Life after the WAVE

Staff in the Community Aid Abroad-Oxfam Australia program section often receive letters from far-flung comers of the Pacific. In July last year, Becci Fleischer opened a letter from West Sepik province in Papua New Guinea. It began: "I am John Sanawe of Arop Village. 1 am fifty-five years old, married with five children."

The author's handwriting was small and painstaking. I knew what the letter was — another request for support — and felt sad that our resources were too stretched to help.

Before reading John's letter, I had never heard of Arop Village. Just a week later, the whole world knew about it. On 17 July a massive tsunami swept across the north west coast of Papua New Guinea. TV screens around the world filled with images of flattened trees and uprooted villages. Newspapers printed photographs of the dead floating amongst debris, along with reports of horrific injuries. Television graphics tracked the path of the fifteen metre wave, as it swept thousands of men, women and children from the villages of Sissano, Warapu, Arop and Malol high above the coconut trees and smashed them into the lagoon behind their homes.

Then I remembered the letter. I pulled it out of my files, and turned to the last page. John Sanawe had drawn a sketch of the area around his village. It was virtually identical to the maps now appearing on the TV stories. There, in the centre, was Sissano Lagoon. He'd marked in all the neighbouring villages, now flattened by the wave. He'd drawn in the mangrove swamps, now filled with rotting corpses. It slowly dawned on me that the man who'd written this call for help could now be dead.

Margaret Otto weaving a bilum under the tarpaulin roof of her makeshift home.
Photo by Becci Fleischer

It wasn't until recently that I pulled out the letter again, this time on an Air Niugini flight bound for Aitape, the nearest town to the tsunami area. In the weeks after the wave, Community Aid Abroad sent an emergency response team to set up clean water and sanitation facilities, and to offer any assistance they could. Now I was on my way to look at longer-term ways to support this devastated place. Outside the plane window, a tropical paradise stretched below me: long white beaches and tiny reef islands, turquoise water and palm trees. It was hard to match this scene with the news reports' horrifying images of disaster, or with the picture of poverty stricken villages painted in John's letter.

My image of paradise didn't last long once I landed. Aitape is a small, dusty town, and has the district's only bank, shop and health centre. Small groups of people wandered the streets or sat under rain trees. They didn't talk much, but stared into the distance, chewing betel-nut and spitting the blood-red juices onto the road. This was a far cry from other towns I'd visited in Papua New Guinea, where life on the streets is animated and noisy. I noticed that they sat well away from the beach.

I spent my first afternoon at a river, swimming with a group of young amputees who had lost their limbs to infection after the disaster. Medical teams had done many amputations to prevent the spread of gangrene from untreated wounds. Most of the kids had lost many, if not all of their family members. To get to the river, we travelled kilometres down a gutted dirt road in the back of a ute, each bump jerking these bedraggled kids with their bandaged stumps. When we arrived, one of the kids — Sebastian — stopped to pose proudly for photos with his new crutches, before running off to join the other boys in a rowdy game of soccer. Their missing limbs didn't seem to slow them down at all.

The young women, however, made a very different picture. They sat quietly in waist deep water, covering their lost limbs with their clothes. They talked a little of their worries for the future. Several felt they had little chance of getting married and having families. Women in Papua New Guinea do so much of the survival work: carrying water, growing food, bearing and raising children, cooking, fishing and house-building. What man, they asked, would take them on? Without family, it is hard to feel a sense of belonging in the villages of Papua New Guinea.

The next day I took another long, bumpy truck ride to visit the new Arop village, relocated in the swampland several kilometres from the sea. John Sanawe, I was told, had survived. He had been taken to Port Moresby hospital with multiple injuries, but I was unable to find him. Walking around the relocated village showed that much of what he'd written still rang true: "There is no economic development in the village, or in the area for that matter, since independence in 1975. Consequently the economic base is nil ... There is no decent road to the village ... To go to Aitape station, one either walks east along the beach for nearly three hours (to catch a bus) or travels by casual boat trip ... once every two days". This isolation means that people have virtually no access to basic services like health care, schools, or even a trade store. Worse still, with their houses and gardens now gone, people are living in makeshift shelters, surviving on the dwindling relief supplies and whatever they can forage from the bush.

Community Aid Abroad's emergency response to the tsunami focussed on the provision of clean water and sanitation. This young villager is washing his food in water from a new well.
Photo by Becci Fleischer

One of the village's older women, Margaret Otto, invited me into her makeshift home — a hastily constructed wooden frame covered with a large blue tarpaulin. Rain dripped steadily onto the floor. Her few remaining possessions were crowded into the centre: a single mattress with a mosquito net, a cooking pot, a spool of green string, a few tins of fish and a bag of rice. We sat quietly for a while before she told her story.

Margaret had lost three of her children in the wave. She moved inland with her remaining family, onto land belonging to another clan, but after three months, fighting broke out. The landowners had become jealous of the aid being received by the tidal wave victims, and the family were forced to move. They packed their belongings and started again, this time on land belonging to their own clan. Although we were speaking in Margaret's native tongue, Tok Pisin, she spoke slowly and with difficulty about her missing children, and her attempts to rebuild her life. As she talked, Margaret picked up some string and continued to make a bilum, a bag used for carrying everything from food to babies. The work seemed to help her get through the trauma of telling her story. The spirit of survival is strong in these women.

I started to build up a picture of a community in shock. Although aid has helped in Aitape, the trauma of this event will stay with these people for life. One of the starkest images I saw was a few days into my stay in Aitape, at a memorial service marking All Souls Day. Families carried poles with paper hearts stuck onto them — one for each person they had lost. One woman sat alone in the crowded service, with a pole carrying more than twenty hearts. In the rush of international attention after a major disaster, it can be easy to forget that recovery is a slow process, and that support may be needed for a long time.

There are a few aid agencies still working in the area, but many left in the weeks following the disaster. They left behind a number of serious problems. Local committees have been organised to distribute assistance, but the difficulties of transport and communication make it hard to ensure that representation is fair. Women, particularly, do not have a strong voice, and find it difficult to express their needs and the needs of their families. These issues compound the difficulties caused by severe trauma, and by the loss of so many capable people.

The need for support remains high in Aitape. Survivors of the wave are traditionally seafaring people, who have not yet adapted to an inland lifestyle. Although some may eventually return to the sea, the terror of their memories may keep them away for a long time. For many people, even visiting the sea to fish is still too frightening. People have to find new ways to survive: gathering water, growing food, organising sanitation, and building different kinds of houses. In the new Arop village, where Margaret Otto and her family have settled, the nearest river for washing and drinking water is a twenty minute walk away through a swamp. The women are just starting to build gardens in their new villages; gardens that need to be more varied and productive than before, when the sea provided plenty of nutritious food. Women play a key role in the rebuilding process, as they will do much of the work to get their communities back on their feet.

We must also remember the story told in John Sanawe's letter: that conditions in Aitape were already very difficult before the wave hit. The flow of aid after the disaster may eventually improve living conditions for people in this remote part of Papua New Guinea, despite their huge loss. However, if this is to happen, we must focus on the longer-term issues, rather than the "quick-fix" attitude that often characterises disaster response.

Community Aid Abroad is now working to help communities set up adequate water and sanitation systems in the Aitape district and in the nearest hospital. We are also establishing support programs in other areas. These include permaculture training, to encourage new methods of sustainable gardening, and finding ways to strengthen the womens network.

The people of Aitape gave me a glimpse into the spirit of survival that drives life in Papua New Guinea. A spirit that helps people to live through frequent natural disasters — drought, landslides, tidal waves and volcanoes — and to survive the difficulty and isolation that characterise their daily lives. It is part of Community Aid Abroad's work to learn from, and to find ways to support the continuation of this Spirit.

You can support Community Aid Abroad's work in Aitape by donating to our long-term overseas aid program. Call 1800 088 110 in Australia.