Bringing back laughter to an Acehnese school

It took months for SMA Negeri 1, a public high school in Banda Aceh, to get back on its feet. But the school has been renovated and new equipment has replaced that destroyed by the deadly tsunami three years ago thanks in part to a contribution from AIIC.

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On Dec 26, 2004, a massive undersea earthquake measuring 9.1 on the Richter scale followed by a devastating tsunami killed nearly 200,000 people in Indonesia. Worst hit was Aceh, a province on the northern tip of Sumatra. The twin tragedy destroyed much of the city of Banda Aceh including SMA Negeri 1, one of the two remaining colonial buildings in the provincial capital.

Not only was the school building severely damaged; a quarter of the school's 1,158 students and 23 of its 103 teachers lost their lives. But hundreds of those who survived have since returned to the high school, filling the classrooms with laughter once again.

The historic school would have taken much longer to recover had it not been for two organisations coming to its rescue.

A few months after the tsunami, two Geneva-based non-profit organisations - the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) and the Swiss Solidarity Fund (SSF) - came to the disaster-stricken area to offer help. Working with an Acehnese-based NGO, the Aceh Heritage Community Foundation, the two groups donated US$47,000 to help restore the school to its former glory.

Former AIIC president, Jean-Pierre Allain, who is now head of the organisation's Technical and Health Committee, said that many AIIC members in the Asia-Pacific region felt that they should lend a hand in the wake of the devastating tsunami. The idea was mooted at the first AIIC council meeting after the natural disaster, and a decision made to donate CHF10,000 (US$8,200) to an organisation involved in reconstruction projects, especially the rebuilding of badly needed public infrastructure such as schools and hospitals.

Mr. Allain, who has lived in Malaysia and Thailand since 1984, was appointed by the council to identify a suitable beneficiary. He contacted a number of local academics and non-governmental organisations in both Indonesia and Thailand to pinpoint a project which AIIC could support. A friend from Malaysia's Penang Heritage Trust eventually put him in touch with Ms. Yenny Rahmayati of Aceh Heritage Community Foundation (AHC).

According to Mr. Allain, the AHC had proposed to make urgent repairs to SMA Negeri 1 and to replace computers and other educational equipment. The expected budget for the project was within what AIIC could fund.
The seawater from the tsunami had swept through the buildings' ground floors and destroyed most of the equipment in the classrooms. Computers and language lab materials, as well as cabinets containing the school's records were all washed away. The lower half of the building's walls was also severely damaged and the enclosure fence was completely destroyed.

Ms. Rahmayati said AHC's decision to participate in the restoration of 61-year-old SMA Negeri 1 was not due exclusively to the school's crucial role in Aceh's educational system, but also to the building being an historic landmark of great cultural and architectural significance to the community. In addition, it is the oldest and most prestigious senior high school in Banda Aceh, and many of its graduates have gone on to become key leaders in Acehnese society.

The school was founded in 1946 in a classical Greek-inspired structure put up by the Dutch colonialists in the early 1920's. The building originally served as a Freemasons Lodge and was later converted to a Dutch MULO (middle or secondary school). The school expanded and added two more buildings after Indonesia gained independence.

Ms. Rahmayati, the project leader and herself an alumna of SMA Negeri 1, said that while it was important to restore the school buildings, it was even more crucial to bring the students back to class.

"After the tsunami, many SMA Negeri 1 students moved to other schools in Medan or Jakarta. The school also lost many of its students and teachers in the disaster. We needed to revive the 'soul' of the school - both physically and non-physically," she commented.

As the project progressed, it was discovered that more extensive work would be needed. Committed to the project, Mr. Allain decided to search out additional funds. He contacted various friends in Europe, including the director of the Swiss Solidarity Fund (SSF), and succeeded in obtaining another CHF48,000 (US$39,000).

The SSF, known in Switzerland as the Fondation Chaine du Bonheur, is a charity which receives donations from Swiss citizens through its popular TV programme on the plight of the Third World. It raised more than CHF100 million (US$81.6 million) for tsunami victims, giving Switzerland the distinction of being the country with the highest amount of donations per capita in the industrialized world.

The extra funds came in handy for SMA Negeri 1, covering urgent repairs and the purchase of equipment for new language and computer labs.

Mr. Allain, who visited the school in March 2006 on behalf of AIIC, was extremely impressed by the restoration work. He said the funds had been well spent and the essential repairs done on time.

According to Ms. Rahmayati, students have been benefiting from these efforts for over a year now. The next step, she said, would be the renovation of the former MULO building: "We are so happy that the school is functioning at full capacity again. This has been possible thanks to the help of AIIC and SSF. The renovation of the old building, which we plan to do next, is very important since it is a part of the very identity of Banda Aceh."

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