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## Letters from Aceh

### Hope, Optimism and Tofu Making

BY BOB SEIPEL | February 13, 2007

Country: **Indonesia**

Topics: **Emergencies, Tsunami**



Since December 2004, thousands of new houses have been built in tsunami-shattered areas of Aceh Province. Photo: Bob Seipel, courtesy of Boeing News Now

After many months of preparation and planning - and many days of traveling and what s countless takeoffs and landings of a variety of Boeing-made aircraft - we finally arrived at destination of Banda Aceh late Sunday afternoon. I have eagerly anticipated this momen July 2006, when I was chosen to take part in this site investigation representing my Boe

As we walk across the tarmac, the weather is surprisingly mild after the heat of Jakarta, Indonesia. The sun seems brighter here, the air less heavy. It's a good start.

Flying into the Aceh airport from the larger city of Medan about 300 miles southeast, I w what looked to be a field of green rice paddies, which indicated to me that the area was albeit slowly, from the destruction of more than two years before.

These feelings were tempered somewhat by the devastation we witnessed as we drove city this morning closer to the "ground zero" of the coastline. New homes and those in v of construction stand side by side with those hopelessly destroyed. Debris and rubble of mar the shores. Abandoned and damaged boats sit on dry land, far from the water.

In fact, one of our first site visits was to a 3,500-ton barge housing an offshore power sta apparently rode the waves more than two miles inland and was dropped into the middle

neighborhood, crushing people, buildings and cars. The unmovable barge now provides electricity to the homes in the area.

While it stands as proof of the incredible power of nature, in many ways, this "electric barge" is a symbol of the resiliency and determination of the Acehnese people - making an essentially a burial ground into something useful and life-giving.

That's one thing you notice here right away - the warmth of the people, their optimism and smiles. They seem truly happy to see you. Even after one of the greatest disasters of recent times, not to mention more than 30 years of military conflict, the people here radiate hope - the necessary tool of survival.

After a while, we made our way to the offices of Mercy Corps, our host for the first few days of investigation. There we met a group of very impressive, high-energy people, equal parts foreign born and native Indonesians, some of whom have been here for nearly the whole duration of the disaster.

After an extensive presentation from the office leadership and much interesting discussion, we were able to report that the people making use of our \$1.8 million contribution to Mercy Corps are resourceful and experienced individuals. Everyone shares an unswerving dedication to the livelihoods of those the disaster spared regardless of the potential dangers and their own.

I was also reassured to note that the more than 400 Mercy Corps staff members in Banda Aceh are good businesspeople as well. My evidence is the rigorous compliance, financial, accounting and monitoring and evaluation systems and processes they put in place almost immediately after their arrival on the scene.

"Our intent is to innovate on, maximize and leverage what we are doing every day," Sas deputy director of the organization's Aceh program, explained to our group.

Later in the day, we had the opportunity to meet a few beneficiaries of Mercy Corps' Finance program, which guarantees loans to small-business owners to help them start or rebuild businesses.

One such beneficiary is a woman named Ms. (or "Ibu," as they say here) Suwarsi, who started a tofu-making business in 1997, only to have it destroyed by the tsunami. She lost all of her machinery and tools as well as her raw material.

She managed to reopen her business in June 2005, but found she needed help to be successful that year, a loan facilitated by Mercy Corps (of what equated to just over \$2,700) enabled her to ramp up production by 50 percent and employ six other people. Now she produces about 400 (roughly 900 pounds) of tofu a day, which she distributes locally and down the coast by boat.

A member of our group asked Suwarsi if she felt like life was finally "back to normal" after expecting to hear about how she felt after going through such an ordeal. She responded that she was still not happy with her company's output. Thinking that she may have misunderstood, another member pressed the translator to ask the question again.

The answer was the same: "I would like to increase production by at least another 50 percent and be producing at least 800 kilograms by now."

When you think about it, a true businessperson could not possibly answer anything else

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