

Slow recovery: One year after the tsunami

by [Chris Herlinger](#) in the [January 10, 2006](#) issue

Tsunami survivor Marzuki Arsyad, 34, was luckier than some in Banda Aceh—his wife was unharmed because she was working outside the city. Even so, on December 26, 2004, this pedicab driver and fisherman lost 13 relatives as well as his home. The death toll in Indonesia's Aceh province was 170,000; 500,000 became homeless.

A year later, Arsyad is about to move into a new home not far from where his fishing vessel is docked. He reflects on the year since the disaster with some confusion: like many survivors he feels relief and gratitude but also the continuing stress of bitter memories and of worry and uncertainty, particularly about his livelihood. "We lost everything," he says.

The hopeful news is that response to the 2005 tsunami was commensurate to its staggering effects: within weeks, hundreds of international aid agencies were working in Aceh, sometimes with overlapping programs. Heinrich Terhorst of Caritas Germany says the world has to understand the severity of this disaster. "Only a war is comparable to a tsunami," he says.

War was a part of life in Aceh before the tsunami. The province has been battered for three decades by a conflict that pits the Indonesian government against the Free Aceh Movement, a rebel group that champions independence in resource-rich Aceh.

Then came the tsunami. Its staggering impact, as well as the sudden arrival of outside help, transformed Aceh's political and social landscape. The warring parties realized that if Aceh was to be rebuilt, they'd have to stop fighting. A ceasefire agreement was signed in August, although organizations such as the International Crisis Group (ICG) warned that ending a 30-year-old war would not be easy.

High expectations in other areas have caused friction, however, particularly over the perceived slow progress in rebuilding housing and moving the displaced out of tents and other temporary shelters. The pressure on relief groups and the Indonesian

government is growing.

“The whole world was expecting it would be done in a few months,” said Simon Sengkerij, Indonesia coordinator for Action by Churches Together International, a global alliance of Protestant and Orthodox aid agencies. Sengkerij says those hopes are unrealistic: gaining land permits and settling issues of property rights are never easy, particularly when land and property records have been lost, and relief groups doing the reconstruction have to be careful not to use wood gathered from illegal logging, a perennial problem in Indonesia.

And how much can realistically be accomplished in a year’s time? Terhorst, who grew up in postwar Germany, notes that it took his country at least two decades to fully recover from the devastating losses of World War II, and that it is likely to take five years or more to rebuild areas affected by Hurricane Katrina. It is unfair, he says, to expect underdeveloped and war-torn Aceh to reconstitute its housing stock very quickly.

Trauma is another issue, say Arsyad and his friend, Ibrahim Daud. The two men sit drinking coffee and tea in a spot not far from where they recently buried bodies and walked amid mangled body parts. They have coped, they say, by praying and trying to keep bad memories at bay. “If you keep busy, you’re fine,” says Daud.