

An aerial photograph of a flooded rice paddy field in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. The water reflects the overcast, cloudy sky, creating a shimmering effect. The field is divided into numerous rectangular plots by narrow earthen paths. In the background, a range of mountains is visible under a heavy, grey sky. The overall mood is somber and reflective.

# A Pilgrim in Banda Aceh



Sr. Pat visits a house on top of which the tsunami stranded a fishing boat.

## A BON SECOURS SISTER WITNESSES REBUILDING AND HEALING IN TSUNAMI-RAVAGED INDONESIA

**A**S I STOOD ON THE FLATLANDS of Banda Aceh, a city on the northern tip of the island of Sumatra, Indonesia, I had a terrible realization of the awesome violence and power of the tsunami that struck south Asia.

As far as I could see, there was nothing but open space. Just a year earlier, thousands of homes had been here, with families living in them. Then, early on a Sunday morning, December 26, 2004, a wall of water swept across the ground where I now stood. All that remained of those houses were some tile floors. I couldn't bear to imagine what it had been like for the people who had been where I now was. They are no more.

In that moment, I had a clear understanding of what until then I had only seen through news video: the expansiveness of the destruction, and the reality that almost nobody could have survived it.

I traveled to Indonesia this past December, one year after the devastating tsunami, accompanying a delegation from Catholic Relief Services (CRS), the relief and development agency of the U.S. Catholic community. The purpose of my

trip was twofold. Bon Secours Health System, Marriottsville, MD, had given a sizable donation to CRS to help in the recovery and rebuilding efforts in the wake of the tsunami, and as chairperson of the system's board of directors, I went to see some of what had been done with our contribution. But I also went as a witness, to be able to tell the story of the tsunami relief efforts and of the wonderful work being done by CRS.

### GRATITUDE IN PULO ACEH

Quite honestly, I received the invitation to go to Indonesia with mixed feelings. I was very anxious about going because I thought I would be overwhelmed by it. And I was. It was a very powerful experience. I was overwhelmed by the sense of tragedy and loss by so many people who didn't have much to begin with. But I was also awed by the joy, gratitude, and hope I saw in people as they rebuilt their lives and their communities.

That was the sense I had after meeting with the people of Pulo Aceh, a small island off the coast of Sumatra that had been decimated by the tsunami. When our helicopter landed, we



**BY SR. PAT ECK, CBS**

*Sr. Pat is chairperson, board of directors, Bon Secours Health System, Marriottsville, MD.*



A Palu Aceh community leader, standing center, thanks the Catholic Relief Services for its aid to his town.

were greeted by what I imagine was most of the community. They provided us with incredible hospitality, offering us coffee and coconuts full of milk. Then we sat down for a short meeting. A community leader rose and addressed us very emotionally: "We live here at the end of Indonesia, on an island. We are so isolated. We were sure we would be forgotten. And then, CRS came! We don't know how to thank you."

The gratitude of the people was so strong and heartfelt. It didn't matter that we were of different faith traditions—we were Catholic and they were mostly Muslim. The fact was that we were helping, one person to another. And it was freely offered and freely accepted.

The emotional atmosphere of that meeting didn't last long. A woman from the community rose

next, and wanted to move on to matters more practical: Would it be possible, she asked, to use the water—now available from a number of spigots throughout the village—to wash their clothes? The response, of course, was "It's your water, so use it."

### AN ARK OF RESCUE

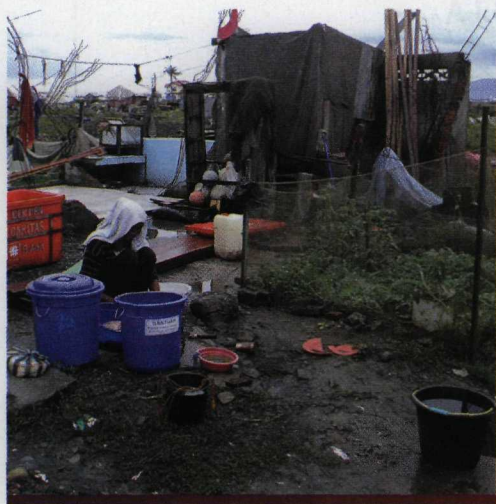
Back on the mainland, we visited an amazing site that has become something of a fixture on the

local disaster tour: a fishing boat, swept up by the tsunami waters and deposited on top of a house, where it remains to this day. The people on board survived, and the boat became an ark of rescue for several families in the neighborhood, who were able to climb on board after it came to rest on the house.

As we were looking at this amazing sight, a woman who had been sitting across the road chopping meat for her family's supper let us know that she had been one of the fortunate people to be saved. It was an incredible moment, both of awe at the power of water and gratitude for providence and the ability to communicate without words.

An important insight I had from visiting the communities in northern Sumatra was the extent of the devastation, not just to houses and community buildings but also to the entire infrastructure. Roads, bridges, and piers were washed away; electrical and communications systems destroyed. And although we had heard so much about the destruction caused by the tsunami, I hadn't realized how much damage the earthquake that accompanied it caused.

Much of the land along the coastline was reconfigured, and so much of what was once property and buildable land is now under water. And what I think so many people in our country don't realize is that this entire infrastructure must be rebuilt, and land issues have to be addressed. The construction in Pulo Aceh is a prime example. There, construction of homes could not begin until key infrastructure was restored. The harbor had to be dredged and a pier and roads rebuilt before construction equipment and supplies could be delivered to the island and taken to



This woman, here chopping meat for her family's dinner, was on the boat when it landed atop the house on p. 13.

**IT WAS AN INCREDIBLE MOMENT,  
BOTH OF AWE AT THE POWER OF WATER AND  
GRATITUDE FOR PROVIDENCE AND THE ABILITY  
TO COMMUNICATE WITHOUT WORDS.**

work sites. It was very illuminating—and frustrating—to watch, on my return to the United States, the news reports on the first anniversary of the tsunami, with their constant refrain of “Not enough has been done,” and “Home construction is going too slowly.”

**“BUILD BACK BETTER”**

Despite the challenges, great progress is being made. We saw simple brick houses that are being built in Pulo Aceh, (their motto is “Build back better”) and in villages along the coast of Aceh province on the mainland. Many more houses are under construction. And in Banda Aceh, the capital of the province, we attended the dedication of the city’s first hospital committed to the care of women and children. The newly completed building is the first of four structures that will be a part of the Banda Aceh Women and Children’s Hospital. When complete, the complex will include space for an intensive care unit, radiology, surgery, and a 50-bed overnight care facility.

The hospital is adjacent to the Kesehatan Blang Padang clinic, a facility that had served an average of 300 patients a day, even though it lost 11 employees in the tsunami. Although the clinic building survived, it was filled with mud, debris—and, most sadly, 28 bodies. CRS hired tsunami survivors to clean out and restore the facility in a cash-for-work project. It was operating again by the end of February 2005, just two months after the tsunami.

The hospital building we saw, which was built by CRS using local architects and workers, was immaculate with its gleaming white walls and brand-new equipment. Viewed according to the standards of a medical facility in the developed world, it was simple and basic. Our guides showed us a very small lab that was set up with the most rudimentary equipment. But the local Acehnese were thrilled and excited and very happy to show it off to visitors. It was amazing to me. They were so excited and grateful about the basic sorts of things that we take for granted.

As impressed as I was by the construction of homes and infrastructure I saw, I was even more moved by the dedication of the CRS workers I met and the immediacy with which they had responded to this crisis. On the day the earth-

quake and tsunami struck, there weren’t any CRS employees in Banda Aceh. Because the region had been wracked by a two-decades-long civil conflict, outside aid agencies were forbidden to work there. By the time our delegation arrived in December 2005, 325 CRS employees were working in Banda Aceh.

**RESPONDING TO A CALL**

Many of the workers were native Acehnese who had been hired and trained by CRS in the months following the tsunami. Many others were career humanitarian workers, who had been scattered

**What Is Catholic Relief Services?**

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) is the official international humanitarian agency of the U.S. Catholic community, providing assistance to people in 99 countries and territories overseas. It was founded in 1943 by the Catholic bishops of the United States.

Although CRS is a Catholic agency, assistance is given solely on the basis of need, not race, creed, or nationality. Working through local offices and an extensive network of partners, CRS aids the poor by, first, providing direct assistance where needed in times of emergency caused by disasters like tsunamis, earthquakes, famine, and war.

CRS also offers hope for the future through development projects in agriculture, community health, education, HIV/AIDS, peace building, and micro credit lending. Wherever CRS works, it seeks to help the poor realize their human dignity and achieve improved and sustainable standards of living.

In the United States, CRS works with Catholics and others of good will to connect them to the poor overseas. This is done through programs that reach into schools, churches, and communities and help Americans to recognize how the choices they make—as citizens and as consumers—can affect the lives of the poor around the world.

**To assist CRS in its mission of relief and development, please contact Fr. Christopher P. Promis, CSSp, institutional relations officer, Catholic Relief Services, 209 West Fayette Street, Baltimore, MD 21201-3443; phone: 410-951-7372; e-mail: [fpromis@crs.org](mailto:fpromis@crs.org).**



**GIVING HOPE TO A  
WORLD OF NEED**

*The official international relief and development  
agency of the U.S. Catholic community*



## A PILGRIM IN BANDA ACEH

The newly constructed Banda Aceh Women and Children's Hospital.



around the globe when the call for help was sounded. Many of them dropped whatever they were doing, interrupted holiday visits with families, and changed their lives in a heartbeat—simply because somebody needed them.

I think of some of the dedicated people I met: for example, Scott Campbell, director of the CRS Aceh program, who was working in Angola before taking on this post.

And then there was David Murphy, an engineer from Boston who helped on the Big Dig tunnel construction project there. He answered a call to help in Aceh with his family in tow. The Murphys were not just an individual response to a call, but rather that of a whole family, whose lives changed because they chose to be a part of the struggle for a more humane world. All of these people lived out this call in ways that are real, tangible, and direct.

I believe that there is an important lesson for all of us in Catholic health care: How do we respond?

Are we willing to be a part of the transformation of our world into something different—something better? How do we hear, understand, and respond to such a call? This is a question we all must wrestle with and answer in our own lives.

We all share a call to be God's love in the world. We live it out differently, some in health care, some in education or social services—and some in relief efforts. My visit reinforced my conviction that we are all in the struggle together and that I may have a call to support someone else's ministry in a way I had not thought of before.

If you are not aware of the work of CRS, I encourage you to search it out. The agency's people do phenomenal work. I know our money is being well used. It is a privilege to have been even a small part of their efforts. It feels like there is so much more opportunity to be in this struggle together. If we choose . . . we all could do more! ■

**WE ALL SHARE A CALL TO BE  
GOD'S LOVE IN THE WORLD.**