



Emergency assistance for media in the wake of the Sulawesi tsunami

DONATE

One year ago, a powerful earthquake and tsunami struck the Indonesian island of Sulawesi. Andi Besse was among the journalists who lost her equipment in the disaster, and received emergency assistance from Free Press Unlimited and partner organisation PPMN.

It was just before sunset prayers, at around 6pm, when Indonesian journalist Andi Besse was hit by the tsunami. The 33-year-old journalist for local newspaper Harian Umum Mercusuar had been covering the preparation of a yearly cultural festival in Palu, on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, when it happened. She was swept away by the water and held under for minutes. She hit the edge of a fish pond that tore her calf before she finally managed to grab onto a wooden pole, stand up and help another woman and a child to safety.

Andien, as she is commonly called, got 13 stitches in her calf in an emergency hospital before her brother took her to a different province to recover. A month later, Andien came back to Palu to resume her reporting. But she had no equipment: her camera, two phones and her money had been swept away by the tsunami.

“As soon as I arrived at the airport, I went straight to the Mayor’s [of Palu] office [where I was posted to report the news]. My brother gave me his old mobile phone for work and communication. For online media, you can take photos with your phone. But for a [print] newspaper like mine, it was terrible [not to have my camera],” said Andien.

It did not stop her from working. She knew that local residents were in dire need of information in the aftermath of the disaster, for example on how to obtain food, clean water and temporary housing from the government. Rumours and hoaxes on how slow the aid was arriving were already flourishing.

Earthquake and tsunami

On September 28, 2018, a powerful 7.5-magnitude earthquake struck Central Sulawesi and caused a tsunami in the provincial capital, Palu. The disaster killed more than 4,000 people, injured more than 10,000 and left tens of thousands homeless.

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Journalists and media professionals were among the victims. Many had their equipment broken or washed away, like Andien. Newsrooms as well as radio and television studios were badly damaged or destroyed. At the same time, local residents depended on information more than ever, for example on the closest and safest evacuation spots and where to find information about their missing relatives.

“Access to information is very important during an emergency situation,” said Eni Mulia, the director of PPMN, an Indonesian media development organisation and partner of Free Press Unlimited. “At the same time, the journalists had to deal with their own situations as they were victims of the tsunami themselves. They lost so much of their equipment and could not work without it. We believed it was key to help journalists and media with equipment and technical assistance to keep up the flow of information.”

Emergency assistance

With support from Free Press Unlimited, PPMN provided emergency assistance to five radio stations, five journalists and one media centre, where journalists and residents could go for information. Andien was among the five journalists who received equipment – a new camera complete with a flash.

“I did not think that I could get [a camera], because there were so many journalists who also lost their equipment. But I did, and it really helps me in bringing the news and taking high-quality photos for the newspaper,” she said.



Andien received a camera after her old one was swept away by the tsunami.

Radio Ramayana

The earthquake and tsunami all but destroyed Zulkarnain Razak's radio station Ramayana, which he had built on his own. The floor had cracked. The radio tower had broken and was leaning at a perilous angle. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, Zulkarnain focused on getting his family to safety and evacuating them to the city of Makasar in southern Sulawesi, away from the destruction.

When he came back to the radio station ten days after the tsunami, he found that much of his equipment, including his sound system, had been stolen. Stopping broadcasts was not an option for Zulkarnain. He moved the remaining equipment and the damaged tower to a safe place near the electricity station and asked the management to supply power for his radio station.



The very limited equipment allowed him to broadcast to a small area for a few hours a day. But the leaning tower was at risk of falling down. Through the emergency assistance programme, Radio Ramayana received a new tower, antenna, and computer as well as manpower to install the kit.

“It was a gift!” exclaims Zulkarnain. “Seven months after the tsunami we are now broadcasting with better quality and I feel more safe. I no longer have to worry about the transmitting tower collapsing.”

Photo: Devina Andiviaty

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