

US HELICOPTER

A dream come true for starving Indonesians

AFP, Teunom

It was as if the US navy helicopter were a miracle, a dream come true.

One man dropped to his knees and held up his clasped hands as if in prayer as the helicopter hovered just over his head. Another refugee strained against the blast of the rotor, his right hand reaching out.

Aboard the navy Sea Hawk, aircrewman Joseph Sabia Jr., 31, his eyes moist with sadness, scrambled to toss bottles of water down to them.

Relief workers say that people in this isolated region are dehydrated and on the brink of starvation one week after an earthquake and tidal wave killed tens of thousands, severed roads and left people completely isolated.

Helicopters from the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln flew a second day of sorties Sunday over the western coast of Indonesia's badly-hit Aceh province in an effort to bring relief to refugees whose communities have been wiped out.

Sabia's cramped Sea Hawk, piled to the roof with high-energy biscuits and water, found the first group stranded on a sandy berm sur-

rounded by a small lake of reddish-brown mud filled with clumps of vegetation.

As they flew on, past empty beaches lapped by gentle waves, the destruction became even more evident.

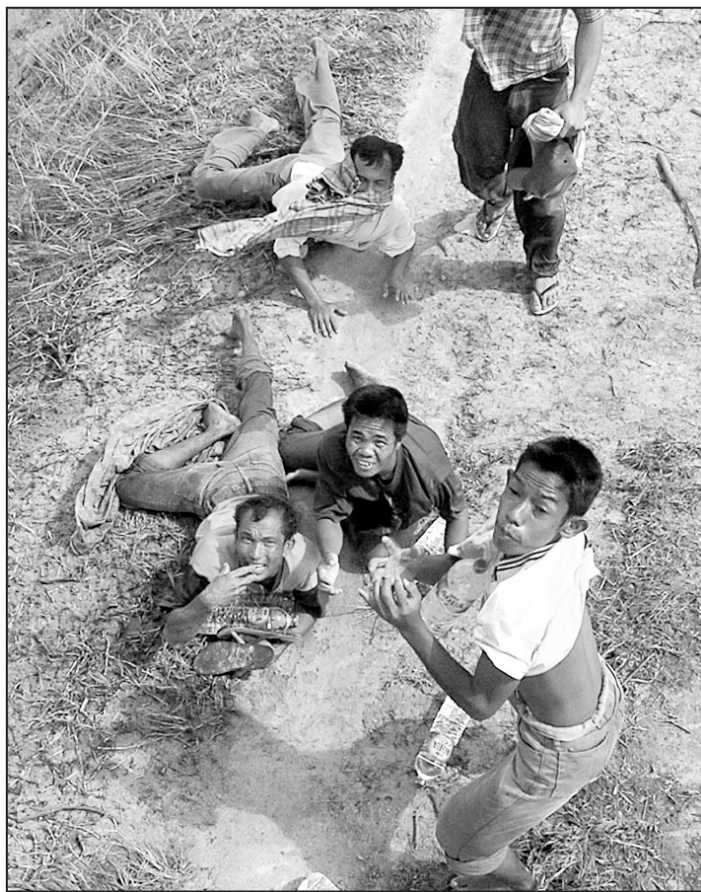
Only the foundations of homes remained in some small coastal villages. Trees lay pasted flat to the ground and the water was sandy, as if it had eaten part of the shoreline.

The coastal town of Teunom looked from the air like a broken piece of white crockery -- the ruins of the town's buildings. The edges of a road were washed away, in other places it was blocked by trees, or completely severed.

Rice fields that surrounded the town looked as if someone has dumped a load of muddy garbage in them. They were filled with corrugated metal, chunks of buildings, and other debris.

People walked or rode motorcycles past the few buildings that still stand.

About 40 villagers were waiting at the edge of a patch of dirt where the Squadron 47 Sea Hawks' pilots, Matt Chester, 27, and Ken Deppisch, 26, touched down.



Refugees from a devastated village swarm a US Navy Sea Hawk helicopter as it drops water and other supplies near the ground in Teunom, 170 kms southwest of Banda Aceh, on Indonesia's Sumatra island yesterday.

Devastation in Aceh slowly unfolding

REUTERS, Banda Aceh

Survivors huddle in clearings without food or shelter above the water-damage line all along the tsunami-ravaged coast of Indonesia's Aceh province, and corpses float for miles out to sea.

A week after giant waves swamped parts of the provincial capital, Banda Aceh, on the northern tip of Sumatra island, the water is only just beginning to drain off to reveal the full extent of the horrific destruction and yet more bodies to count.

"I've never seen anything like this. We've seen bodies 20 miles out to sea. You just cannot describe it," said Capt. Larry Burt, commander of a helicopter air wing on the US aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln parked off the Sumatra coast.

"Above the water line, there are people standing there waving flags trying to signal us. There are so many, you just can't stop for all of them," he told Reuters after a mission down the west coast, which bore the brunt of the December 26 quake and tsunami.

Walking the streets of Banda

Aceh yesterday, local clean-up crews and exhausted soldiers find it hard to know where to start, their efforts hampered by a steady drizzle.

Fires burn around the clock to clear areas around Banda Aceh's main parade ground of wooden debris. The soggy ground, about the size of five football fields, is stacked with rubbish, smashed vehicles and badly decomposed bodies.

As water drains from many districts of this city of more than 300,000 people, a nightmarish landscape of sludge, flattened homes and tangled corpses is exposed. The stench is overpowering.

"We need so much help," said Hayaddin, 51, a street vendor. "People say more waves will come."

Again during the long night, aftershocks from the massive quake that triggered the killer wall of water could be felt, sending panicked residents fleeing into the streets.

Zurhan, 23, a bulldozer driver, wearing a woolen jumper over his head to filter out some of

the smell of death, stood in the middle of the parade ground shaking his head.

As many as 30,000, of the roughly 80,000 Acehnese known to have died, perished in this city when the waves, triggered by the world's most powerful earthquake in 40 years, swept through.

With most of the population suffering severe trauma, half a dozen mechanical excavators sat idle on the backs of trucks, authorities unable to find drivers for them.

Substantial help has finally begun reaching refugees in some of the more remote parts of Aceh and the US military has arrived in force, parking a flotilla of ships off the coast.

"This is an enormous human tragedy. The biggest problem right now is water... It's poisoned," Jorgen Poulsen, chief of the Danish Red Cross, said.

"We hope we can avoid cholera. The problem is we have already seen people vomiting in town."

Indonesian soldiers in rubber boats, armed with black plastic sheets, prepared to remove bodies clogging a canal.

Quake warning stirs panic in Assam

PTI, Guwahati

Panic has gripped India's north-eastern state of Assam after US scientists warned of a potentially major earthquake jolting the region.

Experts at the Centre for Earth Observing and Space Research in George Mason University in Virginia on Saturday said last week's killer quake off Sumatra were moving northwards along 90-degree Ridge.

"If the sequence of these aftershocks moves further north, then it may trigger a very big earthquake in Assam region," Ramesh P Singh, a member of the team and Vice Chairman of the International Union of Geodesy and Geophysics (IUGG) Risk Commission, was quoted as saying.

The seven northeastern states, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur, considered by seismologists as the sixth major earthquake prone belt in the world, experienced India's worst jolts measuring 8.7 on the Richter scale in 1897, killing 1,600 people.

Assam experienced a massive tremor measuring 8.5 on the Richter scale on August 15, 1950 that claimed some 1,500 lives.

Around 3,500 Swedes still missing in Thailand

AFP, Stockholm

Around 3,500 Swedes are still missing in Thailand, a week after tidal waves struck the country's coastline, with 60 Swedes confirmed dead, the foreign ministry said.

The ministry said it had managed to locate missing tourists and struck their names off the list, but new names were being added all the time.

"The numbers go down, but then they also go up," foreign ministry spokesman Arne Kallin told AFP. "We're still at around 3,500 missing."

Aircraft carrying evacuated Swedes continued to arrive at Stockholm's Arlanda international airport through the night, and further planes were expected later Sunday.

Flash floods slow relief effort in Sri Lanka

AFP, Colombo

Floods slowed aid yesterday to thousands of marooned survivors in Sri Lanka as the United States prepared to mount a military operation to help relief work as the tsunami death toll rose to nearly 30,000.

Officials in the eastern district of Ampara, 350 kilometres east of here by road, said rains had ceased and flood waters were receding Sunday, but they feared an outbreak of water-borne disease at overcrowded shelters.

"We urgently need to improve the sanitary condition. We need more toilets," chief civil administrator in Ampara, Herath Abeyweera, said by telephone.

Ampara was the worst hit in last week's tsunami which devastated

more than three quarters of the island's coastline. They suffered a double blow when rains Saturday dumped some 330 millimetres of water, triggering a new wave of refugees.

"Medical teams can get through to some of the camps today because water levels have gone down, but the roads are still very bad and it takes longer to get the supplies in," Abeyweera said.

Officials said more than 800,000 people were displaced by the tsunamis, with another 200,000 added to the list after flooding across the eastern regions Saturday.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga has said that the death toll would likely jump as most of the missing were presumed dead.

A week after the tragedy, foren-

sic experts were struggling to identify 57 foreigners killed in the sea surge, according to A. F. Raymond undertakers.

"There are European medics taking DNA samples and copies of dental structures," Aubrey Raymond told AFP.

"Among the unidentified bodies are six children not more than five years old," he said. Over 100 foreigners died in the disaster.

Along the island's southern coast the situation was improving with better weather allowing supplies to get through, AFP photographers in the area said.

However, in the northern peninsula of Jaffna, the military reported confrontations with Tamil Tiger rebels in distributing relief.

Andamans rattled by 90 aftershocks in 24 hours

AFP, New Delhi

India's tsunami-hit Andaman and Nicobar Islands have been rattled by 90 aftershocks in 24 hours, most of moderate intensity, the meteorological department said Sunday.

Four of the shocks were recorded Sunday morning, measuring between 5.0 to 5.5 on the Richter scale. R.S. Dutta Treym, director of seismology at the New Delhi-based Indian Meteorological Department told AFP.

He said most of the shocks recorded since Saturday morning, were in the same range, except one that hit a magnitude of 6.3.

"There is no threat of tsunamis from these after shocks. However, their occurrence cannot be predicted with certainty," Treym added.



An Indian tsunami victim, who lost her 12-year old son in the natural disaster, laments over the ruins of her house at a fishing village on the seashore of Cuddalore, some 185kms south of Madras yesterday.



PHOTO: AFP
PLO Chairman Mahmud Abbas, favourite to win next week's Palestinian presidential elections, salutes supporters during an election campaign rally in Deir al-Balah in central Gaza Strip yesterday.

Israel launches new gaza operation

Raids undermining Palestinian election: Abbas

REUTERS, Gaza Strip

Israeli tanks rumbled into the northern Gaza Strip yesterday to try to stop cross-border rocket attacks described by front-running Palestinian presidential candidate Mahmoud Abbas as useless.

The offensive into the town of Beit Hanoun began just hours after Israeli forces ended a three-day-long incursion into Khan Younis refugee camp in southern Gaza aimed at halting mortar and rocket attacks by militants against nearby Jewish settlements.

The violence, a week before Palestinians elect a successor to Yasser Arafat, posed a particular challenge to Abbas, who has called for a resumption of peace talks with Israel under a US-backed "road map" and an end to bloodshed.

Witnesses said about 50 Israeli tanks and armored personnel carriers moved into the northern Gaza Strip. The raid began after two rockets hit the southern Israeli town of Sderot, wounding a woman.

"In light of the continuous launching of Qassam rockets which terrorize communities inside Israel, the Israel Defense

Force is operating in the launching areas ... to reduce the attacks," a military communiqué said.

There were no immediate reports of fighting or casualties.

The military statement gave no timeframe for the latest raid. Israel has promised to pull its forces out of Palestinian towns at least 24 hours before voting begins on Jan. 9.

Meanwhile Mahmud Abbas, the front-runner in next week's election for a new president of the Palestinian Authority told AFP in Gaza city that the spate of raids by the Israeli army into the Gaza Strip are designed to undermine next week's vote.

"We are very sorry about this Israeli escalation," Abbas said in an interview on Saturday night.

"The target of this escalation is put an obstacle in the way of the Palestinian election. The international community must be very careful about what is going on -- the democratic process here is being put in danger."

Abbas, who is hoping to succeed the late Yasser Arafat as president in the January 9 election, has been campaigning in Gaza since Friday against a backdrop of violence across the territory.

Emergency in Peru after police station siege

AP, Lima

President of Peru, Alejandro Toledo, declared a 30-day state of emergency in remote Andean province, where a group of nationalist dissidents seized a police station and took officers hostage, demanding his resignation.

"In the supreme decree, we are declaring a state of emergency in the department of Apurimac," Toledo told reporters at the Government palace, after cutting short a holiday trip for an urgent Cabinet meeting on the situation.

At least seven people were wounded in a shootout during the takeover on Saturday. The dissidents are followers of a retired Army Major, who, along with his brother, seeks to establish a nationalist indigenous movement modelled on the ancient Incan Empire. "This is a military protest and we are willing to lay down our arms and surrender, when Toledo resigns from office," Antauro Humala told Radioprogamas Radio from the captured police station in Andahuaylas, 440 km southeast of Lima.

Argentina begins burying club fire victims

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

Argentina rang in the New Year on a grim note as families identified and began burying 177 victims of a fire in a Buenos Aires rock club, including children and babies who may have perished in a makeshift nursery in the bathroom.

New Year's celebrations were muted on Saturday as the government began handing over bodies to families with the order that they be buried, not cremated, due to the criminal investigation into one of Argentina's worst disasters.

The blaze during a concert on Thursday night started when concert-goers launched a flare that ignited foam on the ceiling. The fire sent some 4,000 mostly teen-age fans scrambling for the exits amid falling debris and thick smoke. Four of the six doors were locked, officials said.

The city's medical emergency service raised the death toll by three to 177 at nightfall on Saturday and said 726 people had been treated in hospitals, mostly for smoke inhalation.

Forty-five people were still in intensive care in public hospitals.

Pollution alert in Tehran

AFP, Tehran

Schools in the Iranian capital were closed and the elderly, the sick and children advised to stay indoors Sunday after air pollution reached alarming levels.

According to Tehran's official Air Quality Control Unit, Saturday's Pollutant Standard Index (PSI) -- a standard measurement that incorporates carbon monoxide, dust and other pollutants -- reached 168, or close to "very unhealthy".

"There was a lack of any parameter in the atmosphere to decrease the pollution," a Tehran pollution official, Elmira Parto, told AFP in reference to the current season marked by low winds.

Following the order to close elementary and junior high schools for the day in a bid to reduce traffic, the PSI for Tehran was reported to have fallen to 113 -- closer to Saturday's level in other cities such

as Beijing and Shanghai.

By comparison, Saturday's PSI in New York was 52 and in Bangkok 57.

The soaring pollution in Terhan -- often blanketed in a veil of thick brown smog -- has been attributed to a rapid increase in traffic and congestion.

Half of the four million vehicles in the city of 10 million are more than 20 years old and, according to official figures, the average petrol consumption is 17 litres per 100 kilometres, more than three times as much as for European cars.

According to a recent study, each resident of the Iranian capital -- now considered one of the world's most polluted cities, inhales an estimated 7.1 to 9.3 kilograms of dust every year.

The poor air quality has been blamed for an increase in respiratory ailments, and asthma is increasingly common.