

**Image 6. Mass grave at Guegajah, Aceh Besar, Indonesia February 23<sup>rd</sup> 2005**



*Photograph: Oliver Morgan*

Outside the main urban centres, bodies tended to be buried in smaller mass graves containing 100-200 bodies, in 'family graves' with other family members or sometimes individually. Most of the mass graves were located on an ad hoc basis soon after the tsunami. In some places this created problems where graves were

located within previously existing villages; returning survivors wanted to move the graves and rebuild their houses. It is not clear what official permissions were needed for this and no agency or organisation was willing to coordinate or lead on these activities. There were also been reports of graves being too shallow. For example, we saw one mass grave that was very shallow and an animal had dug up the head of one the victims

Burial of the dead was still an ongoing issue for many rural communities at the time of this research. Many NGOs anticipated that they would not only have to support communities to bury the victims, but that several graves would have to be moved as part of the reconstruction programme. There is currently no technical support for how to exhume the bodies, what equipment is needed and what the potential health risks were (see below).

#### **4.1.5 Health risks from dead bodies**

No public health problems associated with dead bodies were reported, despite the continued presence of hundreds of cadavers. Furthermore, there were no unusual reports of illness from those living near the mass grave sites.

Similarly, no infections associated with dead bodies were reported by the teams recovering, collecting and disposing of the cadavers, some of whom were handling the dead since the 26<sup>th</sup> December 2004. The most commonly reported problems were back pain due to lifting and minor injuries such as standing on nails. There was, however, a potential risk from tetanus. a large tetanus outbreak followed the tsunami, resulting in 20 deaths. Consequently, many of the volunteers working with body collection teams have received a tetanus booster. No cases of tetanus among body handlers or workers at mass grave sites were reported. However, the risk of tetanus and the need for vaccination should be

considered for first responders, rescue workers and rubble removal personnel, including body handlers and mass grave workers.

#### **4.1.6 Legal issues**

There is no formal system of death registration in Aceh. Information about births and deaths are normally recorded by the village or community leader. However, many of these records as well as those held by the government have been destroyed. Therefore there is some confusion about issues such as land rights and access to property or assets owned by the deceased. However, because the emergency phase was only just coming to an end, many of these issues had not been addressed. It is not clear how such disputes will be resolved.