

THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

SUMATRA POSTCARD

OUR MAN IN MEDAN

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Issue of 2005-03-07

Posted 2005-02-28

Jalan Wali Kota is a fashionable street in what had been until the past couple of months a rather unfashionable city: Medan, Indonesia. It may be the biggest city on Sumatra and home to two and a half million people, but, aside from the Palace of the Sultan of Deli and a first-rate orangutan preserve three hours away, Medan has never been much of a draw, and the American diplomatic office on Jalan Wali Kota has been the quintessence of a sleepy outpost. Until, that is, the biggest natural disaster in living memory struck Sumatra's western coast and Medan became the headquarters of the international relief effort. Suddenly, Paul Berg, the rather startled American representative, finds himself one of the world's premier go-to guys.

Berg had a visitor to dinner the other night in the Dutch Colonial house that is all that remains of the once grand American Consulate here. He is fifty-one and quite literally red, white, and blue: ruddy skin, bright-white hair and mustache, blue eyes. He emerged in a Hawaiian-print shirt, and with a heavy silver chain around his neck, and apologized for the meanness of the surroundings. "The United States had a consulate here from independence, in 1949, until the nineteen-nineties, when suddenly it had to open embassies all over the former Soviet Union," he said. "The consulate was closed, and all the beautiful buildings were sold off except this one, the consul-general's house, which was kept as a warehouse to store all the furniture in. Then somebody realized that there are forty-five million people in Sumatra, that three U.S. oil companies operate here, that there's the conflict in Aceh—that there ought to be a consulate here." He sat at one end of a long table as Tony Bennett began singing from the stereo and a lithe young man served a rich broth seasoned with scallions and Parmesan cheese. "This is officially the Medan office of the U.S. Embassy, Jakarta, and I am, officially, here two weeks each month and two weeks in Jakarta." He paused, tasted his soup, and breezed through stories of what sounded like a fun career: Bombay, Brussels, Washington, Rome, Mexico City, Hanoi, Bogotá, and now Medan. He'd earned an entire career's pay in the past few weeks, coordinating aid, greeting visiting congressmen, and being the face of the United States in Sumatra.

On December 26th, the only clues Berg had that an earthquake had occurred were the key clattering in the lock to his bedroom door and what he described as "a mini-tsunami" in the murky, disused swimming pool out back. Later that morning, a call came from the embassy in Jakarta that "something had happened" on the coast. Berg flew to Banda Aceh, where he has many friends. "My wife is dead," they'd say, or, "I lost my two children." It's the first thing people say. It's what social relations are in Banda Aceh. Everybody has lost someone."

The young man, whose name was Hoa, replaced the soup bowls with a salad of seasoned cabbage. Berg spoke to him in Vietnamese. "Hoa joined me in Hanoi and was a fabulous cook," Berg said. "There was a Brooklyn Club there, of people from Brooklyn, and I had them all over for a Brooklyn-food night. Hoa made bagels, pierogi, sausage-and-peppers, and Junior's cheesecake. They loved it. I took him with me to Bogotá, but first I brought him to New York, because I wanted him to go to really good restaurants. We went to one outstanding restaurant after another, and of course we'd drink wine with

every course, and I'd just get sleepy, but he, being younger, would get sharper and more critical. I'm sure people wondered who that sleepy old man and that talkative young man were." A visa for Hoa was never a problem, Berg said. "Traditionally, diplomatic courtesy allows you to bring one servant with you."

Hoa next set down a plate of roast duck in a rich, anise-scented sauce. "I love being a diplomat, but I particularly love being an American diplomat," Berg said. "Americans invented the diplomacy of mutual interests. Classical European diplomacy is based on the zero-sum game: for me to gain something, you have to lose. But the knack for mutual interest springs naturally from the American temperament, I think. This goes all the way back to Benjamin Franklin." Berg has never minded having to defend policies with which he personally disagrees. "That is the profession," he said.

Gone was the duck, and in came chicken braised in caramelized onion and garlic, on a bed of crunchy French-cut green beans. "Yes," Berg said, "I do eat like this every day." He said that the United States relief effort has been a huge diplomatic success. Hoa cleared the chicken and served sections of grapefruit, to be dipped in a mixture of salt and powdered chili. "The size and energy of the American response to the tsunami really resonated with the Indonesians," Berg said. "They're emotional and subjective, like us."

Walking out toward the gate after dinner, he said that the State Department has been considering elevating the Medan office to a full consulate, and that the other day both Houses of Congress passed a resolution asking it to do so. "Soon, this will be the American Consulate in Medan, and I, for the first time in my career, will be consul-general."