

# **Serambi Indonesia: News Extra! No News Today**

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Of all the stories that Aceh's daily newspaper, *Serambi Indonesia*, had covered, this was the biggest. It should have been headline news, but there was no edition of *Serambi Indonesia* that day. The newspaper's printing presses had been silenced.

It was 27 December 2004, the day after the devastating earthquake and tsunami struck Aceh, wiping out not only the newspaper's printing presses but half its staff and destroying the office; it was also the day that around 200,000 of Aceh's population perished, and large areas of the Indonesian province were decimated.

The two-storey *Serambi Indonesia* (hereafter referred to as Serambi) office building was damaged that day, but is still standing, lonely on the skyline of Laksamana Malahayati Street, Baet village, Baitussalam sub-district, Aceh Besar.

On 2 January 2005, as I approached the *Serambi* office, the building which once housed Aceh's only daily newspaper could be seen on the horizon from several kilometres away; a poignant testament to the earthquake that shook the land, and generated an angry sea that had sent waves metres high sweeping over buildings several days earlier.

I first saw *Serambi's* office from as far away as Simpang Mesra, more than two kilometres from the building itself. Thousands of homes that made up villages such as Alue Naga, Kreung Cut and Baet, as well as the forest trees that used to obscure the building from view, were completely swallowed by the tsunami that followed the earthquake of 26 December 2004, which measured 8.9 on the Richter scale. *Serambi's* office was about 1.5 kilometres from the beach at Alue Naga and about six kilometres from the centre of Banda Aceh, the main city in the province.

### **Tragedy strikes!**

I was working at the *Serambi* bureau in Jakarta when I first heard news of the tragedy in Aceh. It was one full day later before our bureau chief from North Aceh, Ismail M Syah, was able to give us news of the fate of our office in Banda Aceh. North Aceh was less badly affected, so Ismail and most staff there were safe. But of our friends and colleagues in Banda Aceh, there was only bad news, or no news. The *Serambi* office in Banda Aceh was in ruins. At head office in Jakarta, we were devastated.

My thoughts were in turmoil: what had happened in Aceh? What had become of my family, friends, and work colleagues? We received no other news that day. All telephone communications were down. I felt an overwhelming need to return to Aceh.

I didn't know then that not only was the office destroyed, but almost half of *Serambi's* staff were dead or missing. I began the journey unaware of the scale of the devastation that awaited us. The journey from Jakarta to Banda Aceh was to be a four-day drive, and one of the most difficult, sad and frightening trips I have ever made in my life. I left Jakarta on 28 December, two days after the tsunami, not knowing what I would find, or if indeed I would complete the journey.

It was a journey to a place where life and infrastructure had been eliminated, where the landscape was barely recognisable. It changed my life forever. In Jakarta as I prepared to leave for Aceh, memories of the past struggles of *Serambi* came to my mind.

### **Background to *Serambi***

*Serambi Indonesia* was established in 1989. It was not the first daily newspaper in Aceh, but by late 2004 it was the only survivor. It has always been difficult to sustain a daily newspaper in

Aceh – there were never enough funds to subsidise the unprofitable newspaper industry. Partly-owned by the larger Jakarta-based *Kompas Gramedia* group, *Serambi* survived because it enjoyed the financial support of its owners. For the first eight years, the newspaper struggled with a circulation of only 10,000 to 20,000 daily; income from advertisements was low, as companies were yet to be convinced of the benefits of advertising there.

The newspaper's situation was made more difficult because of the conflict; a violent struggle for independence in Aceh, which began in 1976, was in its thirteenth year by the time *Serambi* was founded. The two warring parties, the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Indonesian security forces (TNI), were never satisfied with the paper's coverage of their actions.

*Serambi* struggled to provide non-partisan views of the conflict, but criticism of its editorial staff and journalists, for what both sides (GAM and TNI) perceived as biased reporting against them, was almost an everyday occurrence. We all felt the burden of responsibility to report the truth, to expose the conflict that was ravaging our society and economy. The paper was read by all sectors of society, and often formed the basis for discussions in the coffee shops of Aceh.

For *Serambi*, the overriding priority was to remain in circulation, to be neutral and to be responsible to its readership.

In 1989, Aceh was designated a "Military Operation Zone" (*Daerah Operasi Militer*, or DOM); in many areas of the province, the conflict was brutal, bloody and violent. Journalists found it difficult, even impossible, to travel to assignments out of the main towns. Those who did travel often suffered intimidation and harassment at the hands of the security forces. Information on what was happening in the villages of Aceh was difficult to obtain – and even more impossible to verify. More or less, there was a news blackout about the conflict areas in the province. Theirs was a dark secret, as yet untold.

Ten years later, in 1998, with the status of DOM lifted, people throughout Aceh were hungry for the information that had been impossible to gain during the previous decade. The paper began to publish articles highlighting several incidents of human rights abuses that were directly linked to the military presence in Aceh. As a picture of systematic abuses such as extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, disappearances and rape – most allegedly perpetrated by the Indonesian military and police – emerged, *Serambi's* circulation doubled, to more than 40,000 per day. Aceh's people, her economy and infrastructure had been under attack for ten years, and the news was just beginning to emerge. The people of Aceh wanted the information that *Serambi Indonesia* was beginning to give them.

### **The journey to Aceh**

My family's house was next to the Lamnyong bridge in Lamreung, only three kilometres from *Serambi's* office in Banda Aceh. My heart pounded in panic as I realised that my house might also be gone.

I was trying to book a flight to return to Aceh, but it was impossible. Too many people were trying to do the same thing – all flights were full. Remaining in Jakarta was not an option; I had to return to Aceh – as soon as possible.

I went to the Sukarno-Harta airport in Jakarta, hoping to persuade the airline staff that my need to go home was urgent. But many others had queued overnight; emotions were running high at the airport ticket offices as others also pleaded with the same airline staff who were helpless to meet

so many demands. My sister Yanti, also in Jakarta, was almost hysterical with worry. She called me many times, crying, and asking if I had been successful in securing tickets. My answer was always the same: no.

I didn't want to wait any longer. Yanti and I made the only decision possible: we would return to Aceh by car. We wasted no more time; enlisting the help of a male friend, Zulkifli, as a second driver to take us home to Aceh, we made plans. We needed a male companion as women rarely travelled alone through conflict-racked Aceh. To do so would leave us vulnerable to robbery and intimidation. Also, there was a history of kidnapping and car hijacking as lonely travellers ventured through some of Aceh's most violent and hostile areas. Anxious to leave enough space in the car for the food and other items we would carry, we packed only a few personal belongings. My mind raced over many issues; I was driven by fear for the fate of my family and friends. We made some quick checks of the car tyres, oil and brake fluid, and left Jakarta on the afternoon of 28 December.

It was a slow and tortuous journey, not only because each of us was harbouring our own fears about what we would find, but the roads were flooded along the way. We saw many vehicles carrying Acehnese, all trying to get home as quickly as possible. Convoys of trucks full of relief aid were also on the road by that time, carrying what were to be some of the first life-saving supplies to arrive in Aceh.

Along the road, food and other supplies were added by the local people of Sumatra who had heard the news of the terrible tragedy in Aceh. Throughout our journey, we tried desperately to call family and friends from our mobile phones, with no success. All communications had been disrupted by the earthquake and tsunami.

As we passed through Southern Sumatra, my mobile phone suddenly (but briefly) came to life. The news was bad: a relative in Malaysia told me that my younger brother Syuhada was dead. Yanti and I were devastated. My sister Mary and a driver had raced Syuhada to the nearest hospital in Lhokseumawe, five hours from Banda Aceh by car. Syuhada didn't survive the journey. His body was taken immediately back to Banda Aceh for burial. I cried as I drove; the reality of the desperate situation towards which we were heading was only just beginning to take shape in my head. Zulkifli offered to drive as I struggled to see through my tears and I listened to Yanti's heart-breaking sobs rack her body. But I told Zulkifli: "I'm still strong, I want to drive". I didn't want to sit as a passenger as he drove. I would rather have my mind occupied with the practicalities of driving.

When we finally reached the border of North Sumatra, I received a long-awaited SMS from another relative in Banda Aceh. The message said simply: "Other relatives and family have not yet been found. Firman, [my younger brother] is still looking for them. Mother and others are in Indrapuri. Please bring as much food as possible."

That was to be the first and only message from my family during the journey. The mobile phone network was disrupted; no more messages could be sent or received. We stopped briefly in Medan (North Sumatra) to buy additional supplies to add to the food and medicines we had brought from Jakarta. I finally met up with my family a day later.

I spent my first day in Banda Aceh with my family who were living with friends in Indrapuri, about half an hour's drive from our own home which I discovered had been damaged by the waters of the tsunami. I also visited Syuhada's grave. The grief I felt for Syuhada, and for other family and friends, was overwhelming and too difficult to describe here.

The following day – 2 January – I visited the *Serambi* office.

### **Return to *Serambi***

Accompanied by Firman, I set off full of dread for my return to the *Serambi* office. As we came closer, we were confronted by swampland where once homes had stood. The sea water had swept over the land, gouging huge holes in the earth as it raged, leaving in its wake a swamp area where nothing lived, and nothing could live.

From Krueng Cut bridge, we could now see the *Serambi Indonesia* office. The houses and trees were all gone, the busy streets no longer visible among the swamp and the wreckage. The landscape had been changed – perhaps forever. I thought to myself, “Nobody will want to live here in the future”.

There was not a single person to be sighted between where I stood on the bridge and the *Serambi* office. Firman and I were alone. The gate and concrete walls, and the many trees surrounding the office, were now gone, fallen and dead.

As I surveyed the destruction, I felt a panic; I couldn't breathe. I remembered the struggles of the newspaper throughout years of the conflict in Aceh, and the constant fear felt by many of the staff and their families as we struggled amid a volatile security situation to bring news of the abuses and atrocities perpetrated against the Acehnese people, often by unknown armed groups.

### ***Serambi* in ruins**

I hesitated before entering the office. My heart was pounding. Eventually, I took a few steps towards the entrance. Firman looked around outside – I entered alone. I desperately wanted to see my workplace of 15 years.

The printing room located at the front of the main building now lay in ruins. The printing presses, folding machine and other machines were completely smashed; some other machinery had been swept away by the waves. The main printing press – the single largest piece of equipment in the building – had been relocated by the tsunami. Later we heard that the machine was lying about one kilometre from the office, swept away by the water.

The offices were emptier than before, and looked bigger: the furniture had been smashed by water; some of it had disappeared. The floor was covered in debris, the windows were broken, air conditioning and lights were damaged. The waves of the tsunami had reached up to the first floor.

On the floor among the piles of rubble I noticed a bank book belonging to Nurlaili, a *Serambi Indonesia* staff member, torn but still readable. Later, I would learn that Nurlaili, together with her four children and husband, were missing. The payslip of Najamudin Oemar, a Kompas reporter based at the *Serambi* office, was also among the debris. It sat in an open envelope; I picked it up and thought how Enje (Najamudin's nickname) must have been pleased to receive his December pay cheque early for the holiday season. He was also listed as missing.

Many more similar documents, printed with the names of journalists and staff all so familiar to me, were scattered on the floor. As I wondered about the fate of these absent friends, my head exploded with grief. “Please, oh please, let them be safe.”

And what about *Serambi*'s accumulated documents? Hundreds of carefully documented cases of human rights abuses during and after DOM, the result of years of investigation by *Serambi* journalists? These and other important papers were kept in the library, located on the top floor. If the library was destroyed, what else could serve as evidence of the atrocities, when justice finally arrives in Aceh? Later I was to find out that many of the precious documents gathered by *Serambi* to use as evidence had been destroyed.

The staircase to the second floor was shaky, but I felt the need to go up. The second floor was where I had worked for so many years; where I had enjoyed the camaraderie of the journalists and editorial staff, and where at other times I had felt frustrated and even betrayed by the paper's often cautious decisions on content.

As I climbed the stairs, I felt so sad, as if a cloud full of memories was hanging over my head, dripping the rain of pain and sadness. I couldn't say anything out loud – it felt inappropriate. But suddenly my sadness turned to fear as the smell of dead bodies reached me. From the top of the stairs, I yelled: "Who's there? Is there anyone?" I yelled to rid myself of my sense of fear and horror. My voice echoed back and into the quiet corners of the warehouse. No reply. There was, of course, nobody there.

As I reached the entrance to the second floor, the smell of bodies got stronger. I kept my head looking down, close to my chest. I could feel my feet stepping onto something slippery...blood! Blood that was turning black on the floor. Blood from a life that was gone.

I turned and ran down in fear. I ran to the car where life was real again. As I breathed the fresh air, I felt safer.

Only two bodies were found in *Serambi*'s office; bodies of the townspeople, not staff. The first, the body of a woman, was found on the ground floor. A man's body was found near the stairs on the top floor. His family finally claimed his body on the sixth day.

### **A major news story**

I was not the only person who wanted to reach the *Serambi* office in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. Watching the giant waves roll in over parts of Lhokseumawe in North Aceh, Ismail, the local *Serambi* bureau chief who had sent us the first news, had an idea that the events he had just witnessed might constitute a major news story.

Convinced that the massive earthquake and tsunami were front-page news but unable to contact any other colleagues in other parts of Aceh to confirm the scope of the disaster, Ismail wrote the story based on what he had witnessed personally in Lhokseumawe.

Throughout the day Ismail failed to contact colleagues in Banda Aceh. He explained: "I called the office many times, but no one answered the phone. I didn't really think it was strange as the telephone connections are often problematic in Aceh". Ismail thought he should deliver his story and photos personally to Banda Aceh. It was, after all, headline news.

As Ismail set off for Banda Aceh in his car, he did not consider that the city might have been almost entirely wiped out in the disaster. All the same, he took along a friend for company on the five-hour journey; it was night time and an area of conflict where few lone travellers journeyed after dark. As the two drove beyond the Lhokseumawe area, it soon became apparent that much

of the area between Lhokseumawe and Banda Aceh had been affected by the same tragedy. In fact, some areas appeared worse.

Arriving at Sigli town, which was about the halfway point in the journey, all communication signals were lost. Ismail and his companion were alone on their journey. It was about ten o'clock in the evening when they finally arrived in Banda Aceh.

### **Ghost town**

Ismail explained:

“I was very scared. Banda Aceh was like a ghost town. The lights were out everywhere, everything was black. But from the outline of things, I knew much had changed in that city.

We saw many survivors, wandering or just sitting in the street; many were wounded, and all in shock. They were shocked and hungry and took refuge in the mosques or homes that were only partly destroyed.

Many of the streets in Banda Aceh were impassable, blocked by rubble from fallen buildings, smashed vehicles, including ships; we could see the bodies of thousands of people, hanging from buildings and trees, and strewn all over the ground.”

Ismail explained how he often was forced to stop his car to push aside debris that blocked his path. He was further shocked by what he found at the newspaper's office...

“...Arriving at the front of the *Serambi* building, we saw no signs of life. The horror of the surroundings pierced my soul. Even in the darkness, we could see that an area that used to be full of people and houses was now flattened to the ground.

Where houses and businesses once stood, alive with people, was flat; among the debris and fallen coconut trees were the bodies of men, women and children; overturned vehicles, and rubble from homes and other buildings – all covered with a thick black mud.

I wasn't brave enough to enter the *Serambi* office that night. We had seen too many bodies, and were too shocked standing alone there in the dark. We left the area and went to Ulee Kareng (a suburb of Banda Aceh), one of the few local areas untouched by the tsunami.

The journey from the *Serambi* office to Ulee Kareng would usually take 30 minutes, but that night it took more than twice as long. As we drove in silence, I thought of the fate of the journalists and staff of *Serambi*, many of whom lived in the area that I had just seen flattened. Their fate was as yet uncertain, but in my mind I could imagine that many were dead.”

By nine o'clock the next morning, Ismail had already set out for the *Serambi* office again:

“I had to check and re-check what I had seen in the dark the night before. I still could not believe what I had seen.

However, as I drove out that morning, I could see that all around the city was destroyed. The fate of the *Serambi* office was no dream, it was very real.

My journey was over. I was still carrying my front-page story, but it was not to be printed in *Serambi Indonesia*. Only silence greeted me as I entered the office; silence, and the ghosts of my friends who had been swept away by the tsunami to places as yet unknown.”

Ismail did, however, run into a friend who had seen *Serambi*'s Chief Editor, Sjamsul Kahar, Deputy Editor, Mawardi Ibrahim, and journalist Akmal Ibrahim. All three were on the road on a work assignment, travelling from Lhokseumawe to Banda Aceh, when the waves struck. The friend informed Ismail that Sjamsul's group was safe, arriving in Banda Aceh after the disaster.

But Mawardi's entire family, including his wife, mother and father, were lost. His house was completely crushed. He was the sole survivor, safe because he was working out of town that day.

Ismail also received sad news about journalist Erwiyani Syafri. A few days after the tsunami, Ismail told us that he had met with Erwiyani Syafri's mother-in-law that morning. Erwiyani and his family – his wife and two children – were confirmed dead. His house was also destroyed. These are just a few of the losses suffered by the 'Serambi family' that day.

### **Serambi's struggles...**

While the small team of *Serambi*'s journalists and editors who survived desperately searched for missing family and friends, their attention also turned to work. Driven by the belief that *Serambi*, as the only local newspaper, had a critical role to play in helping people reunite, and in providing much-needed news on the situation throughout the province, it was decided that the name of *Serambi Indonesia* must return to the printing press – as soon as possible.

It seemed ironic that the many years of conflict-related struggle endured by the paper, the intimidation and harassment of staff and the very real threat of violence that was part of our everyday existence at *Serambi*, had rarely silenced us. Yet this natural disaster had stopped not only *Serambi*, but those responsible for that violence. I thought about how we are all equal when confronted with a power much greater than the power of a gun; the power of nature's own force.

The life of *Serambi Indonesia* had never been an easy one; reporting conflict-related news in Aceh was fraught with risks. The newspaper was always careful to try to give balanced and non-partisan coverage of often harrowing events. It was a fine line to tread, and it was common for one side – GAM or the Indonesian military – to be angry with stories written by *Serambi* staff, accusing the editorial staff of bias towards the other party, visiting the offices, making threats (sometimes carrying out these threats) and generally intimidating staff. Hardly a day passed without *Serambi* journalists and editors receiving at least one phone call expressing displeasure, or demanding that the content be changed or deleted completely.

There were many occasions where vehicles carrying journalists were attacked by the military and by groups of unknown armed men, and undelivered copies of *Serambi* burned.

With the fall of the dictator President Suharto in May 1998, Indonesia had taken its first tentative steps towards long-awaited reform. Criticism of the government became more common, and the Indonesian media, including that in Aceh, enjoyed more freedom than it had had for decades. At *Serambi* we too enjoyed a "relative" taste of this "freedom".

In Aceh, student groups and others began to protest issues as broad as human rights, government corruption, peace and democracy, and environmental policies. Nationally, the issue of conflict in Aceh and West Papua (in the most eastern part of Indonesia) also gained more attention. In those two years, 1998–2000, the media in Aceh had already begun to address the imbalances of the past, and to report in more detail the atrocities and repression that characterised Aceh’s recent history. But it was to be short-lived. By early 2000, even as a shaky peace process had begun under new President Abdurahman Wahid, GAM and military visits to the *Serambi* offices were becoming frequent once again. The creeping increasing militarisation in the province was already visible on the horizon.

### **Journalists in the line of fire**

To be a journalist in Aceh came with known risks. Not only were individuals attacked and copies of the newspaper burned in a number of incidents, but *Serambi* was also forced into silence on more than one occasion.

On 20 June 2001, the newspaper stalls in Aceh did not carry copies of *Serambi*. GAM was angry with an article that had appeared in the paper the previous day: “Corpses Found Spread Throughout Greater Aceh, An Entire Family Discovered Dead in Lampuuk”.

The story was about a series of killings in Greater Aceh, including those of a family killed by what the paper called “armed individuals”. Although it did not say so explicitly, the article was widely interpreted as implicating GAM in the killings. The organisation angrily denied any involvement in the incident. According to GAM, it was the work of the government’s paramilitary police force. On 19 June, in retaliation over the article, GAM issued a statement threatening to kidnap or attack *Serambi* journalists and also the office. The next day, *Serambi* didn’t go to press.

A few weeks later, in August, *Serambi* ran into the same problem: an order issued by GAM forced the paper to close for 13 days. GAM felt that *Serambi*’s report that an “unknown armed group” had visited a plantation company in East Aceh, and massacred 37 workers, implicated the separatist group. In fact, this had not been the newspaper’s intention. The so-called “*Bumi Flora Massacres*” (named after the plantation company) became yet another of Aceh’s well-known massacres. Following a public outcry, an investigation was undertaken which produced overwhelming evidence that it had in fact been TNI which had carried out the killings.

As *Serambi*’s influence increased in the villages and towns of Aceh, the warring parties – GAM and the Indonesian government – came to realise the potential influence and impact of the information carried by the broadsheet. Both GAM and the military increased their pressure on *Serambi* staff and sought to interfere with the editorial integrity of the paper: both parties sought to use *Serambi* as their propaganda machine.

There were several occasions when management made controversial decisions not to publish a particular story for fear of incurring the wrath of one of the warring parties. Such decisions often caused internal problems among both journalists and editorial staff, many of whom felt that the paper was betraying the trust of the readers who expected uncensored news.

For two years, the peace process waxed and waned, finally resulting in the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) on 9 December 2002. *Serambi* celebrated the “end” of the civil war with the headline “Alhamdulillah, RI-GAM Teken Kesepakatan Damai”

(Congratulations, Indonesia-GAM have signed a Peace Accord) on 10 December 2002. Unfortunately, CoHA was fraught with its own problems as both sides frequently violated the peace agreement.

After only a few months, it became increasingly obvious the agreement might collapse. The news in *Serambi* was reminiscent of the dark days of the conflict: gun clashes, deaths, disappearances, threatening statements by TNI. In return, GAM's statements were bold and defiant; analysis became increasingly based on worst-case scenarios.

Finally, the Indonesian government issued an ultimatum to GAM to "drop the push for independence or the government would withdraw from the peace agreement". GAM rejected the demand, and the CoHA collapsed on 18 May 2003. At midnight the same day, martial law came into force.

### **Martial law**

Initially imposed for a period of six months, martial law in Aceh was later extended to one year. Seven months before the tsunami, the security status of the province had been downgraded from martial law to a civil emergency, but in reality nothing much changed. The level of militarisation – not seen in Indonesia since the invasion of East Timor in 1975 – remained even as the raging waters of the tsunami swept people to their death.

Several weeks before the imposition of martial law, the board of *Serambi* and its parent company met a number of times to discuss the possible implications of the impending security operation on the newspaper's ability to function independently, and what the newspaper should do in the event that media restrictions were imposed. The conditions for reporting would surely become more difficult and were likely to be repressive. Perhaps *Serambi* should close for six months?

A contingency plan was prepared: operations would be consolidated in Banda Aceh and Lhokseumawe; all satellite offices would close. A special fund would also be established to pay a minimum salary to all staff. Two days before martial law was imposed, *Serambi* published a statement by Muzakkir Manaf, the military commander of GAM. In the article, accompanied with his picture, Muzakkir was quoted as saying that he was ready to go to war against the TNI and Indonesian police.

The same day, the *Serambi* office received a phone call from Major-General Endang Suwarya, chief commander of Aceh's military command. Endang requested a meeting with all *Serambi* editors and senior journalists.

The message from Endang was clear: the statement by GAM's military wing published by *Serambi* that day must be the last. Endang explained that once martial law was imposed, the military would censor the news carried by *Serambi* and all other media: "No more GAM statements to be published by this – or any – newspaper", the General ordered.

The *Serambi* team protested that by not carrying GAM statements, the newspaper might risk accusations of biased reporting from GAM, and were afraid. Endang offered a solution; he would send troops to guard the newspaper's office.

*Serambi* offered its own alternative; the newspaper would stop publishing for the six months of martial law. The General did not agree. He said: "We [TNI] and the government have an interest in *Serambi*. *Serambi* must help the government to socialize the instructions and other messages to

the people”. He said the same “duty” would also apply to the tabloid *Kontras*. Therefore, *Serambi* and *Kontras* must continue to publish.

“But, if we do not carry out balanced news, what will happen to our journalists and vehicles in the field? For sure, aggrieved parties who feel that they had been harmed by our report may burn our cars”, *Serambi*'s board had argued.

In response, the military offered an armed escort for *Serambi*'s vehicles and staff. “And if need be”, said Endang, “We will carry the newspaper by helicopter”. *Serambi* rejected the General's offer, but agreed to continue to publish – under the watchful eye of Endang and his men.

True to his word, a number of Brimob (Indonesian military police) arrived at the *Serambi* office later that night to guard the premises against possible attack by GAM. The paramilitary presence generated quite a bit of concern, anxiety and even fear among the staff: life at *Serambi Indonesia* would never be the same again.

### **Manipulating the press**

During the first few weeks of martial law, *Serambi* and other national media reporters were able to travel around Aceh either as journalists embedded with the military or independently. Foreign journalists were also allowed to cover the situation as it unfolded.

But as stories became increasingly focused on the suffering of civilians and destruction of infrastructure, the martial law authorities decided to close Aceh to the media, and to stop the flow of information.

They did this by introducing presidential decree 43/2003. This was aimed at restricting movement and what could be published. For example, GAM statements and interviews were forbidden. And all stories and data had to be checked and approved with the martial law authorities prior to publication – just as Endang had predicted. The media was ordered that all coverage must be in the spirit of nationalism, in aid of the government's war effort.

In addition to controlling the print media, journalists' movements were also restricted by the martial law authorities. All journalists had to receive written permission before carrying out journalistic activities. As for foreign journalists, many applied to Jakarta for permission to enter Aceh, but very few applications were approved.

Taking a lead from the US method of media control in Iraq, Indonesia introduced a policy of embedded journalism. The location of journalists, and the content of the stories they wrote, was subject to direct control: there was no freedom of the press in Aceh. When travelling with the military, getting comprehensive and truthful information from civilians was impossible.

In response to a flood of criticism by the media throughout Indonesia, and from civil rights and other groups, the Indonesian government simply sought legitimacy by reminding critics that this was exactly the system used by the Americans in Iraq.

### **The morning of ...**

My mind flicked back to the present. I thought how lucky the *Serambi* family was that 26 December 2004 had been a Sunday; the office was less busy than on weekdays. Even those who were due to work that Sunday had not arrived by 8.30 am when the earthquake first shook the building.

Eyewitnesses spoke of how many people sat in the street outside the *Serambi* office, waiting for the earthquake to stop, and unaware of what was to follow. Then suddenly, a loud roar was heard – like an aeroplane flying too low overhead. In the next few minutes, the sea could be seen, grey and angry, racing towards where people were gathered. Everyone panicked and began running in all directions, many to the *Serambi* office because it was the tallest building in the area. Some entered the building.

They described how the water swirled and raced as if angry, carrying with it furniture, cars, children's toys; thousands of people were also swept along in the torrent. The level of water continued to rise, people were panicking, trying desperately to reach a higher place to gain safety, going to the second floor of the *Serambi* office.

A *Serambi* security guard who survived said: "I saw people from the villages, including the older folks, run to the back of the office. I saw the waves hit them and then they were gone. I don't know what happened after that. The waves were really violent and very strong. The water reached as high as six metres."

#### **A major news story: *Serambi* must publish!**

In Jakarta, journalists from the *Serambi* network were asked to travel to Aceh to help cover the disaster, but also to give the Aceh staff moral support and imbue them with the spirit to continue.

The management in Jakarta, Ismail and the Lhokseumawe team said: "We must strengthen our hearts and minds. We must make preparations for *Serambi* to continue. We can do that from Lhokseumawe. There's a printing machine there."

*Serambi* opened its first emergency office in Lambaro, about seven kilometres from Banda Aceh, in a shop that used to belong to a member of *Serambi*'s staff. And so, six days after the tsunami, on 1 January 2005, the first post-tsunami edition of *Serambi* appeared on the news stalls of Aceh with the headline "Cholera is threatening our refugees".

Eventually, the computers and other items that were on the top floor of the destroyed *Serambi* office and that had not been damaged were brought to the temporary office in Lambaro. *Serambi*'s staff crowded into the small office at Lambaro with what few things could be saved.

The first 10,000 copies of *Serambi* were circulated free of charge; many people in Aceh did not even have enough money to buy food, let alone a newspaper. Publishing those first copies of only eight pages was the result of a supreme effort by the small team of just eight reporters and two editors from the original *Serambi* staff. Later, reporters were sent from sister newspapers such as *Bangka Pos*, *East Kalimantan*, *Surya*, *Metro Bandung*, and others to assist with those early post-tsunami editions. Writing, editing, laying out, printing and distributing those first editions of post-tsunami *Serambi Indonesia* was a testament to the endurance of the human mind and spirit, and to the bravery of the *Serambi* team.

From 9 January onwards, the newspaper was sold for 1,500 Rupiah but remained at only eight pages, eventually increasing to 12 pages in February.

#### **The fate of our staff**

As well as reporting on the tsunami, those early editions of the paper also placed advertisements appealing to its own journalists to report into the temporary office in Lambaro or into their

respective regional bureaus. Too many of our staff were missing; it was an appeal not only to come back to work, but to know whether our friends and their families were safe.

One by one, staff and journalists called into the office, but not all wanted to return to work immediately. Many had moved away from Banda Aceh to stay with friends or family elsewhere, and promised to return sometime in the future.

Those *Serambi* journalists and staff who did return to work were often to be seen weeping as they sat quietly at a computer writing a story to meet a deadline. The tears did not stop them working; there was much private and shared grief in the *Serambi* office. Sometimes, a colleague would appear without warning; everyone thought he or she was dead – the feelings were emotions none could describe.

This emotional rollercoaster lasted several weeks as some staff had fled Aceh after the disaster and only slowly returned. It was a common sight in the Lambaro office to see people hugging and crying, sometimes holding each other as if scared to let go.

Photographer Bedu Saini, 38, was one journalist who suddenly showed up on the second day of the newspaper being published. Bedu cried when he met his surviving colleagues.

He told us how, during the quake, he had driven his motorcycle to the centre of Banda Aceh to take pictures of the destruction. It was while he was in the Simpang Lima area, taking photos of coffee shops and offices, that he heard the roar of water and saw the sea heading his way.

Bedu abandoned his professional duties, and quickly headed home to Kajhu, about eight kilometres away. But his journey was slowed by the debris that lay on the roads, and the panic as people ran everywhere. When Bedu reached home, he found his house destroyed. His wife and one child survived, but his other two children perished in the mountain of water that swept through the area where they lived.

Nevertheless, Bedu had enough spirit to continue working, helping take post-tsunami photos. He had almost forgotten about his lost Nikon camera, which he had left on an abandoned coffee shop shelf when he first saw the waves sweep in.

The owner of the coffee shop brought Bedu's camera to the *Serambi* office on 13 January after hearing of the paper's new address. The camera was intact, and the photos it contained were also undamaged. Bedu had precious pictures of the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. He also managed to catch on camera the initial moment when the sea had hit the city in all its ferocity: it was clear from the images that the people of Banda Aceh had very little chance of escape.

These photos were printed by *Serambi*, and many were later picked up by the international media.

### **The financial realities...**

With most of the surviving now back at work, *Serambi* moved to a better office in Beurawe Shopping Centre in order to try to get the newspaper running more efficiently and to increase the number of pages and scope of coverage.

Everyone at *Serambi* carried their own personal loss and sadness, and therefore the struggle to continue to work was a very personal one. *Serambi's* management were not strict about staff

coming into the office by a certain time. A number were still not on active duty. Some staff also took extra time off to overcome their trauma.

As surviving members of the families of *Serambi* staff who had died began to arrive at the office asking for help, a special fund was established to give out aid such as food packages and other essentials. There was also planning for immediate financial assistance, and for claims to be made by these families from insurance and the existing workers' social fund.

The *Serambi* finance manager, Ahmad Bakti, was also missing, and so no salaries were paid to staff during January. However, this was at a time when people really did need money to buy what basic foodstuffs were available. In fact, Ahmad returned to work two weeks later; he had lost his wife and children in the tsunami. Knowing Ahmad's personal tragedy made the issue of salary payment less of a priority; everything about Ahmad's physical appearance told us that this was a man who struggled each minute of every day with overwhelming loss.

For those working in the emergency office, they were only able to "borrow" – the term used was "kas-bon" – from the office. Each person received about 500,000 Rupiah each. Even without a salary, we continued to cover the news. We continued to write, as this was our duty.

### ***Serambi's fifteenth birthday...***

Fifteen days after the earthquake and tsunami, 9 February 2005, was *Serambi's* fifteenth anniversary, the same day as National Press Day. A small ceremony took place in the original ruined office in Baet village in Aceh Besar .

The gathered crowd listened in silence as we were asked to remember the 52 *Serambi* staff who had died or were missing in Banda Aceh – only 11 of *Serambi's* journalists remained. Several of the newspaper's staff based in other tsunami-hit districts of Aceh were also lost. In total, 58 friends and colleagues were gone.

Among them were senior journalists such as Erwiyani Safri, Syahrul Rahman, Muhammad Rokan, Thondi Rizal Putra, Karta Gusti, Erismawaty, Muharram M Nur, Sayed Alwi, Ridwan Ishak, M. Rizal and Razali Idris.

National poet Fikar W Eda, also a *Serambi* journalist at the Jakarta bureau, read a poem written in their memory: a dedication to so many lives ended prematurely and suddenly. Fikar was in Aceh to pay respect to the dead.

As he read his poem, "The Pain of Aceh is Our Pain", ("Nyeri Aceh, Nyeri Kami"), each line echoed in the vast emptiness of the destroyed Baet office. The words echoed also in the hearts of every one of those who were present.

### ***THE PAIN OF ACEH IS OUR PAIN***

Within the soil of Aceh lies our pain -  
Aching in our muscles, our bond is painful,  
The pain is in our blood, in our crying,  
The pain makes us tremble and smart,  
The pain is our bond, this is our pain:

The pain of waves battering the shoreline,

Smashing our houses,  
Tearing up trees by their roots,  
And our bodies, our very bodies  
Are torn from the earth too,  
Washed away through the mossy woods,  
Floating through broken bridges,  
They float into drains and culverts  
They are hooked, frozen and ragged  
In the branches of trees,  
They are breached on wet pavements.

Within the soil, our pain  
The soil of the veranda of Mecca, our pain,  
Aching in our muscles, our bond,  
Aching in our blood, we voice it in our cries,  
We tremble and smart from our pain,  
The pain is our bond, this is our pain:

Innocent children  
Running across the sand  
To catch the fish at the shoreline  
Before the sea recedes -

And then comes thunder  
The sky is dark  
The waves are a blanket  
To fold frail flesh and brittle bone,  
The waves tear up the walls we have built  
Tear up the lives we have nurtured,  
Like twisted cotton caught in a storm  
Our children are carried ashore into the flooding land,  
Their footprints are gone from the sand  
Their smiles are washed away  
Their jokes and games and laughter  
Will never be heard again.

The pain of Aceh says you will smart and grieve  
It says  
Do not search anymore for Meuloboh,  
Do not ask for Aceh,  
Do not search for Calang, Teunom, Lamno,  
Lhokseumawe, Bereunuen or Sigli.  
Because the map is torn  
And is dissolving in the folding blanket of the sea.

And so Ya Allah  
Lay them down,  
Our children,  
Our elders,  
All of our lost people,

Lay them down  
Above your fragrant carpet;  
Place them there  
Beside your greatest

We smart from the pain, ya Allah,  
We grieve and smart,  
The mirror you hold to life is painful to see,  
But there must be some wisdom within,  
Something there to ease our pain.

*(Re-interpreted by Alex Jones, June 2005)*

No one was too shy that day to show their emotions; to cry the tears wept when sorrow and pain are so overwhelming. Women and men cried the same, as we thought of all the good and the bad times of our lives and those of our colleagues – of the struggles of being a *Serambi* journalist and staff member during the long and violent conflict.

The memories, some sweet and some painful, were recalled by the large *Serambi* family present that day. Around 200 survivors, both *Serambi* journalists and their families, attended the ceremony. And other journalists and media friends were also present. Also present was the Deputy Governor of Aceh, Azwar Abubakar, and other community leaders.

Even Mawardi Ibrahim, a man known to show little outward emotion, was seen wiping tears from his eyes. Mawardi had lost everything, including his most precious friend and colleague, Muhammad Rokan.

Bang (brother) Rokan – as those who were close had called him – was as close to Mawardi as if they had been born of the same mother. So it was not strange for Mawardi, who had lost his parents, his wife and his entire family, his home and all his material possessions, to admit that the saddest thing for him was to have lost Bang Rokan.

“Bang Rokan was more than a brother to me. He was loyal. We have been friends for almost 20 years, even before we started working at *Serambi*”, Mawardi said in his speech.

### **Looking to the future...**

It was announced that a new warehouse would be rebuilt in a new location. With fresh capital injection from a friendly donor, the building would be located in Lueng Bata, Banda Aceh, about five kilometres from the city centre and – most importantly – far from the beach.

“The building will be earthquake-proof”, said M. Din representing the newspaper’s management. Meanwhile, the old *Serambi* warehouse, a part of it completely crushed, may in the longer-term future be renovated and fitted out for other purposes.

“We could turn it into a restaurant, or whatever. Because now it is located right by the beach. Before the tsunami, it was about 1.5 km from the sea. Now, it has become 1km. And from the office, you can see the beach. This is because the houses and the villages that were in front of the office are no longer there”, he said.

For me, my future can never be as I imagined it before the tsunami. Not only for me, for all the Serambi family – how can we forget those we lost, how can we forget the struggles of the conflict times, and how the tsunami washed away our friends, our colleagues, our documents, our work – our lives? This story is told through my eyes and from my thoughts, but in reality it is the story of so many. *Serambi* lives on; so too do those who were lost – they live in our memories, never to be forgotten.

*Zulherna Bahari worked for Serambi Indonesia in Aceh for several years before threats to her safety forced her to relocate to the Jakarta office. She was one of the first journalists to be consistently critical of the Indonesian military's tactics during the war in Aceh.*

*The original text has been edited by Eye on Aceh.*

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