

The heat in April was unbearable. The dust, left over from the Tsunami, still covered many areas. The buildings which remained standing after the incredible wave of fifteen meters and the flood, were flattened by the latest earthquake of 9,0 magnitude on the Richter scale. Most things built by human hands have been destroyed – they are in pieces, the debris visible over a huge area. Much had already been cleared from the roads by the military which came from all over the world to help. On higher ground, the downtown area was busy and bustling with life, while the old flooded markets were empty.

Of the initial 250,000 inhabitants of Aceh, an estimated half of the population perished in the gigantic wave which engulfed an area of ten kilometres depth inland. Heavy boats were carried by the power of the water right into residential areas where they were stranded, looking totally out of place.

The spirit of the Acehnese is remarkable. Known to be very proud people, they are showing incredible strength in dealing with this collective trauma affecting each and every family. A young Acehnese, told us (Tiwi, my Javanese colleague and myself) he has the recurring post-trauma experience of hearing the incredible thunder and noise with which the wave swallowed all and everything. Most of the dead bodies were carried by the wave into the centre of town. With the other survivors, he found himself surrounded by thousands of dead bodies. He had to wait four days before help arrived with food and water. This first help came from American soldiers from the Abraham Lincoln airplane carrier.

The city was drowning in one meter of mud when the wave receded. Now, three months later, the initial tent camps are being replaced with wooden barracks where each family has one room.

Our project "women empowering women" took us first to Camp Kajhu, in an area a few kilometres out of town, where



Margret conducting a meeting with the women to hear their aspirations



a village once stood. We met with a group of fifteen women, to engage them in small business projects, applying an empowering approach. They work daily in the surrounding areas to clean the debris from the Tsunami.

We began with some relaxation exercises, then we invited the women to share what they wished to do, and tell us how they wanted us to support them. We introduced photos of Swiss valleys given by a sponsoring organization and tried to establish an emotional relationship between the two women's groups.

In spite of the total destruction of their village and its surroundings, the Acehnese women expressed a strong wish to remain in the place where they had roots and had lived before the event.

Eventually the women developed a plan for small businesses. The money was handed directly to the women, to empower them to purchase what they needed. There were many excited and happy faces. We also asked whether the men would allow them to keep the money. In Aceh, a conservative Muslim province practicing Shariah law, women's rights are not in the foreground. Women are subject to the decisions of men. The women were sure that they would keep the money and use it in the way they felt appropriate.

Some new ideas were introduced, including the notion that their small businesses could enable them to do something nice for themselves. This concept was new to the ladies and they needed time to reflect upon it. Each of the women who received a financial gift made a commitment, in turn, to support another woman outside of the family at a later date.

The projects that we agreed upon were: selling fried bananas, a kiosk, breeding goats, farming ducks (salted duck eggs are considered a delicacy), a sewing machine and sewing materials for three girls, selling fish and selling clothes. Insari, a local Acehnese field coordinator will be in contact with the women until our return in June.

The fifteen women in Camp Lampsenong underwent a similar process. I introduced relaxation and breathing exercises as a tool to relieve some of the stress and tension from the group trauma. Their chosen projects were similar to the other group.

The camps and barracks are a sober affair, set in land still full of debris, with water coming by truck and sanitary facilities not yet installed. We agreed to return to continue to expand the small business projects. During this visit I was invited by a male peacemaker circle to share my knowledge and views on prevention of violence and peace training. My presentation was received warmly and another meeting on the next trip is planned.

The need for support is immense, so many people having lost their loved ones and all their possessions.

You, too, can help with your contribution to support other groups of women and men beginning their own small business projects.

Margret Rueffler is a transpersonal psychologist and an acupuncturist, working with the prevention of collective violence internationally and in Bali, Java and Sumatra. **For more information on training programs and projects:** www.pppi.net