

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Jakarta deployment: tsunami response

by Donovan Croucamp, EMA Liaison Officer, Jakarta

As part of Australia's response to the tsunami disaster in SE Asia, EMA sent me to Jakarta, Indonesia to act as a liaison officer between the United Nations and both EMA and the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID). This role was one of strategic level co-ordination and information exchange.

After being rerouted twice and losing but regaining my baggage I arrived in hot, humid Jakarta. Catching a weaving, hooting taxi was an interesting experience and so was standing outside the Australian Embassy for close to an hour trying to convince the local Indonesian Security Detachment that I needed to gain admission. The Indonesian city of Jakarta is a busy, congested place with many motorcycles and Toyotas of every description.

The work environment was very intense for the first week as structures, relationships and co-ordination systems were still being developed. The diversity of UN agencies, Non Government Organisations (NGO's) and donor countries was wide-ranging. The response from the international community was swift and, as a result, there were many well meaning players all jostling for resources and information. The biggest challenge for the UN was to get all the foreign countries, foreign military forces, and NGO's to work in a co-ordinated fashion. I was introduced to the UN Disaster Assessment and co-ordination Team (UNDAC) by Trevor Haines and my AusAID contact was Sally-Anne Henfry, both friendly Australian faces.



PHOTO: TREVOR HAINES

Donovan Croucamp and fellow workers in the UNDAC Communications room.

Civil and military co-ordination was essential as the Indonesian Military (TNI) initially co-ordinated all military resources, both Indonesian and foreign, through a Joint Operations Centre in Medan. Military support was the backbone to the initial response and relief efforts into the affected area of the Aceh province. The focal point was Banda Aceh where the losses were most obvious and significant. Air operations by both fixed-wing and helicopter aircraft bore the brunt of the logistical support with the RAAF doing an outstanding job of service provision and air operations support.

My role was quite removed from the affected area although I was inundated with information and images from the field. I began the task of strengthening links with AusAID and providing regular intelligence to Canberra through daily situation reports (Sitreps) and other UN documentation. Working at a strategic level with UN agencies was an interesting experience and working with key players from UN, NGO and donor countries was rewarding despite the tragedy of the overall situation.

The business and hype of the first week was stressful but it seemed to stabilise and calm down in the second week as regular meetings were established and key figures got to know each other and their responsibilities. Disaster logistics was a very important functional area and the UN Joint Logistics Centre (UNJLC) managed a key forum to co-ordinate and manage the movement of resources into and around the affected areas. Other UN agencies included UNDP, OCHA, WFP, IOM, WHO and many others whose acronyms are sure to confuse most people for a few days. I attended an address by UN Secretary General, Kofi Anan, as well as many meetings and forums chaired by various UN and Indonesian leaders. In addition to my UN/AusAID role I was involved in assisting the extrication and debrief of the first Australian medical team that provided an emergency medical and surgical capability in Banda Aceh for two weeks. Many lives were saved by this team and they helped set up structures and relationships for the replacement medical teams who were deployed on a rostered basis. The experience was challenging and rewarding although disasters alter one's perspective on what is important in life.