

# What's missing in the Tsunami coverage

**NEW YORK, JANUARY 5, 2005** – The lead story from Aceh in today's Washington Post is vivid: The subhead offers its vantage point, "Above Indonesia:

"LAMNO, Indonesia, Jan. 4 – From the skies above Aceh's devastated western coastline, no sign of civilization remains except for the barren concrete foundations of houses sheared clean and wooden debris scattered like multicolored confetti . . . The line between life and death was evident Tuesday looking down at the countryside from one of the Seahawks . . ."

It is colorful writing and graphic but also totally inadequate to the task of helping us understand what is happening on the ground in the catastrophe that has struck the region with a force of biblical proportions.

This is an example of helicopter journalism and distanced "outside-in" reporting that accesses few if any sources in the country itself, does not speak the language, and does not explain much about what is going on. It's like the foreign correspondent who flies into a conflict zone for an afternoon and gets most of his information from a taxi driver.

When you watch the coverage, you see endless stories of Colin Powell touring the devastation or Kofi Annan arriving in Jakarta and speaking to the press. You hear the sound bites of the elite and high and mighty, who tend to look at the world from 30,000 feet – cruising in first class – and far from the pain of the real worlds below.

And, yes, you also see US soldiers delivering aid, often dropping it from the skies. You hear about the UN Food program with enough food for 100,000 people. (When you read closer, you learn that the food supply will only last a week!)

It looks so impressive – and in many ways it is. But the reporters on the ground say that there are still major problems reaching those most in need. And those people are dying and at risk from an epidemic of disease.

They say the crisis is getting worse, not better.

As the crisis deepens, the journalism has not.

The reporting is often more graphic than informative as the Indian Express notes: “Perhaps it’s time for channels to draw up a blueprint of coverage norms for different events/incidents/disasters that involve violence, death and extreme suffering. Perhaps, as is the print media, reporters, or a team of reporters should specialize in certain fields – as they already do in sports and business – so that in such moments, they have some understanding of the problem, know what to ask or say. Don’t say food, medicines and supplies are required, identify what food, which medicines and the nature of supplies so we Northerners don’t donate bajra, Vitamin C and warm clothing . . . Expertise may help minimize the hysteria of less informed reporting.”

Why is it so hard for western news organizations to connect with local journalists who often know the story best? What we need is “inside-out” and bottom up coverage – not just reporting from the clouds.

One example of how that might strengthen our understanding. While we were shown examples of help on the way, the local media offered another story – a story of chaos.

“The massive relief operation for tsunami-hit areas in Aceh is on the brink of chaos with the absence of a single authority directing the aid effort,” reported The Jakarta Post. “Vice President Jusuf Kalla, did not deny suggestions that in the first week after the devastation, coordination among government agencies was poor, if not absent.”

We have heard about all the money that is being raised, but where is it going and how should it be spent?

What do the people who know the most about delivering aid have to say. What about the agencies who know Aceh best who report that the Indonesian military is using the crisis to sustain its war against local rebels?

Who is thinking about longer-term reconstruction? And what are they planning?

What about organizations in Indonesia who know the country best, groups like United in Diversity. Why not give their thoughts and actions more visibility? They will be living with the crisis long after CNN packs up its

cameras and goes home.

What is the relationship between the so called “core countries” designated from afar by President Bush to lead the Aid effort and the UN which will coordinate most of the international involvement?

How about some background on the US history with Indonesia dating back to Washington’s support for the dictator Suharto and Indonesia’s invasion of East Timor. That would put Secretary of State Colin Powell’s comments about “American values “into an Indonesian context – not just one about the war on terror. Are we being as idealistic as many media accounts make it appear?

Covering a crisis like this one is tough and heart breaking. It is easy to criticize from a distance. But there are parallels between the coverage of this disaster and ones in the past. They share problems in common.

Can we learn the lessons of the past and correct the limits of “parachute” reporting before the world press corps gets back on the helicopters for the long ride home?

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*News Dissector Danny Schechter is the “blogger-in-chief” of Mediachannel.org. His new film WMD (Weapons of Mass Deception)exposes media complicity in the War in The War in Iraq. See [www.wmdthefilm.com](http://www.wmdthefilm.com).*