Indonesia: Tsunami and its Aftermath

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The year 2004 was to be remembered as a time of growing optimism and encouraging promise for Indonesia. Instead, it was marked by a tragedy of horrifying proportions—one that is believed to be the most destructive natural disaster in living memory. Past experience could not have prepared us for this event. Indonesia was simply overwhelmed by the scale and magnitude of this catastrophe.

On the morning of December 26, 2004, at 07:58 local time (at 19:58 Eastern Time on December 25, 2004), an extremely powerful earthquake, followed by a catastrophic tsunami, struck the northwestern edge of Indonesia—specifically the Province of Aceh (inhabited by 4.5 million people) and parts of the west coast of the Province of North Sumatra (inhabited by more than 11 million people)—an area only 45 miles from the epicenter of the earthquake that registered 9.0 on the Richter scale. The destruction was beyond imagination.

More than 123,000 people are dead, while 114,000 are still missing, almost three months after the disaster. Hundreds of thousands of homes, offices, places of worship, schools, hospitals, markets, shops and health care centers were destroyed. About 80 percent of the roads in northern and western Aceh suffered damage, as did hundreds of bridges and dozens of land and sea terminals. Telecommunications systems were affected. Eighty percent of electricity customers in the disaster area experienced outages. Preliminary calculations put the material loss at approximately US$ 4.5 billion.

In spite of these monumental challenges, Indonesia, as an affected country, has never tried to shirk its primary responsibility of dealing with the disaster and its massive consequences. From day one, the Indonesian government set out to do all it could to confront the situation and address the problems. Indonesians from all corners of the country immediately responded to the tragedy by mobilizing all kinds of assistance. They came by the thousands as volunteers to the affected provinces, especially Aceh.

At the same time, Indonesia also recognized the unprecedented nature of this disaster, which triggered a staggering amount of international assistance. Therefore, from the outset, Indonesia welcomed help from the international community.

In the process, Indonesia has indeed been truly privileged to receive, not only an outpouring of sympathy and condolences, but also spontaneous and generous assistance from all over the world, including in particular from the US government and private sector, nongovernmental organizations and from the local community. No less than President George W. Bush himself and First Lady Laura Bush accompanied by former Presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, visited the Indonesian Embassy to express their sympathy.
Relief operations in the affected areas—initially a bit chaotic—increasingly improved and became more effective as days went by. Even at the time when attention and action were still focused on relief, Indonesia always understood that emergency relief was only the earliest stage of a comprehensive program necessary to deal with such a disaster. We cannot let the victims be condemned to mere subsistence. We must help them regain a full and dignified life by rebuilding their livelihoods, providing permanent shelter for the displaced, repairing infrastructure in the affected regions, educating their children, etc.

In this context, the Indonesian government has developed a disaster management strategy consisting of two phases: rehabilitation and reconstruction. Both phases represent an ongoing challenge to the government and the people of Indonesia. The objective of the rehabilitation phase is to restore to a minimum level public services, i.e. education, housing and physical infrastructure, economic infrastructure including banking and financial institutions, and religious and social services, i.e. trauma treatment, law and order, securing land rights. The time frame for the rehabilitation phase is between six months and two years.

The reconstruction phase will focus on rebuilding affected communities and regions by promoting economic and urban development, assisting human resettlement, repairing transportation and telecommunication systems and revitalizing social and cultural systems and institutions. The time frame for the reconstruction phase is two to five years.

Planning for the rehabilitation and reconstruction phases is the responsibility of the National Planning Agency (BAPPENAS), while a newly-created Special Authority will be in charge of coordinating the implementation. International institutional support for coordinating the rehabilitation and reconstruction phases will be entrusted to the World Bank with support from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and key donor governments.

Resources to implement the strategy are expected to come from a reallocation of Indonesia’s state budget, a re-direction of already-committed and additional pledges of foreign assistance and new funding sources, such as grants or highly concessionary loans. Private sector involvement is equally important in this effort. In view of the magnitude of the resources needed and the complexity of the projects, governments alone would not be able to cope with them. There is bound to be private sector involvement through a public-private partnership: directly, as providers of assistance through resources, in-kind contributions and expertise; indirectly, as executing arms of projects; even commercially, as commercial contractors and/or investors.

The US introduced in the Congress on February 9, 2005, a supplemental appropriation bill in the amount of $950 million for tsunami relief and reconstruction. As of February 22, 2005, the US government has committed over $42.1 million in emergency relief and rehabilitation projects in Indonesia. These projects include: emergency food assistance, relief supplies, shelter, water and sanitation, health, livelihood recovery, psychological and social support, logistics and coordination, and rehabilitation activities for the affected communities in Indonesia. The generous American people have contributed incalculable amounts of money and in-kind donations. The US corporate and
private sectors, too, have been a major help in tsunami relief. It is expected that the US corporate sector will mobilize up to $750 million in the form of fresh money and in-kind donations for the affected countries. In this context, the private sector summit, scheduled for late May, will be very important.

Undoubtedly, the aftermath of this devastating disaster is further compounding the already complex and enormous challenges that Indonesia is currently facing. Not only will rehabilitation and reconstruction of the affected areas supersede other priorities in the deployment of our meager budget resources, they also will place further strain on an economy already heavily burdened by poverty and severely pressured by unemployment. Thus, it is understandable that Indonesia will continue to welcome cooperation with the international community, both directly and indirectly, in addressing this dire predicament.

One of the most effective ways for the international community to assist in the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the affected areas in Indonesia is to honor and readily disburse their pledges. As we know, there is a lag between the time a pledge is made and the provision of real concrete assistance. In this context, several principles need to be observed:

1. While international community cooperation is of crucial importance, the primary responsibility in dealing with the aftermath of the disaster should remain with the Indonesian government.

2. The Indonesian government should ensure transparency and accountability with respect to all international assistance. Similarly, any project proposals submitted by the international community also should observe the principle of transparency.

3. While the rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts in the affected areas must be part of, and consistent with, the Indonesian national development master plan and priorities, they also should take into account the wishes, interests and sensitivities of the local community.

As mentioned above, the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the affected areas will not only place a further burden on the Indonesian state budget, but they also put additional pressure on the national economy. Therefore, any foreign help that could alleviate that pressure would indirectly facilitate rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts. Two areas that offer possibilities for this indirect help are: finance and trade. In the area of finance, assistance could present itself in various forms of debt relief, such as debt forgiveness or reduction, a debt swap or a debt moratorium, which is under discussion in the Paris Club. With respect to trade, several schemes under consideration include: reinstating Indonesia on the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) list, suspending or revoking anti-dumping measures and countervailing duties and providing various forms of capacity building assistance.

Another important element of post-tsunami international cooperation pertains to efforts to bolster disaster detection and response by strengthening the capability of local
and national authorities to be prepared for, and coordinate response to, similar disasters. As reflected in the “Declaration on Action to Strengthen Emergency Relief, Rehabilitation, Reconstruction and Prevention on the Aftermath of Earthquake and Tsunami Disaster of December 26, 2004,” foreign leaders, who came to Jakarta on January 6, 2005, to participate in the “Special Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Leaders’ Meeting on Aftermath of Earthquake and Tsunami,” agreed to support ASEAN’s decision to create regional mechanisms on disaster prevention and mitigation and to establish a Regional Tsunami Early Warning Center (RTEWC) in the Indian Ocean and the Southeast Asian region.

Recently, former Presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton visited Aceh and North Sumatra. At the request of President George W. Bush, they are working to mobilize support and strengthen coordination among donor countries, international agencies and nongovernmental organizations that are assisting Indonesia and the other countries affected by the tsunami. The Indonesian people saw in their visit a more crucially important and a valued gesture from the American people in particular, and the international community in general: to maintain strong momentum for the future rehabilitation and reconstruction of the affected areas.

I find that this disaster has taught us a most precious and inspiring lesson regarding the value of unity and solidarity, the virtue of friendship and brotherhood and the power of cooperation: “Friends in need are friends indeed.”