

A Helping Hand in Managing the Dead in Disaster



Management of the dead in natural disasters is a very challenging aspect of disaster response, especially as they may cause a large number of casualties. Although the humanitarian community has been aware of this challenge, the massive loss of life following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which saw about 220,000 people killed, was a wake-up call for the need to improve the capacity to respond. Measures have been taken by the humanitarian community, including the Indonesian Red Cross (PMI) to address the challenge.

Responding to the tsunami, PMI deployed about 5,000 PMI volunteers to assist the victims in shelters and more importantly to evacuate and collect the dead. The catastrophe did give invaluable lessons learned to PMI, which, ever since, has improved its humanitarian responses to similar situations. Head of Disaster Management of PMI's Banda Aceh chapter, Suburhan Pagan, said that following the tsunami, PMI in Aceh now has more and more volunteers and they are well-equipped with considerable knowledge on evacuation, first aid, and disaster risk reduction.

Evacuating dead bodies is of importance to a successful and proper identification of victims. According to the Indonesian law, identification of disaster victims fall within the police authority. Therefore, PMI has been working with the National Police' Disaster Victims Identification (DVI) unit, which is in charge of this process. In March 2013, during the Mentawai Megathrust Direx, PMI and police' DVI were part of the exercise. A year later, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the Indonesian National Police and PMI to formalize their cooperation in dealing with disasters.

In order to improve the level of response and coordination with all authorities for the management of the dead in disasters, in 2004, the PMI participated in the first working meeting in this subject, together with DVI and other related institutions, facilitated by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). After recommendations made during this meeting, the relevant authorities under the leadership of DVI and the technical advice of the ICRC, will work on concrete subjects such as developing guidelines, standard operating procedures and training programs in the near future.

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At the operational level, the cooperation between the PMI and police' DVI unit is nothing new. The latest one was during the recovery of victims of the ill-fated AirAsia QZ8501 aircraft in Pangkalan Bun District, Central Kalimantan. During the operation, PMI, which was part of the National Search and Rescue Agency (Basarnas), worked in close cooperation with several related actors, such as the police' Disaster Victim Identification, Armed Forces, Hospitals, etc. In many other occasions, PMI was also involved in the evacuation and recovery of the dead, among others Hercules crash in Medan, North Sumatera (June 2015) which claimed about 147 lives, landslide in Banjarnegara, Central Java (December 2014) which claimed around 39 lives.

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Since Indonesia is prone to disasters, PMI work in evacuating the dead so as to assist the identification process is expected to continue in the future. Improper recovery and disrespectful

handling can result in the loss of important data and may be extremely traumatic for families. Therefore, proper evacuation and recovery of the dead are vitally important in identification of the victims.

