

## **Cut Nur and Kausar before the Tsunami**

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I remember the first time I laid eyes on her. She stood in the doorway of her stately house as we trudged up the muddy street hauling backpacks and cameras, dripping with sweat. It was December of 2002 and the air in Banda Aceh felt like mulled soup. As we collapsed on the couch, Cut Nur and her daughters brought us water and tea and welcomed us with an invitation to stay in their home.

She was tall, with a wide smile and purple dress. Her home was always bustling with activity, and the narrow courtyard was often filled with people and vehicles. Many of them worked at the hotel she owned, the Raja Wali, a sprawling building fronted with a leering plaster statue of an eagle located a few blocks away.

She welcomed anyone who sympathized with the cause of the Acehnese. After all, Cut Nur had been involved in the independence struggle for years. Named after the famed 19th century heroine of Acehnese liberation, Cut Nya Dhiem, Cut Nur was an outspoken critic of the Indonesian control of Aceh. She was heavily involved in the Referendum Movement, which arose in 1999 after the fall of Suharto, agitating for a UN referendum on Acehnese independence.

She was also frequently at odds with the militant wing of the Acehnese nationalists, the GAM, (Free Aceh Movement), an armed guerrilla group operating in the hills of Central Aceh. The guerrillas claimed to have ideological differences with her, but others suspected that the all-male leadership of GAM had difficulty accepting a strong woman's voice for Acehnese freedom.

During the short-lived ceasefire of 2002-3, Cut Nur opened the doors of the Raja Wali Hotel to the men and women who were in Aceh working as international security observers. They were from Thailand and the Philippines, organized by American human-rights workers who stayed in the more luxurious hotels downtown. It was a completely legal endeavor, housing people who were in the country at the invitation of the government, but as happens in a totalitarian state, she was later to pay dearly for her hospitality.

Kausar was in some ways the polar opposite of Cut Nur. Young and dark, wiry and angry, from the other side of Banda Aceh. He was born into a political family - his father was a representative of Aceh in the Jakarta government. Kausar had begun his political activism with Indonesian social-justice organizing, but later wanted to focus more on Acehnese liberation. He founded a group called SURA (Voices of the Acehnese). In January of 2003 SURA called for a rally in the city of Lheukseumawe, during the ceasefire, which was completely legal and should have been, even if it wasn't. Again, were talking about a military dictatorship here.

I remember that demonstration in Lheukseumawe well, if for no other reason than that it

was one of the hottest days I have ever experienced in my life. By 7:30 in the morning all of my clothing was soaked through with sweat, including my socks and boxer shorts. I could barely hold on to my camera, but the heat didn't seem to bother the Acehnese activists, who hustled around unfurling banners and organizing cadres of chanters. By nine o'clock, there were several thousand demonstrators, with untold more would-be participants stuck on the roads en route, blocked by the Indonesian Military (TNI) patrols who invented reasons not to let them enter the city, some firing shots in the air to scare everyone away. Downtown, policemen and soldiers had massed in front of the crowds as Kausar mounted the stage to speak. He delivered a passionate diatribe against the occupation of Aceh, as spectators began joining the demonstrators, crossing the police lines, and more and more soldiers arrived in small blue tanks. The sun turned the heat up a notch to a sweltering blaze, and lots of people started yelling at the assembled security forces to leave them alone.

As it turned out, there was no violence and everyone left peacefully, even after the military told them they couldn't march as planned. They didn't want to start a street fight with soldiers that they well knew would shoot them without hesitation. This was the government that the U.N. and Swiss and American peace groups had brought to the table that hot winter three years ago, hoping to end a decades-long civil war. One that doesn't even let its citizens assemble. I sometimes wonder why anyone even bothers trying.

Because if you play with the devil he will cheat you. Or maybe hell just spit in your face. A few weeks after the rally in Lheukseumawe, armed men burst into Kausar's house in Banda in the middle of the night. They wore no uniforms but naturally carried expensive automatic weapons. Kausar escaped out a window, and the government, as per usual, claimed to know nothing, and also as per usual claimed the perpetrators must have been the GAM, as if GAM would conceivably go after another Acehnese nationalist. But just in case, the TNI issued an arrest warrant for Kausar, for spreading hatred of the government - his speech in Lheuksemawe, for instance. Taking into account that the TNI has the blood of several million of its own citizens on its hands, Kausar wisely chose to disappear and went into hiding.

What happened next, and what happened after what happened next, is history, to put it mildly. The Indonesians used the ceasefire as a chance to try and grab Acehnese activists who might surface, and claimed at every turn that the GAM was breaking the terms of the arrangement. They unleashed a massive military offensive aimed at GAM camps in central Aceh, killing 43,000 people in two years as the international observers were quietly ushered out of the country. The TNI also arrested anyone who had had anything to do with the peace process, including Cut Nur, whom they claimed had proven herself to be a GAM sympathizer by housing the foreign security monitors at her hotel. In the Summer of 2003 a TNI court sentenced Cut Nur to eleven years in Lhok Nga prison. A friend sent me a picture of her on her first day incarcerated, standing in her cell and smiling as big as usual, undaunted.

Kausar remained underground. The entire region was sealed off from the outside world

and the foreign media was forbidden access to Aceh. The Indonesian army continued its operations, trying to root out the guerrillas by murdering the civilian population. George Bush and company charged off to war to bring democracy to Iraq while on the other side of the world, a nation of Muslims was quite literally dying to be a democracy, while a U.S. supported dictatorship strangled the movement in its tracks. The ceasefire disintegrated in a hail of bullets, the world moved on and all the journalists who had filled the hotels of Banda Aceh during the negotiations turned their attention to the Middle East.

Until, that is, December 24th, 2004. Then two plates of the earth's crust pushed one against the other and sent tidal waves crashing into Western Sumatra, with Banda Aceh almost completely reduced to rubble in a few hours. The nearby women's prison at Lhok Nga was destroyed by the water and all of the prisoners died as their concrete cells collapsed around them. One of the prisoners was Cut Nur.

And the great eyes of the world finally moved back to Aceh. It took 100,000 deaths in two days, but journalists were again allowed to travel to Northern Sumatra. Fifteen deaths a day - the average daily toll for two years in Aceh - didn't mean squat.

So the only silver lining I can see in an otherwise morbid cloud is this: I hope that, through the storm of bodies killed by the tsunami, history can be glimpsed. I hope some news gets out about the kind of death that can be prevented, unlike that of earthquakes.

I think of the neighborhood where Cut Nur lived and the huge Raja Wali Hotel, visible for blocks above the small wooden houses around it. I remember the docks down the road from her house, where the brightly painted, high-prowed fishing boats pulled in every morning at dawn and unloaded tuna, shark, and octopus with three-foot iron fishhooks. All of it - the neighborhood, the docks, the warehouses, the cafes - all of it is gone. Wiped away by the sea, and flattened. I think about all of that newly empty space filled with death.

And I think of my two friends in Aceh. One was killed in prison, which is somehow worse when I imagine her drowning behind bars.

The other is in hiding, as good as dead if he's discovered. But, at the moment, I am sure that he is well.

No one will find him, because he is hiding in a sea of corpses.