

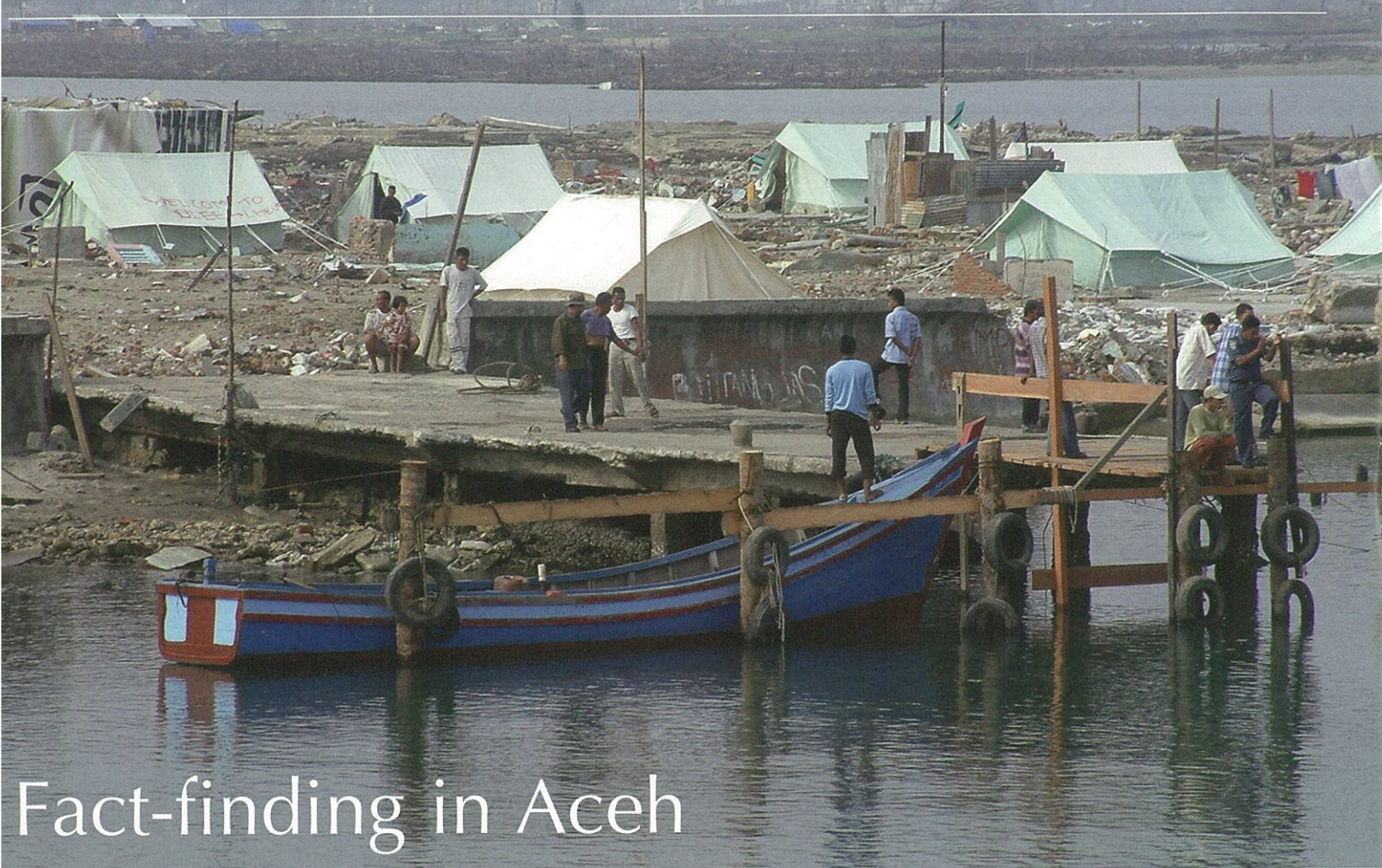
UNITED WORLD

TSUNAMI RELIEF
UWC RESPONDS
TO THE DISASTER

May 2005



UNITED WORLD
COLLEGES



Fact-finding in Aceh

Five UWCSEA staff and a UWCSEA graduate visited Aceh in March to establish links with local schools and relief organisations as the first step in UWCSEA's long-term contribution towards the rebuilding of communities in the area.

Conscious of the need to provide short-term resources as well as building relationships, the six – teachers Dave Allen, Susan Edwards, Kate Lewis, Neil McCullough and Karen Masee and graduate Kerry Riza – arrived laden with stationery, lap-top computers and donations. They also conveyed letters from UWCSEA students who hope to generate long-term student links in the area.

Through the IBO's 'schools-to-schools' programme, coordinated by Peter Kenny, Head of Projects for the IBO Asia-Pacific region, the team quickly made links with many suitable schools, and UWCSEA is now working with the Achenese group Forum Bangun Aceh (FBA) to help with rebuilding and resourcing projects.

Susan Edwards gives us a personal perspective:

The devastation was evident from the air as our plane approached Banda Aceh airport – once a sleepy, almost dormant airstrip until the disastrous Boxing Day earthquake and tsunami. The province of Aceh lost over 200,000 people to the tsunami, and the scale of devastation



defies belief. Now the airport is one of the busiest of the Indonesian archipelago, bringing much-needed aid and expertise from all over the world. Although, along with the rest of the world, I had watched the tsunami disaster unfold on my television screen, the reality of the geographical devastation of the area and

the stories of human suffering cannot be fully conveyed unless one has first-hand experience. We simply were not prepared for the enormous scale of the disaster – and this was three months on.

The lush green countryside unfolded as we headed from Banda Aceh airport towards the town centre. Rice fields and coconut trees line the roadside with the dramatic uplift of the mountainous spine that runs the length of Sumatra in the near distance. However this scenic beauty is abruptly interrupted by a freshly dug field, a white picket fence runs alongside the road and numerous Indonesian flags have been placed evenly along the fence line. This is the mass gravesite of the tsunami victims. Tens of thousands of bodies buried without individual rites and without identification in the effort to clear the decomposing bodies efficiently and with the hope of stemming the threat of disease.

We visited school sites, where just over three months ago stood strong buildings, some of which were built during colonial times. The pride with which the teachers spoke of their schools is heart wrenching. There were libraries, computer rooms, and language and science laboratories. The earthquake had shattered the computers as they fell from their tables during the quake; similarly the science and language laboratory equipment. The tsunami waters swept it all away.

In the back yard of Senior High School

2, a large fishing boat still lay, marooned over two kilometres inland from the shoreline. Thank heavens December 26 was not a school day. As it was, the school lost 30 per cent of the student population, 19 staff and 4 administrative staff. The 1,000 students who did survive now live with extended family or are staying in an IDP (Internal Displaced Person) camp.

Teachers at another Senior High School, who accompanied us to their former school site, spoke of one student who was at school, playing basketball when the tsunami struck. He heard such a thunderous noise that he climbed to the top of a coconut tree in the school grounds to try to ascertain what was happening. He saw a black wall of water and debris (about 30 meters high) coming towards him. He clung to the coconut tree and miraculously managed to ride the water whilst others were sucked down. He is now an orphan, living in a tent along with 12 other orphan teenage boys from the same school. The tent is located on a vacant block opposite his head teacher's house. His school classroom is a tent and his home is a tent. These tents are hot, they leak when it rains and the floors turn

to mud. This is just one individual story, yet there are hundreds of thousands of others.

At the end of the first day as we drove back along the coastal road to Banda Aceh from Krueng Raya, trying again to grasp the extent of this disaster, we passed the IDP camps sponsored by different NGOs from various international communities. Large groups of children (most likely orphans) played in organised activities. In other parts of the tented IDP camps, late afternoon routines of cooking, washing and bathing were evident. As I watched this scene repeated, I phoned my soon to be four-year-old daughter, knowing that her bath and bedtime routine would be well underway. 'Hello Mummy' she answered. 'How is it over there after the earthquake and the big water? Have the people got houses now?'

'Oh darling, I'm not sure just where to begin to answer your question. But tell me about your day at school...'



For more information or to make a donation, please visit www.uwcsea.edu.sg or email Anthony Skillicorn tsunamirelief@uwcsea.edu.sg



Li Po Chun UWC sets to work in Sri Lanka

This year's Project Week had a very personal meaning for many of the students at LPCUWC. In December, when the tsunami ploughed into the coastlines of South Asia, many students witnessed devastation in their home countries. The College is currently working on a fundraising and aid project to help rebuild a school and a community in Matara, a small town on the southern tip of Sri Lanka.

"I do not feel comfortable being here and not doing something for the tsunami victims of my country, which has been devastated," said Ishani Premathilaka from Sri Lanka on her return to the College in January. "Is there any way that I can offer my help?"

Students organised a meeting for the whole College community, providing an opportunity to reflect on the tragedy, honour the dead and bereaved, and brainstorm ideas as to how best the College could offer assistance.

Out of that meeting came the notion of a relief project as part of the College's Project Week – the idea being to send a group of students to a school in one of the affected countries to offer psychological support for the children there to help them overcome their loss and grief.

With the assistance of Ishani and her

parents in Colombo, a small school was identified in Matara on the southern tip of Sri Lanka. Medhananda School has only 80 students, and almost all their lives had been affected by the tsunami.

"It is a fact that when such calamities occur, the more popular schools attract everyone's attention when it comes to rebuilding, while the smaller ones may go unnoticed," explains LPCUWC maths teacher Nimal de Silva. "We felt therefore that we had made the right choice to offer our support."

A team of eleven students, representing Hong Kong, Japan, Lesotho, Namibia, Netherlands, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand volunteered for the project, agreeing to fund the travel and lodging costs themselves. Over the next weeks the students raised over US\$3,000 for building materials and equipment through a number of fund-raising activities, including selling roses for Valentine's Day.

The team set off for Marata in March, having participated in skills-training sessions conducted by the College counsellor on dealing with traumatised and grief stricken children.

During the project the team helped to rebuild the school – painting walls, polishing desks and chairs, fitting electric fans, fixing a new school name board, making curtains, re-

organising sporting venues and clearing the grounds. New school uniforms were given to the children along with stationery, toys, books and sports equipment.

But perhaps the most important aspect of the project was the students' interaction with the children. Rather than dwelling on the tragedy, the group encouraged the children to overcome their troubles by playing and talking to them – listening to what they had to say, making them smile and comforting them when they could. "The children's feelings of grief, despair and suffering were somehow siphoned into each and every one of our hearts and we too felt their pain," reflects Stephanie Kong, from Hong Kong.

The group has now returned to Hong Kong, but the project will not end there. "Through our contact in Sri Lanka, we will monitor the progress of these children and the needs of the school, and continue to help them as best we can," explains Nimal.

"I really feel that I have done something meaningful for people in need. Even though it may not be much, I believe that we were able to make a difference to the lives of these children," says Ishani.



For more information or to donate, please contact office@lpcuwc.edu.hk