

# PEOPLE

Saturday, September 16, 2006

Rizal Sahputra

## The tsunami, an ordeal and a new life

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The Jakarta Post/Jakarta

**R**izal Sahputra, 22, greeted *The Jakarta Post* warmly at the start of this interview at a Central Jakarta hotel.

It was his first visit to the capital city — about 1,900 kilometers from his remote hometown, Calang, in Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam province.

Rizal is a survivor of the Aceh tsunami. The huge disaster on Dec. 26, 2004, destroyed his hometown in Aceh Jaya regency, killing most of its population including his father Abdul Hamid, mother Suryana and younger sister Asirah Sahputri.

His courage and vigor helped him survive the disaster. After nine days drifting in the Indian Ocean, Rizal was found and rescued by the crew of a cargo ship who took him to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, for medical treatment.

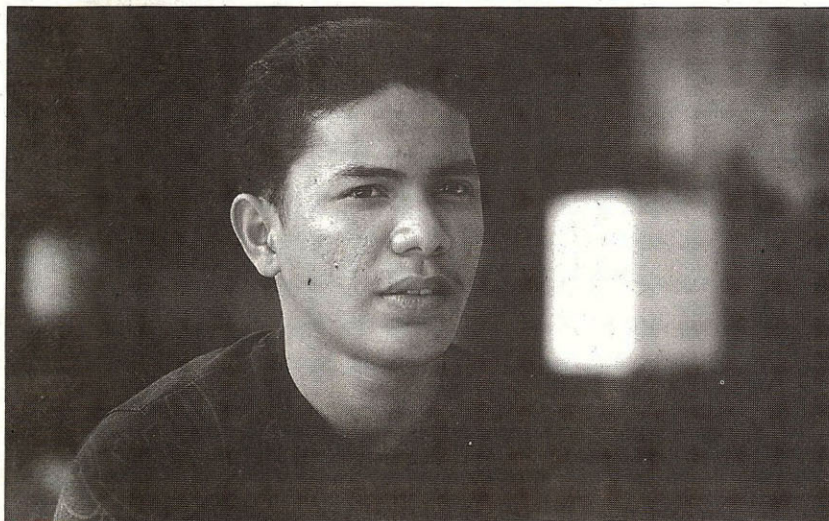
"They threw a rope out and pulled me up. They were frightened, asking if I was a man or ghost. They were shocked at my physical condition," Rizal said.

He had come to Jakarta from Kuala Lumpur to share with young Indonesians his account of the nine-day ordeal and his current studies in the neighboring country.

Although the physical wounds to his body have healed, Rizal is still struggling to recover from the psychological trauma.

This healing cannot be separated from Prof. Dr. Norfadzillah Hitam, vice president of Kuala Lumpur-based University College Sedaya International (UCSI), where Rizal is now studying free of charge.

"Ibu Nor (Norfadzillah) gives me support continuously," said Rizal, who has just completed a one-year English program at UCSI. Now, he is



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### RIZAL SAHPUTRA

confident enough to meet people and to continue his studies at the same university, where he has a scholarship to study English and Communications.

The English classes, his interaction with students from different countries and UCSI support have transformed Rizal from a traumatized individual into a highly motivated young man. It seems that Rizal has found a new chapter of his life.

Before the tsunami, Rizal was just another youth from a remote village in Aceh's west coast, which overlooks the Indian Ocean. He was a local high school graduate.

On the morning the tsunami hit Aceh, he was awaiting the result of civil service entry (CPNS) test held in October 2004. For a high school graduate in Calang, applying to become a civil servant is often the best choice.

The result of the test was scheduled to be announced Dec. 26, 2004. Unexpectedly, the disaster changed his life

and that of many others.

He said that his mother woke him up that morning. The neighbors had sought volunteers to tidy up a nearby mosque.

"I was too sleepy to wake up properly. I had not slept the whole night, thinking about my dream three days beforehand," he said.

In his dream, Rizal recalled, he lost all his teeth save one. According to local belief, Rizal was destined to lose all but one of the members of his family.

(Eventually, he discovered only his elder brother, Ronal Sahputra, was alive because when the tsunami hit Aceh he was in Medan, North Sumatra.) Then, slowly, he woke up.

After he had washed his face, he felt a very strong earthquake. Rizal told himself that there would be a huge disaster. Then, he went to the mosque for the tidying up. His father was already there.

Ten people on the beach shouted a huge tidal wave

was coming.

Rizal quickly ran to his father and spoke to him. During the brief conversation, Rizal apologized for his mistakes.

"I said to my father that if I remained safe, I would see him again. But, if I were to die, I asked him to look for my body," he said.

Rizal said that he also apologized to his younger sister. He had no time to talk to his mother, who was at home just 100 meters from the coast.

"I was able to run only 10 meters away when the wave swallowed my father, sister, the mosque and the whole village. I was about to reach a hill when the wave took me," he said.

Rizal said that he could not remember how long he was under water. He said that something had saved him. "It held me. I did not know if it was an angel. I saw it, but I could not say anything," he said.

When finally he floated up, he saw debris all around. He collected the debris and tied it into a bundle. He used it to keep him afloat. He saw the body of a soldier float by. He took the soldier's knife, which he used to cut open coconuts floating nearby.

"I drank the liquid from 10 coconuts and ate three," he said, referring to the first day of his nine-day ordeal.

Rizal met another survivor floating on a log. He appeared unhealthy. Rizal took a pack of instant noodles that was floating nearby and gave it to him.

"After three days, I saw a boat flying the Indonesian flag in the distance but it did not come to rescue us. My companion became frustrated. He tried to swim, but drowned."

The following day, he ate nothing. He smelt the stench all around him: Dead bodies were beginning to decompose.

Rizal acknowledged that he heard people reciting the Koran while he was floating on the ocean. "I also heard the *adzan* (the Muslim call to prayer). A voice told me not to sleep. I prayed to God continuously to save me," he said.

Then, on the ninth day, he saw a cargo ship, which took him to Kuala Lumpur. During his medical treatment he met Norfadzillah, who gave him support and offered him a scholarship.

"I found out that I'd passed that CPNS test three months after the tsunami, but by then I couldn't stand living in my village anymore. I decided to study in Malaysia," Rizal said.

It was a correct decision. Although sometimes he still mourns the death of his family, Rizal now faces the future with greater confidence.

"Be strong, whatever happens to you. If you have problems, talk to people and be patient," he told his audience of young Indonesians.