

# National Library books for Aceh project: co-operation at work

After a major disaster, whether natural or man-made, humanitarian concerns for safety, shelter and medical assistance come first. After these basic needs have been taken care of, there is time to attend to other vital elements of civil society, such as library collections supporting the information and reading needs of citizens.

It was not until weeks after the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami of 24 December 2004 that news finally emerged from the province of Aceh on the situation of libraries there. It was not good. Libraries had been open that day, a normal working day in Indonesia. The Provincial Library in Banda Aceh (the main public library) still stood after the disaster but most of the library's collection had been destroyed and 23 staff of the Provincial Library had lost their lives, including the Library's director. The Aceh Information and Documentation Centre, a small library with a specialist collection on Aceh well known to Australian scholars, was completely destroyed and all the collection lost. At least two of Aceh's eight public library branches had been destroyed while several mobile library vans were swept away in the floods. The main state university, Universitas Syiah Kuliah, stood further inland and was believed to have been unharmed. In fact it subsequently emerged that it was used as a temporary shelter for those made homeless by the disaster.

Much of this information was passed to us by the National Library of Indonesia (NLI), which had quickly begun assistance and relief efforts. Its own staff contributed cash donations of over 30 million rupiah (about \$5000), which was given directly to library colleagues in Aceh. Several fully equipped mobile library vans were driven to Banda Aceh and NLI took a liaison role to help library staff recover from the disaster. The NLI's director, Mr Dady Rachmananta, commented in a

report that reading materials were urgently needed for people living in temporary camps for displaced persons, where shelters and makeshift classrooms for children had been established.

At a distance from the disaster,

and without the capacity to intervene in a large-scale way, the National Library of Australia (NLA) saw an opportunity for its Regional Office in Jakarta to provide targeted assistance to Aceh libraries.

We asked our regional officer, Ralph Sanderson, to purchase new children's books and light reading materials in Indonesian from local bookshops and send them to the Aceh provincial library. Our purpose was simple — to give those living in refugee camps, especially children, something to read in their own language for recreation and entertainment, as a relief from the experiences suffered in the disaster.

The arrival in Aceh of the first consignment of over 900 books coincided with the official reopening of the Provincial Library, so Ralph travelled to Banda Aceh to attend the ceremony and hand over the donation. As the first overseas professional to visit the library, he was warmly welcomed by Mr Kamaruddin, the new head of the Provincial Library, and his staff who had been working hard to re-establish services. Ralph was given a tour of the main libraries in Banda Aceh, as well as the Provincial Archives building and provided with reports on their situation. He made a detailed photographic record of the buildings visited.

## Local co-operation

The NLA now has a simple infrastructure in place to purchase reading materials we know are wanted and ship them safely to the recipients. Books purchased in Indonesia are relatively cheap so even limited funding can go a long way in meeting immediate needs.

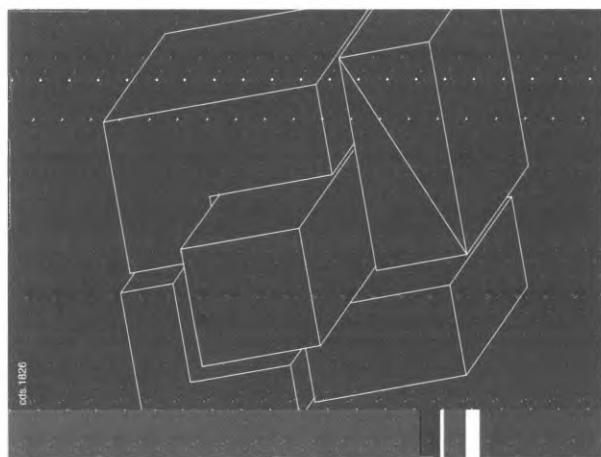
This simplicity also gave us the chance to accept donations for the project, which we had not sought initially. Six independent Canberra booksellers ran a fund-raising campaign in support of the project in June 2005 — Asia Bookroom, Alexander Fax, Booklore, Dalton's, Gaslight and Paperchain. With a variety of in-store promotions and publicity, the booksellers raised over \$8000, which was handed over to the National



*The Aceh Provincial Library, Banda Aceh, late February 2005*



*Before: one of the original mobile library vans after the tsunami*



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