

Vt. companies aid victims of tsunami

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By *Bruce Edwards Herald Staff*

Two Vermont companies with business ties to tsunami-ravaged Indonesia are aiding in the massive humanitarian relief effort.

Green Mountain Coffee Roasters in Waterbury and ForesTrade in Brattleboro are raising money and lending their support to help victims in Sumatra, an area that took the brunt of last week's earthquake and resulting tsunami.

Both Green Mountain Coffee Roasters and ForesTrade buy coffee from the Gayo Organic Coffee Farmers Association — a cooperative of 24 communities in the Takengon Highlands in Sumatra.

GMCR spokesman Rick Peyser said Tuesday that while communities that make up the cooperative were at a high enough elevation to avoid the tsunami, the earthquake that precipitated the tidal wave resulted in extensive property damage to homes, mosques and coffee processing facilities in the co-op communities in Aceh province.

But far more devastating, Peyser said, was that a number of children were attending secondary school in the coastal area that was hit by the tsunami.

"Children from these communities have traditionally gone to Banda Aceh," he said. "As of yesterday (Monday) there were 13 of these children missing and presumed dead in Banda Aceh."

Peyser said the company is using its established employee charitable-giving program to aid in the relief efforts. That program matches employee donations to charitable causes, up to \$500 per employee. In addition, Peyser said company founder and CEO Robert Stiller will match all employee contributions to the relief effort as well.

He said the company's 600 employees are being encouraged to make their donations through the coffeekids.org Web site. Coffee Kids is a group dedicated to improving the lives of children and families in coffee communities around the world.

Peyser said the nonprofit group will wire donations directly to the co-op so the "funds can be put to use on the ground immediately."

Another nonprofit group, Café Femenino Foundation, is also serving as a channel for donations.

ForesTrade, which supplies 15 percent of the Fair Trade coffee sold in the United States and is the world's largest supplier of organic tropical spices, employs 75 year-round workers in Sumatra and another 200 to 300 seasonal workers.

To be certified as Fair Trade, coffee importers must meet tough international standards and pay a minimum price per pound, providing much needed credit to farmers.



ForesTrade co-founder Thomas Fricke (back row, center) poses with ForesTrade staff and members of the Gayo Organic Coffee Farmers Association at the co-op's headquarters in Pondok Baru, Sumatra, in 2003.

Photo: Photo courtesy Melanee Meegan

ForesTrade co-founder and CEO Thomas Fricke will leave Sunday on a 10-day trip to Sumatra to assess the damage to the Gayo Organic Coffee Farmers Association (PPKGO) and its members.

"Our company is mobilizing our customers, our investors, our networks to channel funds to the area," said Fricke, who estimates that his company has raised \$50,000 so far toward the relief effort. "We also have our own staff on the ground who are providing immediate support and coordination to the organizations on the ground."

When Fricke arrives in Sumatra, his plans not only include helping the homeless with food and shelter, but also long-term reconstruction plans.

With the huge reservoir of support and compassion from the world community, he said his goal is to channel resources where needed and in particular towards the coffee producing communities.

"It's really critical that we get our customers mobilized and make sure the harvest is going to proceed," said Fricke, whose company buys 1,800 tons of organic and Fair Trade coffee from Sumatra each year.

Even before last week's disaster, Fricke said Sumatran coffee was already experiencing a "supply and pricing crisis."

Forgotten for the moment in the disaster and the subsequent relief effort is the ongoing civil war between the government and rebel forces fighting for the independence of Aceh province, Fricke said. The war, he said, has taken its toll, resulting in thousands of civilian deaths.

GMCR's ties to the Gayo Organic Coffee Farmers Association date to the 1990s, when the company donated \$15,000 in seed money to help the small cooperative obtain organic certification. The co-op has since grown from 100 farmers in two communities to 1,900 farmers in 24 communities.

Peyser said the company bought its first batch of coffee from the co-op in 1997. Today, GMCR buys 337,500 pounds of Organic Sumatra Reserve coffee a year through ForesTrade.

In 2000, he said, the coffee was certified a Fair Trade coffee, resulting in higher prices for its members.

But Peyser said the ties between the co-op and the company have evolved into more than a business relationship.

"Over time we funded the building of a community center, where the co-op has its offices and members of the co-op have visited us here in Waterbury," he said. "So we have a strong commercial relationship but that relationship, I think, has gone beyond commerce. There's a real people-to-people relationship that's become important to us, to our employees."

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Peyser said it was significant that the predominately Muslim co-op expressed their condolences and sympathy at the loss of life.

And despite the civil war that has raged in Aceh province, he noted that the co-op community "is an oasis of peace in the midst of an area experiencing tremendous civil unrest."

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