

## After the flood

Freer press emerges from tsunami devastation in Aceh.

By Shawn W. Crispin

### BANDA ACEH, Indonesia

Saiful Bahri's home and the radio station where he worked for 20 years were swept away with much of the coastal town of Sigli on December 26, 2004. But within two weeks Saiful was reporting on the tsunami's devastation and was compiling "missing person" and "I'm alive" announcements for Sigli's radio station, Megaphone FM. A friend of Saiful gave the station space in his home and promised it could stay for the next two years rent-free.

Saiful now works in a house, but he returns home each evening to a tent in a refugee camp where he, his wife, and daughter have taken shelter since the disaster. "We never thought this sort of thing could happen," he says. "It will take a very long time before we return to normal—if we ever do."

Aceh's fledgling media were particularly hard hit by the tsunami. Of about 1,000 journalists in the region, around 100 were killed and 70 were forced to live in camps, according to the Alliance of Indonesian Journalists in Aceh (AJI-Aceh). An estimated 170,000 Indonesians were killed or are still missing, while more than 500,000 people lost their homes.

Yet Saiful's determination to get back on the air was shared by other journalists in Aceh, many of whom

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had lost friends and relatives to the killer wave. Foreign aid workers credit the media's rapid reporting of public health and relocation announcements with helping to prevent disease and starvation. Nearly three-quarters of the region's 45 or so radio stations were hit by the tsunami, and many of them were destroyed. Almost all are now back on air. Aceh's only local television station, state-run TVRI-Aceh, lost 12 staff members, but it, too, was quick to resume broadcasting.

*Serambi*, then Aceh's only local newspaper, lost 54 of its 200 staff as well as its offices, printing press, and equipment. Remarkably, the daily broadsheet was publishing just five days after the wave. For weeks it was given away free.

The public's hunger for news of reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts has allowed Aceh's historically restricted media to operate more freely. In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, the Indonesian government eased many of the restrictions it had imposed on reporting from Aceh, where a rebellion had raged for nearly 30 years and where martial law was frequently imposed. Indonesian and foreign reporters were given unprecedented access to the resource-rich region on the northern tip of Sumatra.

The media still enjoy those freedoms and have taken the opportunity to publish and broadcast reports crit-

ical of the government's reconstruction efforts. "It is more open for local journalists after the tsunami," says Nurdin Hasan, head of the AJI-Aceh, adding, "particularly if you compare it to the previous situation under martial law."

Large amounts of aid money have flowed in since the tsunami, including funds earmarked for media rehabilitation. The Jakarta-based broadcaster, 68H, which provides programming to 420 radio stations nationwide, was quickest to react to the crisis, providing temporary transmitters and equipment for seven of its Aceh-based members.

Santosa, 68H's founder, who like many Indonesians goes by one name, sees an opportunity in crisis. His media group plans to help establish or rehabilitate another 20 stations across the underdeveloped region by 2006. "We see an opportunity from the tsunami to open access to information in more remote areas," he says.

Established news outlets, meanwhile, took a little longer to get back on air. Radio Prima FM, which lost four of its 22 reporters, its office building, and all of its equipment, was broadcasting again by January 20, 2005—albeit from its proprietor's back yard, where the station's former storage room has been converted into a studio and seven of its reporters now live in tents. Uzair, Radio Prima's news director, hosted a popular call-in show before the tsunami hit. With the easing of government restrictions, Uzair is exploring new, sometimes controversial, subject matter—leading to a surge in the station's audience, he claims. In mid-August, he hosted a talk show that debated whether the post-tsunami influx of Western aid workers carried an increased risk of HIV/AIDS transmission to the local population, a rumor that had gained currency in some communities. "We are testing new waters," Uzair says.

"Peunegah Aceh," a daily radio program produced in cooperation with Internews Network, a U.S.-based media



An Acehese boy looks at photographs of more than 50 *Serambi* staffers killed in the December 2004 tsunami.

training and advocacy organization, has aired a series of hard-hitting reports since the tsunami, including investigative stories showing that reconstruction authorities have used illegally harvested timber to build homes and accusations that officials are hoarding rather than distributing medicines donated by European countries. "Before the tsunami," says Yon Thayrun, the program's news director, "airing such criticism of the government would have been unimaginable."

Journalists and editors hope the new era of openness will extend beyond monitoring tsunami reconstruction to checking the implementation of a new peace deal. On August 15, the government in Jakarta and the rebel Free Aceh Movement (GAM) signed an accord to end three decades of fighting that has cost 15,000 lives in a region of four million people.

The print media, are testing new boundaries. "Before the tsunami we

had pressure from GAM and TNI (the Indonesian military)," says Syambul Kahar, chief editor and founder of *Serambi*. "Even when we wrote a balanced story, still both sides were mad with us," he says. "After the tsunami, things changed. Now nobody is pressuring us. We can play an independent role." *Serambi's* circulation has jumped 25 percent since the tsunami, due partially to its now freer reporting of the conflict, Kahar says.

The media were restricted in their coverage of earlier peace deals in 2001 and 2002, which both unraveled. Now, journalists hope to be able to monitor the ceasefire and planned withdrawal of 50,000 Indonesian troops, and the disarming of some 3,000 rebels. "If someone gets killed, we will expose who did it," says Isfandiar, a reporter for *Rakyat Aceh*, a newspaper established three weeks after the tsunami. "Now is our golden chance to establish [media] independence."

Perhaps, but reporting on some

military matters is still taboo, while covering the GAM can be risky. One print reporter told CPJ that he and several colleagues were harassed by police intelligence officers, who followed them and made threatening phone calls after they wrote about the GAM. According to AJI-Aceh, another local journalist was recently forced to hand over his tapes to a senior military officer after interviewing a GAM leader.

Still, the media are eager to cover the peace deal's "truth and reconciliation" measures, which promise to unearth information about past abuses and atrocities on both sides. The opportunity for such investigative reports will arise after the Indonesian military has withdrawn and GAM rebels are reintegrated into society, local journalists say. "We want our country to be a democratic one," says Kahar, the *Serambi* editor. "We want to play our role to make sure this peace lasts a long time." ■