

# Day to day horror of collecting the dead

Nearly two months after the Asian tsunami, hundreds of bodies are still being pulled from the wreckage across Aceh every day. In a final report from the devastated Indonesian region, adopted by Edinburgh, **Julia Horton** discovers how people are coping with the still-rising death toll

**A** COLOURFUL row of plastic bags lies beside the main road through Banda Aceh. The bright pink, orange and yellow masks the bags' grim contents but make them visually unmissable.

The usual knowledge each bag contains the grisly remains of another victim of the December 26 disaster hangs in the air.

Some 120,000 bodies have already been recovered from the wreckage across the devastated Aceh region, most from the capital city of Banda Aceh.

Now, nearly eight weeks after the disaster, between 500 and 1,000 corpses are still being found in the province every single day. And with around 115,000 people

of what has taken place. All are virtually silent as the workers go about their grim task.

The men are being paid by Edinburgh-based aid agency Mercy Corps to recover corpses.

Each man is given 50,000 rupiah (2.50) a day – a better wage than that given to other clean-up workers to reflect the horrific nature of the job.

Like the crowd, the workers are quiet as they wade into the debris-filled flood water of Rima. After so many weeks, gathering the dead has become a far more grisly task.

Reduced mostly to skeletons, fish and clothes long since disintegrated, they merge into the wreckage surrounding them – limbs are like sticks, skulls a similar size and shape to coconuts littering the area.

An ID card, possibly a driving licence, lies on the ground, but it seems impossible to tell who it belonged to.

The now 100-strong crowd watching will never know whether these bodies are those of their missing relatives, friends or neighbours whose countless faces still stare out from posters on buildings and from pictures printed daily in the city newspaper.

Wearing face masks, gloves and Wellington boots, the workers lift the corpses, carefully placing them in body bags.

Suddenly, a plane which one of the workers is standing on snaps, plunging him into the corpse-filled water. He laughs with the other labourers, the sound breaking the tension briefly. Their laughter seems alien at first. But humour seems to have become a crucial way of dealing with the horrors of their working day.

Two bulldozers stand in one corner near two gaping holes which have been dug to take the latest deliveries of the dead.

A young Indonesian soldier operating one of the diggers says that there are already 12,700 corpses buried beneath the sandy earth. There is nothing at all to mark their position.

The soldier explains that the body collectors have tried to draw up lists of who is buried in which of the six holes – each containing around 200 bodies.

But as the first truckload of



phone calls from the public telling them where bodies are.

The respect which the Mercy Corps workers show to the dead seems long gone as one Indonesian Red Cross volunteer squashes a single skeleton remains into a large blue plastic washing up bowl, before balancing it on his head to carry back to the truck.

The bodies are now so badly decomposed that they fall apart when they are touched. There is no attempt to keep one body to one bag, making the death toll far greater than the number of bags suggests.

When the truck is full the ambulance loads it through the city to a mass grave called Cak Gue. A few headstones can be seen in the far side of the mass grave. But they were there long before the December 26 disaster, when Cak Gue was a small cemetery with a public park.

Now, after a week picked as one of the first two mass graves in the city, the parkland resembles a giant wasteland.

facilities to even a possible working with existing organisations like Islamic institutions and schools which people traditionally go to for social and psychological support.

"People need time to talk through their grief. It is not coping, though, that is not needed here."

Back at the mass grave, half a dozen Muslim men from a nearby Islamic meeting place are allowed on to the site where they stand, heads bowed, murmuring silent prayers bringing some final dignity to the dead.

Meanwhile, across the city from Cak Gue in the district of Ule Lheue, a massive cargo ship which was being several miles inland is set to be turned into a memorial honouring the city's dead.

Around 500 people from nearby areas climbed to the top of the 250-metre, 100-year-long boat seeking refuge from the tidal waves' after it smashed into neighbouring houses.

The power-generating barge belonging to the state electricity company PLN is expected to be left where it is and turned into a commemorative museum.

SECOND truck arrives and swiftly reverses to the hole nearest the entrance to the site, a scene unlikely that survivors will ever know the final resting places of their loved ones for sure.

In less than five minutes, four of the volunteers have thrown or pushed the 62 bodies from the truck into the hole.

As he is deposited, the first team of volunteers strip off their body suits and throw them into the mass grave on top of the body bag.

The bulldozer presses the bodies down before covering them in sand.

A small boy watches, mesmerised as the second layer of bodies falls from the trucks into the hole, a mix of innocent childhood curiosity and clear distress passing across his young face.

It is impossible to tell how great an impact such a sight will have on him.

However, work by Mercy Corps has revealed that while survivors are severely traumatised, the region is not experiencing a mental health crisis.

Daniel Curran, the charity's chief of aid in Aceh, says: "People are understandably incredibly traumatised, but there is no mental health crisis based on sustained fear."

"We will try to restore normal



**HUNT:** Mercy Corps workers are still finding corpses almost two months after the disaster



**HELP ON ITS WAY:** A city volunteer examines aid packages being sent to people affected by the tsunami. The Capital's first shipping container of goods is due to set sail for Sri Lanka, containing tents, toiletries, tools, sheets and blankets for the devastated communities

**F**ATHER-OF-TWO Abdul Salam, 42, who was a mechanic before the disaster robbed him of his job and home, is leading the half-dozen labourers in Rima.

He says: "We have been doing this for about a week. We find about 70 bodies every day. This work is OK because in Islam it is our duty to bury everyone."

Like many people in the city left jobless, he says that his family chose not to do the work. "The government is not paying attention to us. Without Mercy Corps there will be no job. The death rate Mercy Corps to leave. We need money. We need our jobs, our homes, our families."

Back at the roadside, the body bags are left to be picked up by volunteers from the Indonesian Red Cross. They pull up in an ambulance, followed by an open-backed truck into which they might shove the body bags. They load with a dull thud among the pile of dead already there.

The volunteers also respond to

**"We find about 75 bodies every day. This work is OK"**  
- Abdul Salam

**GRUESOME?** Indonesian Red Cross volunteers dump body bags in mass graves, as children, below, look on.



## News campaign nets £40,000 but that's only the beginning

MORE than £40,000 has now been raised by Evening News readers for the Capital Appeal for Tsunami Survivors. Future events for the appeal, run jointly with city-based charity Mercy Corps, aim to bring in £500,000 in six months and include a deal at the Tipoo Samba restaurant in Rose Street, where diners can pay whatever they think their meal is worth – providing they pay at least £5 per head – from 20m until late this Sunday with all the money going to the appeal.

David Welch, Mercy Corps' director of development, says: "Mercy Corps is delighted that over £40,000 has all ready been raised for the Capital Appeal and with so many fundraising events planned in the next few weeks we are more than confident that the total will be surpassed."

"The generosity of the people of Edinburgh has been excellent, but it is really important that people continue to support the appeal because, while the immediate fundraising needs have been met, the longer-term needs are only now beginning to become clear."

Donations can be made by calling 0845 2450666 or online at [www.mercy-corporp.co.uk](http://www.mercy-corporp.co.uk) or by post to Mercy Corps, The Capital Appeal for Tsunami Survivors, Freeport, SCO 5923, Edinburgh, EH1 1QB. Please make cheques payable to "Mercy Corps".

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