

Rev Niko Selan, minister of Ebenezer Congregation in the village of Pido recounts the tragic events of Sunday 4 April through to Monday 5 April when Cyclone Seroja swept across Alor Island, one of the worst affected islands. At the time of writing, twelve people from this village are still missing and five bodies have been recovered. This story is taken from website of PCI's partner church – the Evangelical Christian Church of Timor.



The disaster here has been heart-breaking. We are all still in deep trauma, but the people here have not lost their faith and hope.

On Thursday 1 April, the rain started falling. The peak of the heavy rain accompanied by strong winds occurred late on Sunday evening through to the early hours of Easter Monday morning.

On Saturday night at 11.30pm, amid the wind and the heavy rain I ventured out to assess the situation and at the same time to waken people up in order to tell them to take shelter on higher ground. Water levels were rising and there were some signs of the slopes becoming unstable. My house was located only about 10 metres from the river, which had now become a torrent and was beginning to overflow. I proceeded to the bridge which connected two neighbourhoods across the river. There were four adults who were waiting to cross, but the flood waters had already reached the level of the road. Quickly, I asked them to get to somewhere safe.

At 2 o'clock on Sunday morning, a terrible roaring sound was suddenly heard. We ran to the bridge to confirm what was happening. There was no other village we could run to, because our village of Pido is surrounded by steep mountains. The people live in houses under the slopes in an area shaped like a basin or cauldron, with the river running through the middle.

At 4.12am the bridge was swept away in the flood water. People gathered nearby to witness with their eyes the head of great landslide of mud, rocks, and trees approaching, felling everything in its path including their own houses.

5.30am, I ran to the house of my congregational treasurer, Mama Yunita Lande. Her house was right on a slope that was about to give way as the flood water rose and was already entering her house. I tried to help them move as many of their belongings as we could and after that we ran to a safer place. No more than 10 minutes later Mama Yunita's house was swept away by the flood and mudslide. Praise the Lord all five of her family were saved. We watched these tragic events unfolding before us, tears streaming from eyes.

Not only Mama Yunita's house, but eight other houses along the river were completely swept away.

Because that Sunday morning was Easter Sunday, members of the congregation who had already lost their possessions and homes asked me to lead a simple service in the church building that was only some metres away from where the landslide had happened.

At 9:00am we began our Easter service, a congregation of 14 people, including two children. I opened our worship with the words of Psalm 23. We cried as we heard the words. When we got to the prayers of intercession we prayed the Lord's Prayer together. Then I led a reflection from John 20: 14-16, entitled, 'Turn to the Living One'.

After the service, we visited four shelters located in different places. We prayed with Mama Yunita who was heartbroken. With tears in our eyes we embraced her one by one.

Suddenly we heard a roaring noise again, like an earthquake. The whole hillside began to collapse at the other side of the river only about 15- 20 metres away from where we were. We were all shaking. I invited everyone to gather around a cross positioned outside the village office and we prayed there asking for God's help.

Later that afternoon we heard that 17 people from the neighbourhood across the river were unaccounted for. On Monday morning we again worshipped together in the church with 10 people in attendance. On Wednesday I invited some people to come with me and search for those who were missing. The congregation forbade me from doing so because of the continuing danger of landslips but I was determined that we had to search. Praise God we found Mama Nila Letde Maure (48 years old) who was found buried in mud about 10 km from the disaster site. Four other bodies were recovered in Taramana about 25 km from the disaster location. There remained 12 people that are yet to be found. One of them is the daughter of Mama Nila, who worked as a school teacher in Pido Christian Elementary School.

We were so thankful when on 5 April, two soldiers came to our village to help us with the evacuation. On 7 April a medical team arrived and were able to attend to those with injuries.

On 8 April people from GMIT's Tribuana Charity, the Welfare Department, and others arrived. They came with trail bikes, as access for four-wheeled vehicles is not yet possible.

We thank the Lord and all those from across religious and tribal differences, development agencies and all those who are remembering us in prayer at this time wherever they are.

May the Lord be with us all.

Rev Niko Selan

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