

Once the government decided to open orphanages, very few children were enrolled despite some efforts by overly enthusiastic NGO volunteers who tried to force single parents to part with their children to swell the numbers in these orphanages. As of now, fewer than 100 orphans are in the state-run homes in three districts.

For the media, though, orphans were part of the human-interest angle. In part, media interest was triggered by an NDTV story in which the reporter held a cute infant and said on prime-time television that “These babies could be yours for adoption. For all such orphan babies, the need of the hour is a secure, loving home.” The perception left by the media and government was that these children might not be safe if left with relatives or the community.

One of the best displays of media insensitivity came from the Outlook photographer who accompanied me on this story. Despite being told that the children in the government-run orphanage were scared of the sea, he wanted them to collectively pose near a catamaran “with the sea in the background” for that would make “a great picture.” Denied this, he made the children pose behind the sliding iron grill door of the orphanage to (mis)represent “their

plight” and, during the photo shoot, a finger of an 11-month-old girl in the orphanage was crushed in the grill.

Some three weeks after the tsunami, print and visual media remained keen on showing amateur video footage of the tsunami taken by tourists. While visual media thrived on these sensational images, print media was not far behind. The Hindu, a leading English-language national daily printed in Chennai, prominently displayed poor quality photographs taken with a camera that after 20 days washed ashore on Chennai’s Marina Beach. A feature story in the daily’s January 25th issue was woven around the recovery of this camera and The Hindu’s earnest efforts to successfully restore it to its owner, who had come to Chennai as a member of a sports team.

These are a sampling of the human interest/investigative stories the tsunami inspired. By January 26th, it was time for “calendar” journalism involving a spate of one-month-after-the-tsunami stories.

While covering these many aspects of the tsunami’s destruction, there are certain topics about which India’s media have been almost silent. When India rejected offers of foreign aid, there was hardly any analysis done of this decision,

even in the English-language press. On the nuclear installations along the coast not having tsunami-preparedness, there was muted reportage. On the failure of India’s scientific community, there was no debate. When the Indian government refused to characterize the tsunami as a “national calamity,” members of the news media were largely silent. The media did not report when dalits were employed to clear the dead bodies without even protective gloves. And the media continue to show no interest reporting on the efforts to relocate fisherfolk in landlocked areas far from the sea.

In all this, one factor remains clear and important: The fisherfolk are not people like us. The reporting on the tsunami told us more about the society to which journalists belong than about the society of the fisherfolk, about which they know very little. ■

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Media Bias in Covering the Tsunami in Aceh

‘Indonesian journalists do not understand Aceh stories from the Acehnese perspective.’

By Andreas Harsono

One early morning in January, when Hotli Simanjuntak drew water from a well outside a house in Banda Aceh, he was complaining about some messages he had received from his Global TV editors in Jakarta. “They grumbled about having no official quotes on the beating of Farid Faqih. How important is Farid in Jakarta? But here his story is not that important,” he told me. “You could check with other Aceh journalists. His story

is only important for the parachuting journalists from Jakarta.” We ended up trading jokes about the frenzied Jakarta editors, while carrying buckets of water to an adjoining bathroom.

Simanjuntak is a 30-year-old photo-journalist, who used to freelance for the Agence France Presse. Like most stringers, his payment depends on how many of his photos or how much footage gets used by his bosses in Jakarta. He is humble, energetic and critical—and

this combination makes him an ideal correspondent in the war-torn Aceh. I met him because the December 26th tsunami destroyed his house, and he moved to Nani Afrida’s house, which she made into a temporary shelter for visiting journalists, like me, who couldn’t find a hotel in Banda Aceh. She is a freelancer who writes daily for The Jakarta Post.

Both Hotli and Nani told me that many Acehnese men and women were

being harassed, scolded, beaten and even killed by Indonesian soldiers. Such violence was frequent, they said, but stories about it go unpublished. As I heard this, I remembered Ryamizard Ryacudu, the Indonesian army chief who openly admitted that in the month after the tsunami his men had killed 120 members of the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, or GAM). GAM representatives said only 20 guerrillas were killed and that the others who'd been killed were civilians. I tend to give more credit to the GAM version.

The Jakarta media continuously regard such beatings or killings as minor stories, but when an Indonesian army captain beat more well-known, Jakarta-based activist Farid Faqih, who allegedly stole some relief aid, this beating immediately became a headline. Kompas, the largest newspaper in In-

donesia, carried news of the beating on its front page. "Indonesian journalists do not understand Aceh stories from the Acehnese perspective," Hotli said, adding that as a Christian Batak from northern Sumatra he did not understand the perspective until he moved to Aceh four years ago.

Indonesian media are overly narrow-minded when they are required to cover anything that relates to stubborn territories like Aceh, Papua or East Timor. Since the 1950's, Aceh has struggled to secede from Indonesia, and Papua set up its own Free Papua Organization in the 1970's, even though each voluntarily joined Indonesia originally. In 1999, East Timor won a United Nations-supervised referendum to become a new state. Today Indonesia is comprised of thousands of islands stretching over a distance from east to west that is approximately the same as from London to

Baghdad. Its 210 million people speak more than 300 languages, and 88 percent of its population are Muslims, many of whom live on the islands of Java and Sumatra, making Indonesia the largest Islamic country in the world.

Ethnic violence and separatist movements are escalating throughout the country. The main reasons are injustice, human rights abuses, and the growing gap between the main island of Java and the other islands. Now questions are being raised whether Indonesia can survive as a nation-state. Critics contend that Indonesia is bound to disintegrate like Yugoslavia, given that its people's only common history is their Dutch colonial past. The old strongman, General Suharto, managed to keep the country together by brutal means after he rose to power in 1965. But when he left power in May 1998, the institutions that he had built up also began to crumble.



The Baiturrahman grand mosque in Banda Aceh in Indonesia was not destroyed by the tsunami, prompting an interpretation that it had a divine power protecting it from the killer waves on December 26th. *Photo by Maha Eka Swasta from the book "Ocean of Tears."*

Ironically, almost all of the current media companies were set up during the Suharto era. It is no wonder that I heard so many times these news organization's top editors talking about the need to preserve the Unitarian State of the Republic of Indonesia (Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia, or NKRI). "We journalists should be red-and-white first and defend the NKRI," declared Derek Manangka, the news director of RCTI, Indonesia's largest private channel, when talking in a seminar about the Aceh coverage two years ago. (The red-and-white is the name of the Indonesian flag.)

Suryopratomo, the chief editor of Kompas, told me it is always better that those territories remain within Indonesia, even though he realizes that many human rights abuses by Indonesian soldiers take place in Aceh, Papua and others. "Still it is better to be united

in this age of global competition," he said. Such views are common, even if they don't totally dominate the media of Palmerah, the Jakarta neighborhood where most of the leading newspapers and TV stations have their headquarters. Frequently, managers and editors at these news outlets put forward their nationalism—and in some cases also their Islamic interpretation—when confronted with ethnic or religious problems in their coverage.

The Politics of Tsunami Coverage

When the tsunami hit Aceh, reporters from these news organizations rushed to cover the suffering of their "Acehnese brothers and sisters." Many also organized fundraising to help relief services. The tsunami raised a genuine solidarity among many Indonesians.

Outside Indonesia, from Paris to Beijing, from Warsaw to Lima, many people also shared the suffering of the Acehnese, the people in Sri Lanka, and other tsunami-hit countries.

But just one week after the tsunami, the Jakarta media bias against what they claimed to be "foreigners" and "Christianization" began to appear. They reported that activists of the Muslim-based Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, or PKS) put up posters in public spaces in Banda Aceh with this warning: "Don't let Acehnese orphans be taken away by Christians and their missionaries." Indonesian Vice President Jusuf Kalla announced that he would call upon the Indonesian Council of Ulemas to help decide on the adoption of Acehnese orphans. "We will help the children to keep their faith. No adoption could be done without the ulemas' supervision,"



Coconut trees on the coastline of Aceh in northern Sumatra were destroyed by the tsunami that restructured the coastline. *Photo by Maha Eka Swasta from the book "Ocean of Tears."*

Kalla announced.

Hidayat Nur Wahid, a PKS leader and currently the speaker of the People's Consultative Assembly, said the arrival of American, Australian as well as other foreign troops to help the tsunami victims should be controlled. "They should go out within a month," Hidayat said, adding that his party is worried some foreign soldiers as well as the international aid workers might help to "Christianize" the predominantly Muslim Acehese.

Jawa Pos Group, which controls more than 100 newspapers throughout Indonesia, quoted Kalla without providing an explanation for what prompted him and Muslim activists to focus on religion when the bulk of attention was on how to get emergency aid quickly to the tsunami survivors. Tempo magazine also published a cover story on the "Acehnese orphans" without providing readers with a single bit of evidence that Christians had taken the initiative to adopt the children. Though some American evangelical groups had been working in Aceh to preach the gospel, it was the U.S. media that revealed their religious activities.

Concerns such as these raised in various media accounts were soon brought up in a cabinet meeting led by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Kalla, who attended the meeting, later told the media that "foreigners should get out of Aceh as soon as possible." He added: "Three months are enough. The sooner [they leave], the better." Indonesians, not foreign troops, according to Kalla, should be in charge of caring for those who lost their homes to the tsunami. When asked about long-term relief efforts, he said: "We don't need foreign troops."

Such statements irritated the Acehese, who organized a street rally in Jakarta in late January to demand that the United Nations, Americans and the British remain in Aceh and saying that Indonesia tries to keep foreigners out of Aceh in a bid to keep pacifying the Acehese. "If the foreigners go out, the Indonesian corruptors will go in," said Nasruddin Abubakar, a leader of the Center for Information and Referendum in Aceh.



Jakarta's top newspaper editors use the red-and-white (Indonesia's national flag) to defend the country's unity. Photo by Mohamad Iqbal from the book "Ocean of Tears."

Aceh is an oil-and-gas-rich province of Indonesia. Most of its natural resources, however, have been channeled into Jakarta. In 1976, the Aceh independence movement began when Hasan di Tiro, an Acehese aristocrat with a doctorate from Columbia University and a past connection with the CIA, declared independence in Aceh. Di Tiro established a guerrilla network, trained his soldiers in Libya, and maintains his position as walinegara, or head of state, from self-exile in Sweden. He wants to see the ancient Aceh sultanate revived. Di Tiro dislikes Indonesia; for him "Indonesia" and "Aceh" are a contradiction. He hates Indonesia's political construction and even uses a different spelling ("Acheh" rather than "Aceh") for his region. He described Indonesia as "a Javanese republic with a Greek pseudo-name."

The Jakarta media, however, has not published news about di Tiro nor about Nasruddin's street rally. The Jawa Pos Group newspapers also did not mention a word about the street protest nor any statements made in Aceh about this situation. The Acehese, indeed, want the international workers to remain to balance the presence of the Indonesian military, but statements such as those by Hidayat and Kalla were published widely and found resonance in many In-

donecian circles opposed to the United States. At this time, U.S. forces are not anybody's heroes after the bad publicity they received from the Abu Ghraib prison atrocities in Iraq. Jakarta media carried the prison scandal pictures in full, and this has only fueled resentment against them. Many Indonesian Muslims see the American troops as staunchly anti-Islam.

In mainstream news reports, the innuendo was palpable: Relief services that had come to Indonesia were motivated by religious considerations and nationalistic factors. Perhaps such worries were sparked because international relief organizations—whose workers are mostly Westerners and presumably Christians—were among the first to rush to Aceh. But this seems to present more of a case of paranoia. Nothing has happened to suggest that international relief workers are keen to take away Acehese children, and neither have Indonesian churches demonstrated much altruism.

Misunderstanding Nationalism

Benedict Anderson, the Cornell University political scientist who wrote "Imagined Communities: Reflections on

the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,” believes that many Indonesian political elite misunderstand the concept of nationalism. Anderson is an old hand in Indonesia’s political analysis. He used to be the director of the Cornell Modern Indonesia Project and for more than 20 years edited the Indonesia multidisciplinary biannual journal.

In March 1999, a year after President Suharto stepped down from power, Anderson visited Indonesia and gave a speech to media leaders in Jakarta. In this speech, he said that nationalism is widely misunderstood to be something very old and inherited from “absolutely splendid ancestors.” Many misunderstand nationalism as arising “naturally” in the blood and flesh of each Indonesian citizen, he went on to say. In fact, nationalism is a new entity; in countries like the United States and France it is little more than two centuries old and, in Indonesia, which declared independence in 1945, it is in its infancy.

Another misunderstanding Anderson shared is that “nation” and “state” are, if not exactly identical, at least connected like a happy husband and wife

in their relationship. In fact, the reality is often just the opposite. In this speech, Anderson also debunked the idea that only Westerners could colonize “native people” by reminding audience members that 90 percent of the government officials of the Netherlands Indies, the colonial ruler of this vast archipelago, were “natives.” In the 1950’s, when Indonesia began to govern itself, these native colonial officials became the ruling elite.

During the Dutch colonial period, repression took place but was not as extreme as what was observed during Suharto’s regime (i.e. torture with electrical cords connected to activists’ genitals). And such violence took place excessively in areas like Aceh, Papua and East Timor. “I see too many Indonesians still inclined to think of Indonesia as an ‘inheritance,’ not as a challenge nor as a common project. Where one has inheritance, one has inheritors, and too often there are bitter quarrels among them as to who has ‘rights’ to the inheritance: sometimes to the point of great violence,” Anderson said. “The situation is today very serious and can

only be remedied by a radical change in the mindset of the political leaders in Indonesia.”

As Hotli and Nani’s comments attest, and Anderson’s observations show, nationalism in Indonesia is narrowly understood, especially among leading editors. A necessary change of mindset should start with journalists themselves as they work to rid themselves of their narrow-minded sense of nationalism and start to report on the Aceh and its people from a broader perspective. In some ways this will mean choosing to act first as journalists and then as Indonesians. It is by sticking to my journalistic principles that I believe I serve my Indonesian audience better. ■

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Reporting From a ‘Calamity That Defies Description’

A tight focus on individuals allowed a U.S. journalist and photographer to present ‘these people in scenes that began to form chapters in a narrative.’

By Richard Read

In Sri Lanka, we saw a fishing boat that had impaled a house, its bow protruding into a gutted living room. In Indonesia, we saw coconut trees ripped out by the roots, rice paddies filled with salty black muck, and everywhere people grieving for family members. In our minds, we connected the dots between these two nations, 1,000 miles apart at opposite ends of the Indian Ocean. Although we met people who inspired us in their efforts to rebuild, grief and destruction encircled the region.

Photographer Rob Finch and I walked

at one point through a shattered village where we’d met a man who had lost a son. “Some things,” Rob said, “are unphotographable.” The two-time international newspaper photographer of the year would go on to prove himself wrong. But I knew what he meant. What we were witnessing couldn’t all be contained in a frame.

So we confronted the arcane question—arcane, I mean, relative to the life and death around us and mainly of interest to journalists on deadline: How does one cover a disaster of such magnitude, a calamity that defies descrip-

tion? Where does one begin to extract meaning from mass destruction?

Using a Tight Focus

Our answer was to focus in tight. We picked a few families, a few aid workers, a few towns. Only by seeing people up close, we felt, could readers appreciate the dimensions of the devastation. We presented these people in scenes that began to form chapters in a narrative. I tried to include details that newspaper writers often omit—bickering among aid workers, for example, or dissem-