



Letter from Rebecca Young in Indonesia

September 29, 2009

Friends,

Every Wednesday and Thursday, I teach English to the staff of a local disaster relief agency at their offices around the corner from Jakarta Seminary. On Wednesday, September 2, I had gone a bit early to prepare for the 3:00 o'clock class. I was standing in the office kitchen by myself when I suddenly felt oddly dizzy and disoriented. I thought I was going to faint, and couldn't quite figure out why. But then I heard a lot of commotion and voices out in the hallway yelling, "Earthquake! Earthquake!"

Within moments the entire staff was out on the street in front of the office. We stood there a bit shell-shocked as the earth swayed beneath our feet. We could see the trees going back and forth, and hear the buildings groaning as their foundations shifted beneath the earth. It was an eerie feeling, and we all felt seasick (should I say "earthsick"?) for the next hour or so. Eventually we went back inside and I tried to teach the class, but none of us felt up to it. I could hardly look down or try to read anything without feeling sicker.



An earthquake survivor and her daughter in the displaced families' camp, Tasikmalaya, West Java, September 7, 2009. Photo by Tatang Husaini.



An older sister carries her younger brother across the tent city, Tasikmalaya, West Java, September 22, 2009. Photo by Nugi Adinugroho.

Since I happened to be at a disaster relief agency when the earthquake hit, it wasn't long before we were getting a number of details about it. The epicenter of the quake (7.3 on the Richter scale) was beneath the Indian Ocean about 100 miles southeast of Jakarta. The city that bore the brunt of the damage was Tasikmalaya, with about 800,000 inhabitants. On hearing the news, the staff immediately thought of their colleague, Mr. Tatang Husaini, whose home town is Tasikmalaya. He was out of town for an evaluation of another project at the time, but his wife and two children, a 7-year-old daughter and a 1-year-old son, were at home.

I spoke to Tatang later about the experience. He was understandably distraught at hearing the news and was unable to contact his family in the first hours after the quake

because it had knocked out cell phone communications. Eventually he received word from another relative that his family had escaped harm. Because the disaster agency sends out a rapid assessment team when and wherever a major disaster strikes in Indonesia, Tatang was able to be part of the team and left as soon as the team assembled for Tasikmalaya. After the team completed its initial assessment, he was able to go to his home and embrace his family, thanking God for having kept them safe in his absence.

Over the next few days, the cost of the quake rose higher and higher: 100 people dead, 1,250 injured, 290,000 left homeless, and 210,000 homes, 2,600 schools, and 14 health centers damaged. Yet in the midst of the heartbreaking news, there was good news: government contributions and donations from

domestic sources would be able to cover a large portion of the funds needed for disaster response. It is exciting to see that Indonesia's own citizens can take more responsibility for helping one another rather than always being dependent on outside aid.

Tatang and the response team handed out food and basic supplies such as tarps, blankets and mats for the people now living in emergency tents. He mentioned that Tasikmalaya is located at 1,150 feet above sea level. Even though it's quite hot during the daytime, temperatures drop to 50 degrees at night, making it difficult for families huddled inside their tents to keep warm. In addition, the avalanche and collapsed buildings stirred up a great deal of debris so that many people are now suffering from respiratory infections.



Earthquake survivors line up for water from YBTBI tanks, Tasikmalaya, West Java, September 13, 2009. Photo by Nugi Adinugroho.

Besides the food and other supplies, the team has also provided water tanks for the newly created tent cities. The bright orange tanks stand out quite clearly in the midst of the white tents and the exposed brown earth. Living in the tent cities, the people are far from any other source of water, so life would be very difficult without this important contribution. They line up with donated plastic bags to fill and carry back to their families waiting in the tents.

The disaster agency that Tatang works for is called YBTBI, which stands for the Foundation for Disaster Relief in Indonesia, a Christian organization that works primarily with members of the Indonesian National Council of Churches. They plan to keep serving the affected population in and around Tasikmalaya for the immediate future, providing more food and water as well as medical care and psychosocial help for at least

5,000 of those traumatized by the disaster. Tatang will continue to be involved, as he knows the area well and has a strong personal motive for wanting to serve the people of his home town.

One more important point about Tatang: as you might guess from his name, Tatang is a Muslim. YBTBI is a Christian-based agency but serves any and all people in need, regardless of their religious affiliation. Several Muslims work for YBTBI, either as field staff or office workers. Their presence is a testimony to YBTBI's commitment to serve all of God's children. As Tatang himself will tell you, disasters don't recognize religious differences. They can affect anyone, anywhere, without regard to their personal beliefs. Therefore aid should be equally non-discriminating, based only on the affected populations' needs, not their faith. That principle, or code of conduct, is a part of YBTBI's founding documents and one of the reasons why Tatang can and does work there as part of a team of Christians and Muslims who work side-by-side to assist their neighbors in need.



Becca with Tatang Husaini at the YBTBI office, Jakarta, September 17, 2009.

Thanks be to God for the faithfulness of Tatang and the entire YBTBI staff, who work tirelessly to respond to the seemingly endless stream of disasters that threaten Indonesia. I ask that you keep Tatang, his family, and YBTBI in your prayers as they continue to serve this lovely yet disaster-prone archipelago.

In Christ's peace,

Becca