

The Heartland Spirit

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Angels at Aceh: Fairfield's Link to Tsunami Relief Efforts

Fairfield's Robin Lim Assists Tsunami Survivors in Sumatra

"The Indian Ocean off the West Coast of Sama Tiga Aceh is the exact temperature of tears." Robin Lim, March 4, 2005

by Nancy Pfoutz
Staff Writer

When the tsunami of December 26, 2004 struck the northern tip of Sumatra, an area known as the province of Aceh, it devastated a strip of shoreline one to three miles wide, killing more than 120,000 people with another 115,000 missing in Indonesia alone. Aceh was the closest land mass to the epicenter of the 9.0 earthquake which triggered the tsunami. Large barges were lifted and moved as far inland as 5 kilometres. Entire livelihoods were eliminated. Some areas lost 80% of their population.

"The destruction in Banda Aceh was mind-numbing," said Chuka Jenkins, a physician from Maryland who came as a relief worker for Food For the Hungry International. "Everything was destroyed – there were miles of endless debris and mud and standing water."

In early February, Robin Lim, a midwife from Bali who also lives in Fairfield part of the time, traveled with three family members and about 19 other volunteers to a small area in Aceh known as "Sama Tiga." With help from the Indonesia Development of Education and Permaculture, Lim and the relief workers assisted the women and child survivors in this hard-hit region. Of particular concern to Lim



Robin Lim comforting a young child in Aceh, Indonesia. Photo: Deja Bernhardt

were the pregnant women, the bearers of Aceh's future.

Devastation of a Region

The Indonesian Midwives Association says 30 percent – some 1,650 – of its members in this region died in the catastrophe. Many who survived are too traumatized to work or lack equipment for safe deliveries. Although male doctors have been sent in, "the fact is that women won't see male doctors, due to strict Muslim customs," Lim said. "In addition, they won't come out to seek food or aid of any kind from male relief workers."

In a country where the delivery of a baby is traditionally accompanied by feasts, prayers and special ceremonies,

these women don't even have a clean, safe spot in which to birth. Some have walked through kilometers of jungle to get prenatal help, and many face the danger of giving birth alone. Estimates state that nearly 15,000 pregnant women survived the Indonesian tsunami.

The massive damage to the infrastructure has hampered relief efforts: 44 of Aceh's health centers were destroyed, and 50-70% of the staff were killed. 57 bridges had been demolished or damaged. "The only building standing was the Mosque, where 70 people were marooned on

top," Lim said. "One of the women clinging to that roof was Sarjani, who had lost her two daughters in the deluge that day. At sunset, she went into hard labor...also among the survivors on the roof was a midwife."

Delivering Essentials: Veils, Protein and Hope

Part-time residents of Fairfield, Lim and her family have lived in Bali for the last two years. She is successfully bringing birthing and breastfeeding services, natural family planning, and health care to marginalized communities and families through the Healthy Mother Earth Foundation, the community-based cooperative health clinic she founded in 1994

and works for on a volunteer basis.

Lim brought these valuable skills with her when she traveled to Aceh. Her focus was on immediate survival relief and providing medical attention to



Robin Lim Photo: Deja Bernhardt

her detailed, personal letters written prior to arriving in Aceh, she says,

"We will be bringing 'birth buckets' for the expectant women containing high protein foods, rehydration fluids, a sarong, veils (Muslim women will not come out unless their heads are covered), candles, receiving blankets, vitamins and herbs..."

"We hope to train any health workers, surviving midwives and dukuns (traditional medicine women) on 'Safe, Calm, Clean' birth and postpartum protocols. We will be camping among the 'internally displaced people', refugees of the earthquake and tsunami. We will bring many boxes of medicines and first aid supplies."

The truck loaded with food (mung beans and peanuts), medicines, baby blankets and survival essentials had 16 hours of dangerous travel from Medan to Aceh, because the far northern province is also the epicenter of a civil war. (Lim and her family caught a free Red Cross-Red Crescent flight.) For 30 years, "Free Aceh" rebels seeking an independent Islamic state have skirmished with the Indonesian military, adding to the isolation and impoverishment of the Aceh region.

Educating and Bridge-Building

Phase I of the trip "surpassed our wildest dreams in what we accomplished," Lim said. The team established

women and children. Lim also concentrated on providing and teaching safe birthing practices. In one of her

a mobile clinic and bridged the critical gap between local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and their international counterparts. Aid reached people needing it most. UNICEF, ANISA ("woman" in Arabic), World Health Organization, Red Cross, Catholic Relief Service and Mercy Corps responded well to the team. Building bridges also occurred in other ways.

"Honestly, our clinic is one of the few places where the military and the rebels both come and get free medical supplies," Lim says.

"We taught a workshop for midwives on safe, clean birth procedures and 41 local midwives attended," Lim went on. "For many, the workshop was therapy, allowing them to speak of their losses. One walked for three days to attend. She had lost her husband, child and home and was 30 weeks pregnant. We convinced the medical director of UNICEF Indonesia to attend, with the result that UNICEF donated 200 birth kits and 200 baby kits."

Outbreaks of malaria are common, and tetanus is causing a high rate of infant mortality. Without clean water sources and sterile instruments, births are dangerous. Lim and her teammate Kelly Dunn taught the birth attendants how to safely burn the umbilical cord to eliminate tetanus or bacterial transmission from non-sterile tools.

Lim, currently back home in Bali, hopes to return to Aceh on April 1, to continue the clinic and coordinate the delivery of aid which includes tools for rebuilding their homes. "The resettlement of these villages is essential to the physical and emotional survival of the people," said Lim. "Those who do not go home to attempt to rebuild their lives on ancestral soil, face generations of displacement."

In her absence, other team members from Bali have taken shifts doing relief work in Aceh.

Lim's Lifeline: Fairfield

Lim has strong connections with Fairfield, the place in America her children call "home." She is well-known for her neo-natal work with women in Fairfield, and also has established herself as a talented poet.

Her daughter Deja Bernhardt graduated from M.U.M. recently, and is doing video work on the Aceh effort. (Her documentary on AIDS prevention efforts in Africa won an award). Daughter Zhou attends the University of Iowa, and will spend her summer in Bali and Aceh, working with the team.

Even from afar, Fairfield continues to be a lifeline for her and her family. The primary source of funding sustaining them in Bali has been rental income from two homes in Fairfield, which is currently in jeopardy due to a soft rental market.

Keeping Lim's Work Alive in Aceh

Bruce Grady, a friend and supporter of Lim's efforts, is establishing a fundraising drive to keep Lim's work



Lim (right) meets with a woman in her clinic.

Photo: Deja Bernhardt

going strong. Monies raised support both the Bali clinic, whose finances are "scary" says Lim and her work in Aceh.

"Robin fully intends to keep her work at Aceh going. People who go there are totally transformed. The tsunami is one of the largest natural catastrophes in history. Robin is our link, our ability, to do something about it through someone we know and trust," says Grady.

"Robin is already accepted by the Indonesian villagers and the Indonesian

government. She can do things that large organizations cannot do, but she needs our support."

Two types of funds are needed: one-time donations and small monthly contributions on an ongoing basis (see below).

Lim's letters show the poignancy of Aceh's loss and the resiliency and hope of its survivors and relief workers.

"Cheryl and Louise, the Australian midwives we sent to Aceh on Team II, have just returned," she writes. "They are carrying something we have come to call "The Aceh Light." They worked so hard, day and late into the nights. In the most primitive conditions, [such as] sharing a pit toilet with 9 people, often running out of water, sweltering in intense heat. (The tsunami took most of the trees away – making it triply hot). These women did patient care, trauma counseling and worked as liasons between large international NGOs.

"After a month of that they come back looking ten years younger! They cry easily, bursting into tears when they

"They are wearing their hearts on the outside of their bodies. This has been true of every individual who has worked with us in Aceh....I would say that the lesson of Aceh is 'More love less attitude.' The people of Aceh have lost absolutely everything, some have lost everyone they love, indeed, every person there is grieving, no one was left unharmed. To live among them is to be converted to [a] religion of gratitude. None of us will ever take a single moment with a friend or lover, or child, or family for granted. Aceh is the most broken place on earth today, and the most healing."



Homeless children of Sama Tiga Aceh living in camps.

Photo: Deja Bernhardt

were reunited with my sons, who were on the team with them and returned a few days earlier. They cry for missing the people. They ask out loud 'What are we doing here, when we are more needed in Aceh?'

To donate to support Lim's work and to learn more about her efforts, visit www.robinlim-support.org. Those without Internet capabilities can Bruce Grady at 472-3880.