

“Are you a doctor? Can you please help?”

By Dr Raymond Kwah

THE JOURNEY

The roar of the C-130 was deafening. I looked across the cabin at my team mates, surveying their faces for some hint of emotions. We were a group of doctors and nurses who had volunteered for the medical relief mission to Banda Aceh following the terrible tsunami that wreaked havoc and disrupted the lives of many in Asia.

The cabin crew signalled for us to fasten our seat belts, as we were about to approach our destination. *Will there be dead bodies in varying degrees of decay lining the streets? Will I be overwhelmed by the stench of death? Is the whole place inundated with flood water?* Thoughts filled my mind as I looked out the window, straining to catch my first glimpse of Aceh. But all I could see were clouds that rolled across the sky like a white cotton quilt cover, shielding us from the impending horrors of the devastation.

The image through the window blurred as the plane descended. I cast a quick glance back at the others who, like me, had also begun to peer out the windows. *Was that shock I spotted on their faces?* I turned to look out again and that was when I really understood the true destructive force of nature. The entire coastline of Aceh was submerged. There were no buildings, no cars, no trees – just acres of land covered by seawater! My heart ached for the many lives that were lost, and I uttered a prayer for the unfortunate victims.



A mosque still stands, its clock (which had stopped) silently bearing testimony to the exact moment of the nature's fury.

MY FIRST PATIENT

“1,2,3 lift...” I could feel the strain on my back as we loaded crates of medical supplies onto our vehicle. The sun was unforgiving as it scorched the earth with its fiery rays, as if attempting to push back the sea. Just a few moments ago, we had landed at the military airbase, which was miraculously spared by the earthquake and tsunami. A sea of people packed the airport, scrambling for seats on the outgoing flights in a desperate bid to flee the disaster. Exhausted, I wiped the sweat from my forehead after heaving yet another crate onto the vehicle.

Suddenly, I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned around. I found myself staring into the face of a middle-aged Chinese lady. There was weariness and fear in her eyes. “Are you a doctor? My husband isn’t feeling well. Can you please help?” There was a tinge of hopelessness and despair in her imploring voice. “Yes,” I replied. “I will do my best.” A smile broke through the tired lines on her face and she thanked me profusely. I suddenly experienced a sense of renewed strength. Being able to give hope to those in need is one of life’s greatest rewards.



Dr Raymond Kwah (seated) attends to a patient.

ULEE KARENG

Life for us in Aceh was simple. We lived in tents and shared stories over combat rations. It was tough at times but was made bearable by the good people who were around.

“Di mana sakit?” I asked, smiling at a middle-aged lady who had limped into the clinic. A crowd was building up outside. Word had spread around the refugee camp that a medical team from Singapore had arrived. We had decided to augment the medical capabilities of a local polyclinic, Ulee Kareng, which was located near the periphery of the devastated area.

The reconnaissance of Aceh was a humbling experience as we surveyed the extent of the destruction. Everything within four kilometres from the coastline had been destroyed. Whole villages were levelled and the entire place was littered with debris. “Look!” Someone pointed to a lifeless body which had just been recovered from beneath the rubble and was now lying by the road. The dead’s arms were raised high, as if trying to shield his body from the onslaught of the waves. I could sense the hopelessness and despair that must have gripped this person during the last few seconds of his life. “Look at the clock on the mosque!” another person exclaimed. In the distance, a mosque still stood, its clock (which had stopped) silently bearing testimony to the exact time Mother Nature unleashed her fury on this town.

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We learnt that of the six polyclinics in Aceh, three had been destroyed by the disaster and one of the remaining three was overwhelmed. Apparently, there was only one doctor left to render medical aid, as the others had all been killed in the tsunami. As expected, she had great difficulty coping with the flood of patients. “This is where we can help. This is where we can make a difference.” The team leader succinctly stated the objective of our mission.

“Kaki sakit,” the lady groaned. There was a large gaping wound over her left shin. Through my translator, I learnt that a plank of wood had hit her when the waves crashed into her house. Tears welled up in her eyes as she revealed that she had lost her husband and two sons. Agony was written all over her face. This was the recurring theme in the stories recounted by the patients we saw in the clinic.

Our days were long and tiring. On average, we saw over 120 cases each day, some requiring minor surgical interventions and wound dressings. In spite of the hard work, we were happy making a difference in the lives of the local folk. Their smiles and “thumbs-up” signs were our rewards, and we strove even harder to lend a listening ear, extend a comforting hand and provide a healing touch. To hear the children laugh and play again, to see our patients chatter with glee, and to see the staff of the polyclinic skipping around the premises with renewed zest filled us with pride and indescribable joy. Our efforts may be small but we had succeeded in giving them hope when all was lost.

THE JOURNEY HOME

“Ladies and gentlemen, thanks for your help...”

The roar of the C-130 sundered the silence of the airfield. It was time for the medical team to return home. We had stayed in Aceh for 17 days and a new team had arrived to replace us. For me, it has truly been an eye-opener. I have experienced firsthand the indomitable spirit of the human race and witnessed profound selflessness on a grand scale. Above all this, however, it was the joy of extending a helping hand to a fellow brother in need and forging close ties with team mates who share the same vision that made this mission an unforgettable experience. I cast a last look around and bade farewell to Banda Aceh, which will always have a special place in my heart. ■



The team: Dr Timothy Teoh, Dr Raymond Kwah, Dr Fan Swee Weng, Dr Chong Si Jack and Dr Leonard Ho.

The sun sets over Banda Aceh, but not all is lost...

