Bruneian hearts reach out

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BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN
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DR MOHAMAD Baharin Bintang still remembers the eerie look of Aceh's "flattened" ground as the helicopter ferrying him and nine other medical officers from Penanjong Garrison reached the Indonesian province that was hit by tsunami two weeks earlier.

The medical officers, together with 34 others, including those from the Royal Brunei Armed Forces (RBAF), were the first team from Brunei Darussalam to provide manpower assistance in Aceh.

The team was part of the Sultanate's Regimental Aid Post (RAP) set up to provide aid to the people of Aceh. "All I could see was destroyed, flattened ground below me. There victims and displaced people everywhere," he said in an interview recently.

However, there was no time to grieve as he and his team immediately set up a post in Banda Aceh to provide medical services for tsunami survivors.

He said the team also went to other areas outside the Aceh capital. Baharin said during the three-week stay there, the team handled all kinds of cases ranging from diarrhoea to bone fractures amongst children and adults. He said the more serious cases which required further medical attention were sent to better-equipped hospitals.

"Patients with serious conditions were sent to the bigger hospitals by air," he said.

The most difficult task, however, was not in the treatment of the physical illness, he revealed.

"Most of the patients who came to us suffered from post-traumatic disorder cases. I felt numb.

"But we maintained our focus to treat surviving victims professionally."

Grief overcame him only when he reached home in Brunei as he remembered the suffering that he had seen.

"I broke down when I reached home," he said.

Baharin was amongst the many Bruneians whose hearts were broken when news about the tsunami came. While many were not as fortunate to physically help the surviving Acehnese, few hesitated to give financial contribution.

The Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Foundation played a significant role in collecting the donation. Part of the donation totalling of $2,430,061.012 was used to build 70 housing units, an orphanage, a religious school and a mosque in Mamplam, Kecamatan Leupung, an
area about 15 km from Banda Aceh. Fazlan Othman, the foundation's property officer, said the foundation decided to help rebuild the area following a fact-finding mission conducted last year.

He said Brunei Darussalam's humanitarian relief assistance to Aceh was made in two phases.

"Phase 1 was the help that was given two weeks after the tragedy which was in form of food, medical supplies and clothing while Phase 2 is more of a long-term assistance."

He said the involvement of several private companies made relief efforts easier.

The Royal Brunei Airlines operated a humanitarian flight to deliver Brunei's relief donations while Brunei Shell sponsored the jet fuel to transport the supplies.

Fazlan remembered the grateful tears shed by mothers as they thanked him and other volunteers who distributed milk.

Of the many agencies providing assistance, not one had provided baby bottles to help feed babies, except for one bookstore in Brunei that raised fund and donated the baby bottles. Fazlan remembered how mothers wept upon receiving the milk bottles for the babies.