

Acehnese student in S'pore steers global aid for flood-hit hometown

He leads 2,500-strong network from NUS dorm to send relief to flood-hit Sumatra

Hariz Baharudin
Correspondent

As floods struck homes in his hometown in Aceh in late November, displacing residents and destroying their properties, Acehnese student Hafiz Akbar found himself coordinating relief efforts from his dorm room in the National University of Singapore.

Mr Hafiz, 25, who is doing his master's degree at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, heads the Forum Mahasiswa Aceh di Dunia (FORMAD), a federation of 25 Acehnese student organisations around the world.

Since the deadly floods struck Sumatra on Nov 25, he has been juggling school and his part-time teaching assistant duties in Singapore, as well as coordinating with FORMAD groups, including those in the Middle East, China and Malaysia.

"Coordinating takes a lot of time, sometimes into the early hours, because our members are spread across time zones," he said.

FORMAD's 2,500-strong network has become a channel for information, logistics support and advocacy as the humanitarian situation deepens. The group began raising funds and distributing basic supplies within hours of the floods by working with local partners.

The group has collected a modest 10 million rupiah (\$\$776) so far and he said the funds were deployed immediately to buy food, bottled water and medicine.

These supplies reached families in the worst-hit districts days before official assistance could get through washed-out roads.

"People cannot wait to eat or drink. In many places, prices spiked because of scarcity, so moving quickly mattered more than the size of the funds," he said, adding that in some areas, helicopters



Basic supplies such as food, bottled water and medicine that were purchased by FORMAD, a global federation of 25 Acehnese student organisations, were distributed within hours of the floods to affected families in the worst-hit districts. PHOTO: COURTESY OF HAFIZ AKBAR

are now needed to deliver relief because they cannot be reached by land.

According to Indonesia's National Disaster Management Agency, the Sumatra floods have left more than 1,390 people dead, 330 missing and 5,700 injured.

As it continues to raise funds and amplify other donation drives, Mr Hafiz said FORMAD's focus now is on advocating for a more coordinated and faster humanitarian response to help affected communities.

On Dec 4, the group sent a letter to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, calling for an independent assessment of the disaster and for international relief to be readied if conditions worsen.

The letter was signed by Mr Hafiz, who is pursuing a master's in International Affairs under a scholarship.

He said more help is urgently needed on the ground. Several hospitals and clinics in central Aceh were severely damaged, with stocks of basic medicine, including

antibiotics and antifungal treatments, rendered unusable.

Based on reports from volunteers, he said some areas bear the devastation of "a second tsunami".

Several Acehnese leaders, including Governor Muzakir Manaf, have compared it to the 2004 disaster that killed more than 170,000 people in the province.

"What we are seeing is not just flooding and entire houses have been buried in mud. Families have lost clothes, documents, everything they had," he said.

Local groups and reports coming out of Aceh, one of Indonesia's poorest provinces, said food and clean water remain the most urgent needs.

Mr Hafiz added that access has been hampered by damaged bridges, submerged roads and delays in official verification processes.

In some locations, evacuees were unable to receive government aid because they had lost their identity cards or family registration documents in the floods.

"People tell me that it is not the floods that are putting people at

risk," Mr Hafiz said. "It is the breakdown of supply chains and the slow response."

Indonesia has not declared a national emergency and maintains that the situation remains manageable. The authorities have deployed more than 30,000 National Armed Forces personnel to disaster-hit areas across Sumatra, including the worst-affected districts in Aceh.

Senior leaders, including President Prabowo Subianto and Vice-President Gibran Rakabuming Raka, have visited the affected communities to oversee relief operations.

Mr Hafiz has advised Acehnese organisations and Singapore-based partners on how to legally channel donations, including through licensed charities that can conduct public fundraising.

While FORMAD cannot accept public donations in Singapore, individuals can transfer money privately, which the group then channels to vetted local partners.

The crisis has been personal for Mr Hafiz, who will be going back to

his hometown in Tapaktuan in South Aceh on Dec 15.

His mother and relatives were making an eight-hour journey from Banda Aceh back to Tapaktuan on Nov 25 when heavy rain triggered flash floods along the coastal route.

By dawn, water levels had risen so quickly that they were forced to abandon their car and wait for rescuers.

He recounted how they saw the water climb to the roof of the vehicle as they tried to turn back, before the current started to intensify. They spent hours stranded in the dark, unsure if the car would be swept away, before a rescue team took them to safety.

While grateful that his family is safe, Mr Hafiz said the situation in his hometown remains dire and many others still urgently need help.

"This has reminded us how vulnerable Aceh still is and how every hour matters when disaster strikes," he added.

harizbah@sph.com.sg

SLOW RESPONSE

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MR HAFIZ AKBAR, an Acehnese student in Singapore.

