted UN economist Ian Kinniburgh: "We can't downplay the human tragedy, but the tsunami did not knock out a lot of modern economic manufacturing capacity or infrastructure. The area of Indonesia hardest hit was in dispute and there was not a lot of [investment] activity there."

Having turned a blind eye for years to the TNI's repression in Aceh, and the wider impoverishment of people in the devastated areas, the major media outlets are not about to seriously probe the political, economic and social questions raised by the ongoing catastrophe.

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