



Hope for Peace in Aceh? by Tamara Renee Shie

In the immediate aftermath of the Dec. 26 Indian Ocean earthquake, politicians and commentators expressed hope that the disaster could bring nearly 30 years of fighting in Aceh to an end. The devastation and need for reconstruction provided a new opportunity for reconciliation between the Indonesian government and separatists. Building on a temporary ceasefire, Jakarta has announced renewed peace talks with the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) leadership-in-exile for later this month. An opportunity for peace exists, but it is fraught with challenges.

Since 1976, GAM has fought government forces to establish an independent state. The strength of the separatist movement underscores years of broken promises of autonomy and a central government unapologetic for exploitation of Aceh's natural resources and human rights abuses at the hands of the military. More than 12,000 have died in the conflict, mostly civilians, with casualties increasing steadily since 1999.

In Dec. 2002, the two sides signed a peace accord. That agreement disintegrated in May 2003 when the government declared martial law and launched a major offensive to eradicate GAM.

In the months prior to the earthquake, the government expressed interest in pursuing a new policy toward Aceh. But Indonesia's new president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, extended the state of civil emergency for six months in November and suggested that continued military operations were necessary for security. The Indonesian military (TNI) announced it had killed another 18 members of GAM just one day before the earthquake hit.

Both the government and GAM announced temporary ceasefires three days after the earthquake. Yudhoyono opened Aceh to foreign military, aid workers, and media. More than 60 humanitarian groups from around the world and a contingent of U.S. troops have joined in relief operations.

Consequences of conflict

The disaster has given the Indonesian government a chance to build goodwill in Aceh, but Jakarta has been criticized for its slow response. Three days passed before international aid workers and journalists were allowed into the province, losing crucial time in search and rescue operations.

Protracted conflict in Aceh has undermined relief efforts. Restrictions on foreign organizations since May 2003 slowed initial responses and hindered efforts to conduct damage assessments and communicate with the outside world. Chronic underdevelopment due to a combination of insecurity and corruption compromised the transportation infrastructure, hampering recovery and rescue efforts.

Even the grim task of tallying the dead was complicated by years of violence that compromised baseline population data. Conducted in the midst of conflict, the 2000 census collected data in only three of Aceh's 13 residencies; the 1990 census occurred during a particularly intense period of fighting. As a result, the death toll can never be fully known.

Renewed tensions

The uneasy truce began to crumble within a week. Reports surfaced charging TNI with exploiting the situation to eliminate suspected GAM guerillas. Pro-Jakarta Islamic militant groups – some with links to terrorism and atrocities committed in East Timor – have entered Aceh with the blessing of the military, ostensibly to assist with relief efforts.

Gunfire was heard near the UN relief compound in Banda Aceh on Jan. 9. Two days later, another incident was reported 10 miles west of the capital. The government was quick to blame the rebels; GAM spokesmen denied involvement.

Jakarta then announced restrictions on the movement of foreign workers outside of Banda Aceh and Meulaboh, citing its inability to guarantee their safety. The government also set a March 26 deadline for all foreign military personnel to withdraw from Aceh, although this was later rescinded. Two additional battalions of Indonesian troops have been dispatched to Aceh.

Peace or No?

The announcement of renewed peace negotiations is welcome, but reconstruction is likely to be caught up in a struggle for legitimacy between GAM and the central government. GAM will look to increase international awareness of its cause, while Jakarta seeks to use international aid to strengthen its political position in Aceh and to improve foreign relations, especially with the U.S. Jakarta would like to resume full military ties, which Washington severed in 1999 due to human rights violations in East Timor.

Lasting peace in Aceh faces many obstacles. A peace settlement must be coupled with proposals to address the root causes of the conflict. How far Jakarta and GAM are willing to compromise is questionable. Government reconstruction efforts are crucial, yet their implementation and the role of TNI will be under intense scrutiny. A bungled response or excessive corruption could increase public support for GAM.

President Yudhoyono will have difficulty juggling competing demands of government and military hardliners as well as GAM leadership and ordinary Acehnese. Without strong leadership, the opportunity to use relief and recovery operations to promote reconciliation will be lost.

Tamara Renee Shie is a Research Assistant on East Asian security issues at the Institute for National Strategic Studies of

the National Defense University. Her article “Disarming for Peace and Development in Aceh” is forthcoming in the journal Peace, Conflict, and Development. Her comments represent her views and do not reflect official policy or position of the National Defense University or the U.S. government. She can be reached at ShieT@ndu.edu.