

# Lost Generation of the Tsunami Victims

The first night we were there, the Indonesian army camp where we had set up our tents had incursions from rebel forces. We were instructed to remain within the camp parameters and refrain from speaking to the villagers for our own good. It was our first night and not what we had expected coming to Aceh for the very first time. Along with intense fear, I felt guilt for having brought the group to this place of danger. The rebel activities continued for the next few nights until the Indonesian military managed to secure the parameters with floodlights and positioned more troops to guard the forest boundary at the back of the camp where the incursions took place. Fortunately, no one in our group was harmed, and every morning, we managed to set out for Banda Aceh together with the Singapore Armed Forces convoy to provide medical assistance to survivors at the Ulee Kareng refugee camp.

Providing medical relief in the midst of a civil unrest was unsettling, but what was even worse was seeing absolute devastation wrecked upon the resident population. The pictures in the newspapers scarcely did justice to the extent of destruction we witnessed. A heavy semblance of death and gloom overpowered us when we first saw what used to be a thriving city with schools and houses, now reduced to rubble and corpses. The air was silent but reeked of decay and every now and then, we could hear weeping and wailing in the background, creating an unhappy backdrop to the death and destruction that surrounded the city.

Luckily, work kept us occupied and provided a welcomed distraction. Most of our time was spent doing minor surgical procedures such as wound debridement and de-sloughing for many large and infected wounds that most survivors had. The extent of the injuries spoke volumes of the trauma that they must have gone through being tossed about in the waves and yet somehow survived. Procedures were done with minimal anesthesia and in haste because of the sheer volume of patients we had to treat in that given amount of time. What we had to quickly get accustomed to was the crying and groaning that filled the air.

*Dr Andre Leong, who was in Aceh to lead the medical relief efforts of Raffles Medical Group, spoke to Terence Lim, Editorial Board Member, of the SMA News, about the children.*



Mostly, it was the adults who screamed and groaned. The children, especially the younger ones, were eerily silent when we performed what must have been very painful procedures on them. It was as if they found it pointless to cry – they had already lost everything. They looked up at us with dull emotionless eyes as we cut into flesh, as if to say: “You cannot possibly hurt me more than what I had been through.” It was not so much the cries of the survivors but

the children’s piercing gaze that we could not shake from our memories even now when we are back in Singapore.

In the relief camps where we were, adults and children had to queue up for food and clothing supplies. Not unexpectedly, the children were pushed to the back and left with scraps. They would end up sitting silently in groups, staring into space. Occasionally, a kind adult would bring them to queue up for food or medical attention, but that would be the exception rather than the norm. It was literally survival of the fittest, and without their parents, the kids were left to fend for themselves. I doubt they understood what had happened. They were lost and alone and no one was there to help them find their way home.

Most people would have tender feelings towards children because they are truly innocent and blameless. What we forget however, is just how totally helpless children are as well – they absolutely need our help and support, and without us, they really have not got a chance in this world.

In Aceh, unfortunately, we were thrust into witnessing this need first hand – this vulnerability and desperation for help. And it came in the blank looks on the children’s faces. Their silent cries were deafening. What will become of them? They are truly the lost generation of the Tsunami victims.

Even now, as the memory of Aceh fades, the blank looks of these children remain with us. I dread going back again not because of the insecurity or death, but because of the children. I dread looking at them. I look away when they stare at me because I know cannot take them back when I leave. ■

#### **About the interviewee:**

*Dr Andre Leong (MB BCH, BAO, B MedSc 1996) is a Senior Physician Manager with Raffles Medical Group.*