

VISIT TO CIPANAS ORPHANAGE, DESA ANAK-ANAK, March 13, 2008

by Simone Paige, MSF Trustee

...On the way down (ed: from Suka Mulia) we will visit the orphanage in Cipanas, called Desa Anak-Anak. It is a project of YUM, Yayasan Usaha Mulia (Foundation of Noble Efforts), a member of Susila Dharma, Indonesia. When we turn into the road where we see a village of small, sun-filled buildings, I realize that I had been expecting a dismal Charles Dickens 19th century orphanage.

At the main building, we meet the staff, decorously lined up to greet us, Indonesian style. They are so happy that we have come; we shake hands with the teachers and two administrators. There are 8 full time staff and 5 are Subud members. The buildings are adjacent to a small village and surrounded by green fields of farms growing grains. The building we are about to enter is a long, low building made of wood and woven straw. The ceiling shows the pattern of the straw bound by long cords and braced by wood. The children sit quietly attentive in their chairs; a few daring to wiggle in their seats and wave at the foreigners visiting. My first impression is that this can hardly be an orphanage. The children look so happy and well groomed, and their faces shine with an inner light. They have that well-cared for look of children who might as easily be in a middle class home anywhere in the world. I am not surprised that YUM won an award in 2006 for the best orphanage in East Java, and has been nominated for another award.

The children are irresistible; I leave my place among the “honored guests” in order to say hello. As I extend my hand, several youngsters begin to wave with irrepressible enthusiasm that erupts after sitting still too long. Moving from child to child, I am learning a new ritual as each one takes my fingers lightly and brushes my hand across their cheek, sometimes holding or kissing my fingers. It is a warm and tender form of greeting, a grace of the Indonesian culture that I cannot help but envy against the busy pace of American greeting. They giggle like school children, but they are at ease with strangers while they gently laugh with their friends nearby. After our greetings, we listen to short speeches of gratitude for our visit and then the children perform songs. Two girls of about seven years of age dressed in elegant pink and green dresses sing and dance for the audience.

After the ceremony and some refreshment we are free to walk about the orphanage grounds. Just behind the main building is a large organic garden where vegetables are flourishing in neat rows. Above the garden is a fish pond which also serves to provide food for the children. Across the parking lot is a dorm where brightly colored stuffed animals lean against the window. The orphanage is home to 55 children and sponsors another 43 from the nearby impoverished villages to continue their schooling. Some of the children have lost one parent; if they are from a large family the other parent may not be able to care for them. They attend the local schools but at the orphanage they receive proper nutrition, tutoring, computer skills, and emotional support. The primary aim is to train the children for local schools where they will have a good vocational training. In the orphanage they participate in work that will give them practice in skills that may

evolve into a full time job: cooking meals, growing vegetables, recycling, shop keeping, sewing, computer work.

But this is not always the case. More gifted students are eligible for university scholarships. The Muhammad Subuh Foundation has supported one student, Adi Firdaus, who has an offer from one university but would like to study at a more select university. His sister, Nurfadilah Ros Padanwangi, who also lived at the orphanage, earned a scholarship for a university degree in agriculture and now works full time at Cipanas. If Adi Firdaus were to find an outside scholarship to cover his tuition and board (costing \$9,000 for three years), he could pursue his dream.

The orphanage plans to expand its services as soon as it is able to raise more support for its full time residents who cost \$600 per year to board. The 43 children who are sponsored by the orphanage attend the school-support sessions and use the library regularly. I know the orphanage would benefit from our interest, love and prayers. Perhaps a Subud group might find an attractive Susila Dharma project in supporting one of the village children who have lost a parent or both parents.