

At Simpang Lima

Simpang Lima is the largest traffic intersection in Aceh. It is a flattened dome of grass and flowers, at its centre a tall white monument dedicated to a bank. Five streets stretch outward, grey ribbons between towering bill-boards. Spindly trees droop in the dusty air. *Labi-labis*, large black ovens on wheels, sit in crooked rows along the edges of the streets, waiting for passengers to climb onto their narrow benches and make the driver's return trip worthwhile. Cars and motorbikes stop and start in five directions.

This afternoon at *Simpang Lima*, there are people arriving by foot, dressed up as trees or waving cardboard chainsaws. On a narrow grassy island which splits one of the rivers of traffic, I am standing with a dozen others. Each of us clutches a few tiny nursery trees wrapped in black plastic. We wear hand-painted signs which say 'Earth Day', and '*Hentikan Pemanasan Global*' – stop global warming.

A young man, my companion for the afternoon, comes up to me and wordlessly takes one of my trees. He steps down onto the street to knock on the window of a car stopped at the traffic lights. The driver stares, then winds down the window. He makes a brief comment and takes the tree. The young man returns to me, with a double thumbs-up and a brilliant smile. I hand him the next tree, and watch him step among the stationary cars to face a couple on a motorbike. He holds out the tree, and the woman on the back smiles and grabs it before the lights change and the bike roars off.

Beside me, there are a dozen other pairs, teenager and adult, the older one holding the trees while the younger darts into the traffic. My young companion was hesitant at first, but now I stand back and watch his interactions with the drivers, his pleased smile when he returns empty-handed. He doesn't laugh, because he can neither speak nor hear. Like the other teenagers excited and running about with trees in their hands, he spends his days in one of Aceh's 'special' schools for kids with disabilities. For all of them, today is a rare excursion into the outside world.

The traffic island has become a party, school kids, university students, visitors like me, grinning and high-fiving. Amongst the spindly trees and glaring billboards, above the roaring traffic, we are high and light as air.