

# Tsunami ICT Operation

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Many people took part of the Tsunami emergency in Indonesia. They volunteered from all corners of the world, and within hours packed their things and flew to help people who had just faced one of the worst natural disasters ever. When asked to write a story about the ICT operation in Indonesia, I thought the best way was to use a collage of their own stories to pay a tribute to their efforts.

Gianluca, 7 April 2005.

## Starting from scratch: ICT in Indonesia

Calang, along the west coast of Aceh province in Indonesia, used to be a proud little administrative centre on a narrow stretch of land where its residents had a sea view on both sides of the town. Idyllic... until the tsunami hit on 26 December. Three waves, surging at hundreds of kilometres per hour, hit the town from both sides and literally washed it and its people away. Only the skeleton of a two-storey government building was left standing. "I was having coffee when I saw the water pull back and then the wave coming rushing in," recalled one resident, who then scrambled up the nearby hillside as the water level rose rapidly behind him.

Today, Calang's few survivors live in tents that dot the same hillside. From there, they look over the devastated area where their homes used to be, and which has since become a hive of humanitarian activity. For WFP, the town has become a "transit point" for food from the agency's floating warehouses, providing supplies for up to 500,000 people in need in Calang and along the west coast. The boats shuttle between the Java and Sumatra islands, loading up food and distributing it to devastated areas all along the shoreline. The food destined for the most isolated inland communities is transported by UN helicopters run by WFP.

A team of ICT people from WFP was dispatched to set up communication services in Calang. They began arriving in January and found nothing but heat (reaching 40 degrees by midday). They had to start from scratch: remove debris, clear the area and only then get down to their ICT work.

In the first two months of the operation, the ICT team helped establish and strengthen the seven WFP offices, and provided security telecommunication, electrical power and information technology support to some 800 people. Jointly with UNICEF, this was extended to the entire humanitarian community in Indonesia.

## WHAT IT WAS LIKE:

"The helicopter flight to Calang took us straight up the coast over the affected areas, I don't know if many of these villages will ever re-populate, some have been wiped off the face of the earth... the only standing buildings appear to be mosques....It's now 1700hrs and we are back in Banda Aceh; the chopper pilots forgot to let us off in Calang! I can only laugh. Well, we can shower in clean water tonight and have some meetings with people that think they are important," Bill Campbell, ICT's senior electrical engineer, based in Dubai. He came to Indonesia to design the electrical power network, but landed up in Subang (Malaysia) to install radio brackets on vehicles being shipped to Indonesia. He took part in debris clearance in Calang before returning to Banda Aceh.

"ICT is working behind the scenes of every emergency. Imagine a scenario where an earthquake and a tsunami hit an area affected by 30 years of war, so you know very little about the area, because it has been inaccessible. You need to make sure that the first people to provide assistance can rely on effective communications with the outside world from the first hour. But you don't know anything about the environment, the security situation, whether the area will be hit again, when and where new offices will need to be opened. You can't even imagine how to get people there. But you have to plan to support hundreds of people, handle

millions of dollars of equipment, organize the arrival of ICT staff from all corners of the world, shipments and purchases of equipment from four countries – and ensure your staff will be safe and have a human environment to work in. And every time you feel things are starting to take shape, a new quake makes you fear for your staff, and takes you back to your operational drawing board.” Mike Fletcher, Regional ICT Officer based in Bangkok.

“My main concern was not so much operational, as looking after the ICT team working in places like Calang; Meulaboh, Banda Aceh (at the beginning) and Singkil were similar, if not worse. I helped people prepare to work where there was absolutely nothing – the only thing you could count on was mosquitoes.” Lionel Marre, who arrived on 29 December from Nairobi, was among the first ICT emergency response people in Indonesia.

“Coming from Luanda, Angola – historically one of WFP’s most complex operations, it took me 35 hours - through Portugal, Dubai and Singapore.” Edisher Giorgadze was based in Luanda, and has now been reassigned to Banda Aceh.

Extracts from the “Calang ICT Diary” written between 31 January and 5 February by Diane Zhang in Banda Aceh and Opart Ongwandee, from the Bangkok Regional Bureau, in Calang:

31 January “The camp in Calang consists of three tents. Alpermes Mendoza has joined Edisher and Bill to help with the digging. Today, 31 Jan, they experienced a very strong wind (approx 100kph), so they were reluctant (!) to put a solar panel up.”

“After two days of clearing rubble, the Base Camp is set up and becoming more and more like the Sheraton. Additional people are arriving in Calang, some of them without equipment and rations (MREs—a must in this environment where there are no shops, no markets, no food except WFP.)”

“We are short of equipment, we received the solar panel and battery for the radio but the frame has gone missing in the trip. I decided to home brew and made the wooden frame from the debris I found lying around – it worked, we have power! Yes, it is totally outside our technical standards (and it looks really ugly) but it works!”

“Staff arriving here should be advised to bring food and water for their intended stay. We now have a floodlight in the common area, so staff can sit and enjoy their self-cooked meals (either Russian or American pack – your choice).”

“There’s absolutely nothing here – except a hot sun and shiny floor tiles. This evening we went from steaming hot to one of the worse storms I’ve ever seen. Everything around me is wet... the more we clean, the more mud comes in through the rain. Mahendra from Logistics is really working hard: we are in big trouble since the warehouse has been flooded, we will need to sun-dry the rice sacks.”

“We begin to see the red worm in the water after a few days here, it looks harmless, but most of us decided not to shower in this water anymore.”

“We now have a closed space toilet, and I don’t have to run every time behind the mountain. I didn’t really mind, but there were too many leeches out there.”

“Most of the local population has moved up to the hill now, fearing a new tsunami. A few local markets are also starting to pop-up again...I have seen the first vegetables and meat on the ‘shelves’. People seem to be in good spirit – amazing!”

5 February “A new shipment of equipment has arrived – together with my replacement! Now we are missing an antenna for the radio bridge, which I really can’t make up out of debris...We missed our helicopter ride back to Banda (someone else smuggled his way instead of us). But another helicopter showed up, and this time nobody was going to get between me and a nice shower!

Alpermes, Bill, Diane and Opart were part of a 51-people ICT team that arrived in Indonesia and Sri Lanka from 21 different countries. Coming from as far as Panama and Angola, they were

supported by stand-by partners from the governments of Sweden, Denmark and Norway, and by private sector partners like TPG in Indonesia.

Gianluca