

New year opens on somber note - Glenview Announcements 1/6/05

Asian communities grieve for tsunami victims,

begin relief efforts

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Trisila Davidge was left inspired Friday as she gathered with more than 100 others at the home of the Indonesian consulate general in Winnetka. Those attending a candlelight vigil included leaders from each religious community represented in Indonesia -- Muslim, Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant and Hindu.

"It was the first time I've ever seen the five faiths of my country pray together," said Davidge, who was born and raised in Jakarta, Indonesia. "I was amazed this brought them together like that."

Usually during the week before New Year's Eve, Davidge is busy organizing the annual New Year's Eve party for the Indonesian consulate in Chicago.

The annual New Year's gathering traditionally includes dancing, drinks and celebrating -- things that did not feel right for Davidge and other organizers this year.

"It didn't seem right to celebrate while our families in Indonesia are suffering," she said. "This year, I just felt I would rather pray or do something at home."

Worries mount

Davidge, a Lake in the Hills resident, said she is fortunate because her immediate family members are safe after the tsunami devastated parts of the country. But she worries about extended family members who haven't been heard from.

"Two days ago I talked to an uncle who lives in Sumatra, and he said some of our family that live in Nias Island are probably missing because no one has heard from them," she said. "They say the entire area they are from is basically gone."

Davidge and other volunteers decided to still hold the Winnetka gathering, but to keep the theme focused on prayer and remembrance instead of celebration. The theme was "Faith, Hope and Remembering the Victims."

"We played a video clip that showed the devastation in Banda Aceh, and everyone cried," Davidge said. "I knew a lot of the men at the gathering, very strong men, yet they seemed to cry the hardest. It was difficult to see."

Prayers for victims

The tsunami that struck Dec. 26 dealt one of the most devastating blows to Banda Aceh, leveling almost everything in its path. Yet when the waves rolled back, the city's mosque was still standing.

But even if the physical structure of their place of worship had been destroyed, to the Islamic faithful, the mosque still would exist.

"If something happens, the mosque is still standing up really, really strong," said Roosy Miller, a

leader in the Chicago Muslim community. "That's our belief."

Mosques, such as the Mesjid Raya Baiturrahman, Banda Aceh's best-known landmark, have provided shelter for those displaced in the disaster.

Perhaps as important to Muslims in the provincial capital city, the mosque was a sacred place to pray for those lost. Muslims comprise nearly 90 percent of Indonesia's more than 230 million people.

The act of praying is believed to help the spirits of those who perished find peace.

According to Islamic beliefs, Miller explained, the bodies of Muslims who die must be wrapped in a white cotton cloth, or kain kafan, and buried as soon as possible.

But nature's fury doesn't respect religious customs. The tens of thousands killed in Indonesia made prompt burial, let alone wrapping all the bodies of Muslims in kain kafan, impossible.

The spirits of those who will never receive a proper interment will not be punished for being victims of an act of nature, Miller said. "Nothing happens," she said. "Basically, it's (like they're) going back to the ground.

"The important part is the people who pray for them."

Calls for action

The Rev. Jesse Jackson was among those who led prayers during the New Year's Eve gathering in Winnetka. He spoke about the scope of the disaster in the Indian Ocean, and the coming together of people of different faiths. He also called for a strong response from the

United States, particularly for the thousands of children who were killed or orphaned.

Davidge helped the Indonesian Community of Chicago set up a disaster relief fund for victims on the west coast of Sumatra, including Banda Aceh and Nias Island.

She said about \$15,000 has been raised already; Davidge has personally written a thank-you letter to each donor so far.

The donors span different cultures and backgrounds. Davidge said one donation touched her most of all.

"I got an anonymous letter with a check for \$5 on Friday," Davidge said. "The donor wrote in the letter they wanted to help, but this was all they had to give. My tears were done when I read that letter. It was so good."

Davidge said in a country like Indonesia, where the average paycheck for a month may only equal \$20, any amount of American money is valuable, especially now.

"Whatever we get, we will send from the bottom of our hearts," she said. "Even a small amount could be used."

Still missing

Despite an outpouring of help and a Thai television report devoted exclusively to their son, the parents of 33-year-old Ben Abels of Evanston have been unable to confirm whether he was among the victims of the Dec. 26 tsunami that struck a small island off of Thailand where he was staying.

Abels, a real estate agent with Prairie Shore Properties in Evanston, had been wrapping up a three-week vacation across southeast Asia when the tsunami crushed the beach bungalow on Phi Phi that he was sharing with a college friend.

Though the government has advised families against traveling to Thailand to search for loved ones, Abel's brother David caught a flight Monday to Bangkok. David Abels planned to meet with a friend of Ben's who speaks Thai and can help work with private investigators hired by the Abels family.

The family also has provided DNA samples for laboratory analysis. The results, along with dental X-rays, will be entered into a forensics database in Thailand.

When the tsunami hit the coast of Phi Phi, Abels' friend, a physician, was swept inland, submerged in water and trapped under a pile of debris. Her hand was severed and her leg was crushed. She has been undergoing daily surgeries, and doctors are aggressively trying to fight an infection, according to a Web site providing updates on Abels' disappearance.

The Abels family is working to raise money to bring Elizabeth North back to the United States on a medical transport flight.

Bah' service

In Wilmette Sunday, about 150 people attended a prayer service at the Bah' House of Worship.

"I think that the initial response that Bah's would make is we believe in the power of prayer and that we would pray for those people who had been affected by the disaster," said Joyce Litoff, program coordinator. "It was a variety of prayers we did that were culled from Bah' scripture talking about turning to God in times of crisis. For people who wanted to make material donations we offered a list of organizations."

Politicians react

U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th, said Monday she would join fellow Democrats and Republican members of Congress to plan the U.S. response to the earthquake and tsunami disaster that hit southeast Asian nations last week.

She said the United States, which has pledged at least \$350 million in aid and military personnel for rescue and cleanup, has "a unique opportunity to demonstrate to the world our nation's compassion by using our vast wealth, boundless resources and logistical support to bring about a measure of relief to the millions of people suffering today in Asia."

Schakowsky, the Democrat's chief deputy whip in the House, said the Bush administration also had a chance to improve the country's image with Islamic nations, and to work closely with the United Nations and the international community.

"I stand ready to work with my Republican and Democratic colleagues as we plan our nation's response to this horrific humanitarian calamity," she said.

Tenth District U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk said his staff is collaborating with area organizations' relief efforts.

He said his staff will help Indian relief organizations schedule a fund-raising event to help disaster victims in that country, and monetary donations can be sent to his Deerfield office for the American Red Cross.

Meanwhile, he said the president and Congress are working on a U.S. foreign assistance package of \$350 million to help disaster victims.

Kirk disputed critics who called the the U.S. government too slow to respond to the disaster.

"The amount of aid the U.S. is providing has been dramatically understated by the press. The majority of the U.S. effort is not being counted, but is essential to the relief operations," he said. Those efforts include substantial military assistance with helicopters, airplanes and supply ships needed to deliver relief supplies, in addition to the \$350 million President George Bush has pledged.

"My guess is that the \$35 million (initially pledged by the president) will represent less than 5 percent of what the United States actually contributes. Our final contribution will probably be more than 20 times that amount."