

Indonesia: Determined few keep searching for kin

MIRANDA LEITSINGER Associated Press

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BANDA ACEH, Indonesia -- Word came that workers had dug up another body in a wrecked neighborhood. Teuku Salahuddin headed over, took a look, then called his sister and described the remains: no hair, no hands, looks like a girl wearing yellow or green sweat pants.

It was his latest attempt to find any of the 10 relatives, including his mother and three sisters, who disappeared in the Dec. 26, 2004, earthquake and tsunami. Salahuding, 50, still searches for them weekly at refugee camps and sites of freshly unearthed bodies.

"For us who lived, who survived, we will keep searching for them everywhere, like today," said Salahuddin, who broke into tears several times after workers took away the body -- he decided it wasn't one of his relatives.

"Almost every night I dream about them," he said. "I can still feel that they are around me."

Six months after one of the most powerful earthquakes in the past century triggered huge waves that killed more than 176,000 people around the Indian Ocean rim, workers have largely stopped searching for bodies and queries from distraught relatives have slowed.

But although many people have given up searching for lost relatives, others soldier on, hoping to find loved ones who are among the more than 49,000 still listed as missing -- and are mostly presumed dead.

Indonesia's Aceh province bore the brunt of the tsunami, losing nearly 129,000 lives and most of the country's 37,000 missing. Authorities were overwhelmed by the mass of bodies that piled up on roadsides -- and tens of thousands of corpses went uncollected for weeks.

The rush to bury the dead in mass graves left many families without answers. They posted fliers with names of the missing, ran newspaper ads with their photos, searched refugee camps, sought guidance from fortune tellers, sifted through ID cards found in the debris and scanned the Indonesian Red Cross' "I survived" list.

The Red Cross called off its body search in Aceh in March. But workers go out when they get calls of another body being found, which happens every few days, said Fauzi Husaini, the head of the agency's body collection.

The dead -- sometimes skeletons or body parts -- turn up in remote villages, on jungled mountain slopes, under piles of dirt or buildings, in rivers and mud flats.

Most bodies have been found, Fauzi believes.

"We will never know the exact number of the dead because the area we are working on is so wide," he said.

Bulkaini, a disaster relief official who, like many Indonesians, uses a single name, said the vast number of missing can't officially be declared dead until at least a year has gone by.

People are increasingly giving up the search.

Gone are the fliers, and the newspaper ads are fewer. Many people request official letters of death from the Red Cross instead of seeking help to find loved ones. Some people pray at dozens of mass graves -- even if they don't know whether relatives are buried there.

"I see that the communities now are quite motivated because they head back to their villages, find a job, rebuild their house and try to live like normal," said Fauzi, who lost the families of his brother and niece.

A hopeful few keep searching.

Use of the Red Cross' message system, which began in the last few months, has picked up. People write a note to someone they're looking for, provide a location where they think the person might be, and Red Cross couriers try to track them down.

One courier, Muhammad Reza Syahputra, said messages are often sent between siblings, but often the recipients can't be found and are likely dead.

On a recent rainy day, he searched for two message recipients, finding one -- Hajar Liani, 11, who lives amid the refugee tents and debris near Banda Aceh's fish market and harbor.

She had written to a relative who she knew had survived and was getting a response.

For many of the bereaved, actually having the remains of a lost loved one is crucial to the grieving process and moving on with their lives. For others, time has had to suffice.

A few yards from where the female body in sweat pants was unearthed, a single grave marks where the brothers Risnaldi and Toni buried their mother and brother in the front yard of their nearly demolished home.

Their sister, Ernita, 32, is among the missing, but they have stopped looking for her. A relative told them Ernita's spirit came to her and said she was buried in a mass grave, which they believe. Enough time has passed.

But their brother-in-law, Masprapto, hasn't come to terms with losing his wife of four years.

The discovery of the body in sweat pants drew him to the scene. He decided it wasn't Ernita. She had been wearing brown sweat pants.

"I can't say that she died," he said softly. "My heart doesn't allow me to."