



Aceh: third time's a charm? by Hyun Jung Jo Choi

The fifth round of talks between the Indonesian government and Acehese rebel group GAM (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka or Free Aceh Movement) begins July 12 in Helsinki, Finland. This round is expected to produce a memorandum of understanding (MoU) that will pave the way for a final peace agreement. Hope has replaced decades of cynicism as the Indonesian government expects to conclude a peace agreement before Aug. 17, Indonesia's independence day. A peace agreement will hopefully bring an end to a conflict that has raged for almost 30 years, claimed more than 12,000 lives, and left Aceh one of the most impoverished provinces in Indonesia.

Reasons for previous failed agreements

Previous negotiations left a trail of failed agreements – the “Joint Understanding on Humanitarian Pause for Aceh” reached May 12, 2000 and the “Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA)” signed Dec. 9, 2002. Irreconcilable differences between the government and GAM over the status of the province played a major role in the breakdown.

Other factors contributed to the collapse of the agreements, however. The military was never in favor of peace negotiations. Indonesia has a history of crushing rebellions with force. Negotiating with rebels was seen as intolerable weakness and could be viewed as encouraging secession attempts by other independence movements. Furthermore, the financial benefits the military enjoyed (from providing security to multinational corporations in the conflict-ridden province) gave the military a powerful incentive to favor conflict over peace. The Indonesian people, with memories of the secession of East Timor still fresh in their minds, also opposed negotiating with the rebels.

Suspicious were compounded by the military's belief that GAM was using ceasefire periods to consolidate its forces for further fighting. There were questions of whether exiled GAM leaders in Sweden had control over commanders as some GAM commanders on the ground continued their offensive despite the ceasefire. It was not clear if either GAM or the Indonesian government was committed to peace in Aceh.

In addition, negotiators frequently underestimated the difficulties on the ground and were overly optimistic about goals and timetables. There were flaws in previous agreements that allowed both sides to shift blame and use the other as an excuse to renege on deals. There was a lack of understanding over terms and no forum to discuss the misunderstandings that resulted. In the absence of an effective enforcement mechanism, both sides were able to breach the agreement with impunity. All of these factors ensured the peace agreements would not survive long.

New elements?

Is the situation different today? Jakarta, GAM, and the international community have expressed optimism that a peace agreement will soon be reached. Jusuf Kalla, vice president of Indonesia, has said that both sides have agreed to almost 90 percent of a comprehensive settlement. This expectation of peace is bolstered by some new factors.

One element that differentiates these talks from previous failed negotiations is the Dec. 26, 2004 tsunami that destroyed nearly one-third of the province and killed approximately 130,000 people. The devastation led to international awareness and sympathy and aroused goodwill. Indonesians, usually resistant to any negotiations with GAM, began to view peace as a prerequisite to rebuilding the province. The international community also encouraged a peace agreement to pave way for international humanitarian aid, reconstruction, and development operations.

Another element that may rejuvenate the peace process is the newly elected and popular president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY). SBY, who has experience with previous peace negotiations in Aceh, Ambon, and Poso, can utilize his popularity and broad-based support to push the peace process forward. He has already made his mark by giving a civilian, the vice president, a presidential mandate to direct the process, instead of having the security apparatus closely involved as in previous negotiations. Kalla's role is another boost to the process as he has experience handling local conflicts (Ambon and Poso) and he is general chairman of the Golkar Party, a position that may bring powerful constituencies to support the process.

It appears that the rebels may also be prompted by new opportunities created by the tsunami and are ready to compromise and commit to a peace deal. GAM has allegedly dropped its demand for independence from the negotiations agenda, a significant change from previous negotiations where independence was the sticking point between the two sides.

Finally, the use of an experienced mediator like former Finnish President Maarti Ahtisaari may also help both sides arrive at creative and lasting solutions. The previous mediator, the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, appeared too inexperienced for such complex negotiations.

However, given the long history of hostilities between the government and GAM, these new elements alone cannot bring peace to Aceh. The success of a peace agreement will also depend on leadership, political will, and sustained international support.

Conclusions and recommendations

Even if a peace agreement is reached, success will depend on several factors. First, both the government and GAM have

to be committed to a peaceful settlement. The logic is plain. Thirty years of fighting have not resolved the problem and is unlikely to in the future. Continued conflict will delay reconstruction and cause missed opportunities for both sides. With nearly 90 percent of the draft agreement settled, peace is within reach.

Yudhoyono must demonstrate strong political leadership and a commitment to bringing peace to Aceh. He has to send strong messages to the Parliament, military, and population. The president should draw attention to the need for peace in the province, without which reconstruction cannot begin. In particular, he must send a clear message that he will not tolerate acts of sabotage by the military. Also, if the government and GAM agree to the presence of foreign observers to monitor the peace agreement, Yudhoyono should stress that this does not constitute foreign intervention.

There needs to be clarity on GAM's new demands for "self-government." The government can offer GAM some form of participation in the political system – such as allowing GAM to participate in regional elections, an offer put forth by the president and 10 political parties – in exchange for a guarantee that GAM will not re-interpret "self-government" to mean independence for Aceh.

The role of the mediator should not end with the settlement of an agreement. Maarti Ahtisaari's Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) should set up a mechanism to mediate disagreements or misunderstandings that arise during implementation of the peace agreement. In addition, there need to be sanctions for those who violate the agreement and disincentives to prevent spoilers from damaging the agreement.

Lastly, the international community needs to provide sustained attention and support to encourage the resolution of the conflict in Aceh. It should apply pressure to both sides to agree to a deal and stick to its terms. It can use tsunami aid as an incentive. It should be prepared to speak out loudly against those who violate the agreement.

History suggests the odds against success are high. However, Jakarta and GAM face a novel set of circumstances that they can use to their advantage. At the same time, it is important to be pragmatic – it is going to be a long and hard process; but a peace agreement will be a significant step toward peace in Aceh.

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