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Establishing a Canadian Presence In Banda Aceh – First Report – 31 January 2005

On behalf of Ambassador Mark:

I arrived in Banda Aceh yesterday (Sunday, 30 Jan 05) on a mission to establish a Canadian presence here.

Enroute, I made a brief stop in Medan for a tour of the trans-shipment facilities there with the One-Star in charge, Brigadier General Irawan Supomo. Fortunately, Medan was quiet compared to what it was a few weeks ago and the main warehouse, which had been overflowing, is now almost empty – meaning that the relief operation has for the most part moved to the front lines where it is needed. Arrival in Banda Aceh was a stark contrast. The airport scene looked like something out of an action movie: helicopters of all variety flying in tight formations of two's and three's, in and out in rapid succession and in many directions, fully laden with supplies going out. Standing there amid the din of it all felt like being in a violent windstorm. Around that part of the airport, I saw an encampment of tents from the many countries that have deployed military here: Australian, Japanese, German and Malaysian markings were particularly evident, as were those of the UN.

2. I had a half-hour meeting at the airport with General Bambang Darmono who continues to help lead TNI relief efforts here, although a Three-Star has just been put in above him. He seems a young, capable and certainly amiable man, but also exhausted like everyone else. I let him know that we would be establishing a Canadian presence and that we were, in fact, the third Canadian group to visit since the 26 December disaster, following our Recce team and our CIDA Minister visits. He recalled Minister Carroll and sent his regards. I introduced my six-person Embassy delegation – Karen Foss, GR, who will be staying up here for a couple of weeks at least; Hari Basuki, Development, also staying for the better part of a week; Paul Cunningham, Consular, Sgt. Albert Martineau, Defence; Jennifer Hart, Media; and Harkiran Rajasansi, Trade – all of whom will be returning with me to Jakarta on Tuesday, 01 February 05. The conversation focussed on two things: his desperate desire to know who was doing what among the international community – he admitted that he is constantly caught unawares and can't answer his superiors when they ask him this simple question. And, second, we talked about TNI capabilities and immediate tasks. On the latter, he said they were focussed on restoring the Banda Aceh highway between here and Meulaboh (a section of which I told him was built with Canadian assistance when I last visited in 1989), so that supplies could get through with the use of helicopters. He wouldn't give numbers but he did say they had enough engineers and equipment to do it themselves. He admitted that rebuilding the twenty or so bridges would be a particular challenge, however.
3. From there, I went for a visit to the destroyed Manulife office and then to the nearby "ground zero" of the tsunami-hit section of Banda Aceh. I thought I was prepared for it, having seen the footage over and over again on TV for the past month. But nothing can prepare you for standing on the high point of one of the few surviving (but badly damaged) bridges at the old port, turning 360 degrees and seeing the sheer scope and magnitude of the wreckage and