

from **Hot-spotting**

One of the thousands of Indonesia Red Crescent volunteers was Agus, the husband of our office manager in Jakarta. Agus had a full-time job running his small electrical business in Jakarta, but on the 27th of December, he like so many other Indonesians volunteered a few weeks of his time to go to Banda Aceh to help out wherever possible.

Agus was enlisted as a truck driver and was flown to Medan by Red Crescent, the capital city of North Sumatra. Medan was the closest airport to the disaster area. In Medan, Agus caught up with his team of four, who were given a truck and were organised to load it with the generators and water pumps that had already been purchased. From there, they were to drive to Banda Aceh to meet up with the other Red Crescent teams.

'We drove for 24 hours to get there,' he said. 'As we got nearer to the affected areas, the main roads, which ran along the coast were destroyed or damaged. It took us all day and all night – through back roads and swamps. Many times we were lost. When we crossed the border, we had to register with the TNI.'

Upon arrival, Agus and his exhausted team were put straight to work. 'I worked for two weeks straight,' he said. 'I don't know where I got the energy from – we just drove all day, labouring at clearing roads and lifting patients, and then at night, I would install generators and provide electricity for the hospital and help with surgery.'

Agus had several hundred digital photos of his work in Banda Aceh

in the early stages which he described to me over a long afternoon tea session, soon after his return. Agus had not been selective in what he photographed and had graphic images of the death and destruction.

'This one,' he pointed to a grown man, 'he could not speak for ten days.' Then another image – this time of a woman sitting in a chair with her dead seven-year-old daughter in her arms. 'This one – the girl died in her arms. She wouldn't let us take her.' There were photos of hundreds of bloated darkened bodies, wrapped in all sorts of colourful plastic, cotton sheets or blankets, waiting to be buried. Some had identification notes wired to their big toes, but Agus said most were unidentified. 'We had to bury them,' he said. 'The stench and flies were so bad.'

Blackened bodies were strewn amongst heaps of debris, barely distinguishable from the wet wood and rubbish – often three to four meters high. Gradually Agus and the other helpers retrieved the bodies and occasionally they found some alive.

'You see,' he said, 'many people dead. The earthquake, it killed many people and collapsed the buildings. Then the wave came, then another. All the people and the buildings got washed away into these big rubbish piles and into what is now called the 'black pools' – new lakes of shallow black water that contain many, many dead people.'

As this was less than 48 hours since the earthquake and tsunami, Agus explained how they would often find survivors in the wreckage – some of them would surely die of respiratory diseases from having inhaled filthy seawater or from gangrene, yet others would walk away, virtually unhurt.

Agus described how he quickly grew from being Red Crescent's

truck driver to the hospital's electrical engineer, to its ambulance driver. He ferried injured victims that were being freed from the enormous heaps of flotsam to the hospital, but more often, he took them to the trench pit morgues, ready for burial. Once most victims were accounted for, Agus 'graduated' to assisting the surgeons with amputations. True to form, he had graphic photographs of the horrific injuries – of twisted legs, of sliced bodies, ghastly head wounds and children missing part of their arms. Agus wore a green surgical gown and helped to sedate and comfort the patients who were receiving emergency surgery and first aid in the Red Crescent field hospital.

Kurds are largely tribal people and in northern Iraq the two main tribes today are the Talabanis (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan [PUK]) and the Barzanis (Kurdistan Democratic Party [KDP]). The Talabanis adopt a black *jamadanih* (head-dress) while the Barzanis wear red *jamadanihs*. We Australians referred to them red-hats and black-hats. It was important never to mix them up. Both tribes have taken major roles in Iraq's new government since the fall of Saddam's regime in May 2003. A feature of Kurdish unity in Iraq is the tension between the two tribes, which occasionally boils over into armed conflict.

After I had spent two years working ten hours a day or more with Kurdish agricultural workers, it was only on the last day that one of these men confided in me about how his family had been treated and what he really thought about Saddam Hussein and his henchmen. The Kurds and

this man's family were some of the most oppressed and brutalised minorities of the twentieth century. For someone like this man (whose name must not be mentioned, as remnants of the old regime remain in his area) to speak to a foreigner about Saddam at that time was an arrestable offence. Arrest could lead to all sorts of dire consequences – not just for him, but for his family as well.

The Kurds are armed to the teeth. Every man carried a weapon of some sort – from a hidden pistol in their traditional clothes to Kalashnikov AK-47s and RPGs (rocket propelled grenades) carried openly by bandoleered fighters. Every restaurant had a place where machine guns were to be placed while dining – much the same way as a French gentleman would leave his umbrella or coat. You were not allowed to take machine-guns into the bank. A visit to the bank in Erbil was most bizarre – perhaps one hundred Kalashnikov machine guns would be left in what is best described as a bike rack outside, while each customer went about their banking transactions inside. Upon leaving, each man collected his machine gun. It was like going inside the ski lodge and leaving your skis and stocks outside in the snow while you bought lunch.

Reducing the reliance on opium poppy was an ambitious objective as the Dir District has an ideal growing environment for the beautiful opium poppy – *papaver somniferum*. The poppy yields a resin which requires no special skills by the farmers to harvest. Added to this was the extraordinarily low production costs, which meant that the drug

lords could easily afford to pay a premium price to the farmers for the resin – making it a very attractive cash crop compared to the traditional livestock, maize, cereals, vegetables and fruit production.

However, the main advantage of the Dir District for opium production is its isolation and the tribal government which had its own ideas on laws and enforcement. Until the early nineteen sixties, the area was ruled by a Nawab as a separate administrative unit. It progressively merged into Pakistan, concluding with the appointment of a Commissioner and a new administrative structure in 1971. Even now, special law enforcement and administrative arrangements are different to the rest of Pakistan. It is officially in the Malakand Division of the Provincially Administered Tribal Areas. It has a population well over a million, with thousands of Afghan refugees who are transient and nomadic and are not necessarily included in official population figures. Its close proximity to Afghanistan provides ready access to trading routes for arms, drugs and other contraband. The district is also close to the famous Silk Route, now marked by the Karakoram Highway. The Silk Route runs past the Dir and Swat Valleys, stretching over the Khunjerab Pass into Xinjiang Province of China to the north. The Karakoram Highway is the highest tarred road in the world and is referred to as the eighth wonder of the world by the Pakistanis.

At the request of the Pakistani government, the United Nations was engaged to manage and coordinate the overall program. Most of the funding came from the American and European governments, who were committed to reducing the supply of opium and heroin that was killing so many of its youths and ruining the lives of many more. These governments provided almost unlimited funds to address the problems

in Pakistan, channeled through the special United Nations drug control program, into programs such as this in the Dir District. Of the three main poppy growing areas, Dir district accounted for approximately 60 per cent of the opium harvested in the country.

The Pakistani government responded to the problem of increased illicit opium production and trade by the enforcement of a special ordinance, which brought existing law into line with Islamic injunctions that prohibit trafficking, financing or possession of more than ten grams of heroin or one kilogram of opium.

Early in the project, we conducted a quick survey of the farmers in the area towards the Lowari Pass, one of the main mountain passes in the Dir District. Apart from collecting facts and figures, it offered us a chance to get a feel from the community about what they thought of us being there to address this problem. Without the benefit of an extensive world view outside of their villages, it was obvious that they cared little for the end user of their opium resin, and they saw us as a threat to their incomes and their way of life. In one opium growing valley, about two hours drive up winding mountainous tracks from our project headquarters, we were invited to a *jirga* – a traditional tribal assembly of entirely men-folk where important decisions were made. Standing on the chilly mountain side at the open air *jirga*, I spoke with Saiful, who was one of the leaders of a medium-sized village community hidden even further away in another remote valley. Through a translator, he firmly told me:

‘Why do I care about some rich American kids who’ve got nothing better to do than shoot up heroin? Do they have to toil in the dirt and

hot sun like me?'

Spurred on by his fellow villagers, he continued:

'Do their kids get sick without medicine, like ours? We don't even have schools for our sons and daughters. No electricity, no hospitals.'

By now he was riding on the support of his fellow tribesmen.

'Give us another crop to grow that pays more than opium and we'll be glad to grow it. Grow you tonnes of it. How much you want? We have best soil in world here.'

Then some laughter broke the tension and we all sat down to share a pot of tea.

His comments were anticipated, but he was obviously unaware that there were well over half a million heroin addicts in Pakistan, with many of them in the communities of the opium poppy areas.
