

Ancient seafaring organisation comes to aid of Indonesia's fishing folk

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As Indonesia's Aceh tries to cope with the tsunami aftermath, a group with ancient roots in the province's seafaring past has quietly come to aid of fishing communities whose livelihood has been robbed by the disaster.

Aceh's coast bore the brunt of the enormous waves which swept across Asia killing some 280,000 people and decimating the province's vital 422-million dollars-a-year fishing industry.

Entire villages were lost while wooden boats were smashed or swept out to be lost at sea. Jetties and wharves were splintered into matchwood and shoreline fish farms and markets pulverised.

The loss of its shoreline is a crippling blow to Aceh, which has a longstanding relationship with the ocean, a reputation that established it as the gateway to the Indonesian archipelago for mariners in centuries past.

Although the government says it will eventually provide grants of eight million dollars to rebuild the fishing industry, this could take years, leaving those who survived facing uncertainty.

Into the breach has stepped **Panglima Laot**, an organisation forged in the briny past of Aceh's maritime traditions that is now at the fore of the province's future recovery.

Panglima Laot, which translates as "sea admiral", is offering immediate work that takes survivors' minds off the disaster, provides them with cash and helps clean up the coastline.

In the future, the organisation will work as a trusted channel for grants to buy boats and rebuild the fishing infrastructure, ensuring aid money is not swallowed by Indonesia's notorious corruption.

"Around 80 percent of the fishing fleet in Aceh, some 5,000 big and small boats, is estimated to have been destroyed by the tsunamis," Muhammad Adli Abdullah, the group's secretary general, told AFP.

He said that coastal communities covered by his organisation involved some 425,000 -- fishermen, fish farmers, boat builders and other tradesmen in marine craft and fish culture.

"We have been busy providing jobs for survivors, men and women. We are conscious that keeping them busy while at the same time providing them with some cash is the only way we can help them overcome their trauma," he said.

Each morning, hundreds of people throng Panglima Laot's office to register, receive equipment such as shovels, carts and boots, before leaving in trucks to help clean up efforts along the coast.

With funding from organisations including the **UN Development Programme**, the group can pay daily wages of three dollars, a small but not insubstantial sum in the impoverished province to the 2,000 people it now employees.

"This cash-for-work programme is only for the short term, to heal their trauma and allow them to regain confidence, and in two months' time we will have to start to gradually return them to their normal livelihood," he said.

Panglima Laot, Adli said, was seeking grants for small "krui" fishing canoes costing some 350 dollars each. Almost none of 3,000 such boats survived the tsunami.

"There is no way these poor fishermen can repay loans," he said. Bur for the larger boats that cost about 100 times more than the krui, soft loans will be sought, with the organisation acting as guarantor.

"Our sanctions are much more effective than the government's legal sanctions," Adli said. Erring members face the confiscation of their boat and even their excommunication from the community.

"We always tell our donors that we prefer in-kind assistance, give us boats, fishing nets, equipment. Not money. That way we can reduce the opportunities for corruption," he said.

Source: AFP

More information:

- **AFP Website:** <http://www.afp.fr/english/home/>