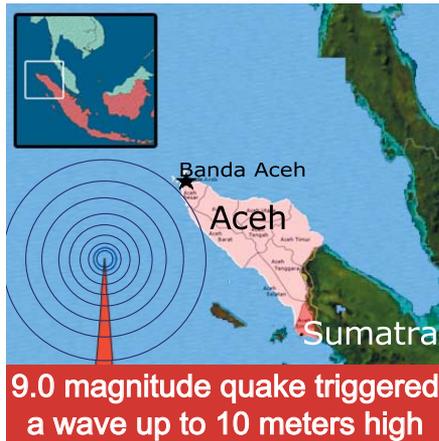


Aceh Province of Indonesia



As the waters from December 26th tsunami retreated, it became painfully obvious that the Indonesian province of Aceh (pronounced Ah·chay) was hit very hard. Estimates of those who perished in Indonesia stand now at 94,000, most of them in that province.

Aceh; the name sounds exotic, and the Acehnese (pronounced Ah·che·nees) surely are just as unknown as the name of the place where they live. The capital of this province of 4 ½ million is **Banda Aceh**, also known in the region as the “Doorway to Mecca.” This city is a stopping off place for Indonesian Muslims as they make the *Hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia.



Islam entered into Indonesia first in Aceh. The people of Aceh are strict Sunni Muslims and have been very instrumental in introducing Islam to Indonesia as well as most parts of Southeast Asia over the years. Today, the only place in Indonesia where the strict Sharia law is practiced is in Aceh.

A separatist movement has been fought with the Indonesian military and security forces for more than 25 years. Oftentimes it has been a bitter struggle with many human rights abuses on both sides of the issue.

The Muslims of Aceh simply do not want to be part of Indonesia. That desire to be independent and the resulting pressure put upon them by the government forces has caused a bitterness that has led to demand-

THE PEOPLE

- People name: *Acehnese*
- Country: *Indonesia*
- Their language: *Aceh*
- Population:
est. 4,500,000
- Largest religion: *Muslim (Sunni) 99.9%*
- Christians: *less than 1%*
- Church members: *316*
- Scriptures in their own language: *Portions only*
- Christian broadcasts in their own language: *Available*
- Persons who have never heard the Gospel: *1,925,400 (61%)*

ing an internationally monitored vote for independence such as occurred in East Timor in 1999. The Indonesian government has staunchly refused to consider it and has launched several offensives on the armed separatists, known as the GAM, (the Free Aceh Movement in local initials).

The struggle with the Indonesian government has kept this resource-rich province in a state of underdevelopment. Human rights groups have focused international attention on the thousands of people, combatants and non-combatants alike that have been killed over the years. Due to that focus, the Indonesian government has strictly limited the number of aid agencies and foreigners who have been allowed into Aceh.

With this background, one might better understand the words of a victim as a US relief helicopter landed in Aceh. He said to a CNN reporter on board, *“Aceh has drowned. We are finished. There is nothing.”* One wonders if he is simply reflecting the tragedy of the tsunami or against the larger tapestry of the struggles of his people, the realization that this tragedy might spell the end of their dreams to separate from Indonesia and practice Islam their way?

At any rate, the government is not keeping aid workers out now. Several ships from the 7th Fleet of the US Navy are off-shore and are ferrying relief supplies to Aceh. With so much suffering in that area, one wonders what the Lord may be doing in the region.

A very small number of Indonesian Christians are in Aceh. Many are severely persecuted for their faith.

- *Pray that these Christians will be able to show the love of Christ as they are suffering alongside their Muslim neighbors.*
- *Pray for the people of Aceh. Pray that the tragedy that took nearly 100,000 of their number and decimated their cities might be used of the Lord somehow to draw the Acehnese to Himself.*
- *Pray that the Lord would raise up Christians who would work in the reconstruction efforts there.*

