

Indonesia Briefing

Banda Aceh/Jakarta/Brussels, 7 December 2000



ACEH: ESCALATING TENSION

I. INTRODUCTION

Tensions in Aceh have escalated sharply in recent weeks, prompting the government in Jakarta to promise to accelerate the implementation of autonomy plans and announce a small humanitarian aid package.¹ President Abdurrahman Wahid has also announced a plan to visit Aceh on 15 December where he will witness the formal introduction of syariah² law in the province.³ At the same time, Indonesian leaders reiterated their unambiguous view that the province would never be independent.

In spite of the 'humanitarian pause', an agreement signed in May between armed separatists and the government, there has been sustained low level violence in Aceh for months. While there was less conflict than feared on 4 December, the 24th anniversary of the founding of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM),⁴ two isolated clashes led to loss of life.⁵ International NGOs have reacted sharply to the increased use of violence by Indonesian police and military personnel in Aceh. Foreign governments have been less responsive, and remain hopeful that the sympathetic approach of President Abdurrahman and the pause agreement may yet see a peaceful settlement of the dispute that leaves Aceh part of Indonesia. But the stakes are rapidly becoming higher, and the Indonesian government will have to do much more in response to Aceh grievances if that is to happen.

II. BACKGROUND⁶

The Indonesian province of Aceh is situated at the northern tip of Sumatra across the Strait of Malacca from the Malay peninsula. The capital of the province, Banda Aceh (formerly Kutaradja), has a population of 250,000 and is 1,700 km northwest of Jakarta. The industrial centre and the most populated area is

¹ The package, worth \$10.47 million USD, is to be disbursed from December to February. Coordinating Minister for the Economy, Rizal Ramli, said that President Abdurrahman had instructed his economic team 'to buy the hearts of Acehnese people' and that the fund would be used both to help finance rehabilitation programs following the massive floods in the end of November, and also to 'accelerate the implementation process of special autonomy for Aceh'. AFP, 2 December 2000.

² More commonly rendered in English language sources as *Sharia*

³ *Kompas*, 5 December 2000.

⁴ *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*.

⁵ Among those killed were a marine NCO and five or six GAM members. See slightly different reports in *Kompas* and *Republika*, 5 December 2000.

⁶ ICG is planning to publish further reports and briefings on Aceh in coming months, in which a more comprehensive account will be provided.

around the town of Lhokseumawe. The province's population is roughly 4.1 million people, mostly Muslim. The language is of Malay origin and the province's common language is Bahasa Indonesia. Aceh is rich in oil and natural gas, accounting for 13 per cent of Indonesia's oil production.⁷ The P.T. Arun oil fields generate \$4 million USD a day, nearly all of which goes to Jakarta.⁸ Its liquefied natural gas is partly owned by Mobil Oil Corporation (35 per cent), and partly by the Indonesian state company Pertamina (55 per cent).⁹ Aceh is said to be the second biggest producer of marijuana in South East Asia, almost entirely for export, and all sides of the armed conflict are said to be involved in this trade.¹⁰

Aceh was never occupied by the Japanese during the Second World War and remained outside the control of the returning Dutch colonial government during the Indonesian revolution until the end of 1949. During the 1950s the newly independent Indonesian government was confronted by an Islamic rebellion which only ended after a peace agreement in the early 1960s.

In 1976, a small band of Acehnese separatists under the banner of the Aceh Sumatra National Liberation Front (ASNLF) and led by Hasan di Tiro declared Aceh an independent state but their resistance was crushed by 1977. The separatist movement revived again in 1989 and, in response, the armed forces imposed a new operational regime known as DOM (*Daerah Operasi Militer* or Military Operations Area) over the province. During this period, a heavy-handed approach by Jakarta increased sympathy in Aceh for the separatists and hostility towards the Indonesian security forces. DOM was finally lifted in August 1998, following the fall of President Soeharto in May of that year.

All Acehnese media use the Indonesian language. The state television channel (Television of the Republic of Indonesia-TVRI) carries each evening a two-hour program prepared in and for Aceh. The province has some fifteen radio stations, of which one is the Aceh station of the state RRI (Radio of the Republic of Indonesia). Print media consist of only one daily (*Serambi*) but there are many weeklies, mostly of pro-separatist tendency, such as *Kontras*, *Aceh Kronika* or *Suwa*. *Aceh Expres* is a weekly advocating autonomy. There seems to be no censorship and little self-censorship but journalists have often been targets of repression and police brutality while exercising their profession.¹¹

A. GERAKAN ACEH MERDEKA (GAM)

The ASNLF established in 1976 took a new name, the Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*-GAM). It is directed by the original founder of the ASNLF, Hasan di Tiro, now 77 years old, who has not been in the country (at least not openly) since 1979. He lives in Stockholm and is apparently in daily

⁷ *New York Times*, 21 May 2000.

⁸ *Newsweek*, 29 February 2000.

⁹ *Business Week*, 28 December 1998, an investigative article 'Indonesia: What Did Mobil Know?' about a mass grave discovered not far from the plant.

¹⁰ The availability of an illicit trade in raw materials of some sort (diamonds, drugs) is an important predictor of the intractability of civil conflict - since the parties have a cause for which to fight that is quite separate from the political sources of the conflict. The availability of revenue from an illicit trade increases the availability of guns, and the fact that the trade is illicit increase the need for guns for protection.

¹¹ Amnesty International document ASA 21/006/2000 of 23 February 2000, 'Indonesia: Acehnese Human Rights Defenders under Attack'.

contact with GAM members. GAM's aim is the complete independence of Aceh. It is difficult to evaluate the number of combatants fighting for GAM. The International Institute of Strategic Studies holds its armed combatant strength at an unbelievably low 50.¹² It is clear, however, from the televised ceremony celebrating GAM's 24th anniversary on 4 December that its strength in just one district was closer to 500-1000.¹³ Other estimates place its strength at a few thousand. At the other extreme, GAM commanders boast an incredible 300,000, which would make it larger than the entire Indonesian army. According to some sources, a few hundred GAM combatants were trained in Libya in the 1980s. The weaponry shown to outsiders includes assault rifles or light machine guns (AK-47 and M-16) and some rocket-propelled grenades.

There has also been some controversy about the existence of factions in GAM or breakaway groups, especially in connection with the so-called Free Aceh Movement Government Council (MP-GAM),¹⁴ which has its headquarters in Europe and had a representative in Malaysia. A respected Western analyst wrote in *Inside Indonesia* in 1999 that MP-GAM was a breakaway group involved in a power struggle with the GAM leadership around Hasan di Tiro.¹⁵ This claim was repudiated by Yusuf Daud, the Secretary General of GAM, in a letter of 28 November 1999.¹⁶ However, the rival Secretary General of GAM, Teuku Don Zulfahri, was assassinated in Kuala Lumpur on 1 June 2000.

According to information obtained by ICG in the field, GAM has divided Aceh into seventeen regencies each run by a commandant. Another report claims that there are 30 districts.¹⁷ It is said that each has a rather impressive parallel system for protection of citizens and tax collection, and has even been issuing birth and marriage certificates. Partisans point to this as civilian administration tasks not unlike that in a real state, while critics consider it racketeering and robbery. One Indonesia specialist says that most of the thousands of Aceh villages pay GAM 20 per cent of the development funds they receive from the central government.¹⁸

Some observers, however, believe that not all the conflict in Aceh originates from the struggle between GAM and the Indonesian military, arguing that a 'third force' or 'forces' have vested interests in exacerbating the conflict and the disorder. For example, it is possible that dissident groups in GAM have launched attacks in order to sabotage the 'humanitarian pause'. It is claimed by some that the military runs its own 'third force' in order to discredit GAM and justify the eventual imposition of martial law. And it has also been rumoured that military deserters engaged in the marijuana trade or simple banditry have an interest in continued upheaval.

¹² IISS, *The Military Balance*, 1999-2000.

¹³ Metro evening news, 4 December 2000. The *Jakarta Post* estimated about 500 while *Kompas* estimated 1000. *Jakarta Post*, *Kompas*, 5 December 2000.

¹⁴ *Majelis Pemerintahan - Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*.

¹⁵ Gerry van Klinken, 'What is the Free Aceh Movement?', *Digest* 89, 25 November 1999.

¹⁶ See the GAM website, www.acehnet.tripod.com/asnlf.htm.

¹⁷ *Jakarta Post*, 4 December 2000.

¹⁸ Anthony Reid, 'Which Way Aceh', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 16 March 2000.

B. Indonesian Military and Police Presence

Until April 1999 the police force formed part of the armed forces and was placed under the operational command of the Commander of the Armed Forces. After its separation from the military in that month, it took formal responsibility for internal security. However, in Aceh, the police force's paramilitary unit, the Mobile Brigade (Brimob), did not have the capacity to carry out effective counter-insurgency operations, so the regional police chief continued to rely on the support of military units.

It was widely suspected that operations continued to be conducted by army troops wearing police uniforms, and this suspicion was reinforced by a recent report that three Kostrad battalions sent to Aceh during the last few weeks have in fact worn police uniforms. A military source was reported as saying that 'the government's stance to use dialogue has presented us with serious problems and provides us with no legal basis to launch operations'.¹⁹ His point apparently was that the army no longer had formal authority to involve itself in internal security operations but the police did not have sufficient capacity to take over the army's previous role: therefore the army's role had to be disguised.

Estimates of the number of government troops operating in Aceh should therefore be treated with care. In 1999, police strength was estimated to be about 3,000. The armed forces number some 7-8,000 troops, including 1,000 marines.

The Indonesian Army also has important business interests in the province and some even suggest that they are involved in drugs and weapons trafficking, although this is difficult to prove.²⁰

III. 'HUMANITARIAN PAUSE'

In the middle of 1999, the Henry Dunant Centre (now the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue), a small, relatively new, private organisation based in Switzerland, entered the Acehnese scene as a mediator.²¹ It is testimony to the great skill of those involved that they managed to get the two sides of the armed conflict to sit together. As a result of the mediation, on 12 May 2000, representatives of the Indonesian Government (Ambassador Dr N. Hassan Wirajuda) and of the Free Aceh Movement (Dr Zaini Abdullah) signed a three-month cease-fire agreement designated a 'humanitarian pause'. The document, known as 'The Joint Understanding on Humanitarian Pause in Aceh' specifies both a humanitarian intent to reduce or stop the violence and a confidence building

¹⁹ *Jakarta Post*, 3 December 2000.

²⁰ According to Karim D. Crow, writing in the *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2000: 'The Army's business interests, from illegal logging and raking off a slice of the oil and gas profits, to alleged drug-running and even supplying GAM with weapons, are part of the reason the generals do not want to cooperate with demands for accountability or withdrawal. They risk condemnations over severe human rights abuses'.

²¹ The Henry Dunant talks are funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the UN Development Program (UNDP), among others.

intent, rather than an effort to resolve political differences.²² On 16 September 2000, the 'humanitarian pause' was extended until mid-January 2001. The pause did enable some changes in the confrontation, the most important being the creation of joint working groups on several issues.²³

But combat activities continued, both on the separatist side and on the government side. At least 221 people were killed between the time of the agreement in May and the beginning of November 2000.²⁴ One prominent victim was an Acehnese member of the national parliament. Another was Jafar Siddiq Hamazah, Chairman of the International Forum for Aceh (IFA), a human rights group based in New York, who was brutally murdered in August 2000 after he arrived in Banda Aceh on a visit.²⁵

IV. ESCALATING VIOLENCE AND POSSIBLE NEGOTIATIONS

Important targets of new official repression in early November were those intending to come to a rally planned for 9 November in the provincial capital of Banda Aceh to commemorate, and repeat, the rally held a year earlier that had called for a referendum on Aceh's status. The organising group, *Sentral Information Referendum Aceh*²⁶ (SIRA), is a local coalition which has advocated a referendum on independence. Police and army personnel tried to prevent people from outside Banda Aceh from attending the event. Methods included shooting out the tires of cars and trucks, and shooting in the air on checkpoints and into the sea in the direction of boats bringing prospective participants. At least 41 people were killed²⁷ during the two weeks preceding the rally.

The 'Acehnese Popular Assembly for Peace' finally began on 11 November, starting at the ground of the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque, before moving ten kilometres to the university campus in Darussalam. The demonstrators called for a referendum and for the end of 'neocolonialism', as Jakarta's rule is often described. It was conducted peacefully, but attacks by the security forces

²² In article 1 the text says: 'The Objectives of the Humanitarian Pause are: a. delivery of humanitarian assistance to the population of Aceh affected by the conflict situation; b. provision of security modalities with a view to supporting the delivery of humanitarian assistance and to reducing tension and violence which may cause further suffering; c. promotion of confidence-building measures towards a peaceful solution to the conflict situation in Aceh.'

²³ The agreement provides for two joint committees (with five members from each side) and two monitoring teams (two GAM, two government, one independent) one each for humanitarian activities and one for ensuring security for humanitarian activities. The sight of jeeps with the blue dove and the lettering *Jeda Kemanusiaan Untuk Aceh* of the mixed GAM/Government monitoring group set up by the 'humanitarian pause' agreement, is a new symbolic element holding out some hope of an end to the violence.

²⁴ AP, 12 November 2000. Another estimate of the number of people killed during the period since the 12 May agreement, compiled by the Care Human Rights Forum, reported an increase from 32 in July and 32 in August (first phase of the 'pause'), to 97 in September and 89 in October when the first extension of the 'pause' was in place. CARE (founded in July 1998, and no relation to the multinational humanitarian group of the same name) deals specifically with human rights, conducting investigations, publishing reports, training students and police officers and organising exhibitions. ICG interview with Mr Saifuddin Bantasyam, Executive Director of CARE Human Rights Forum, 12 November 2000, and with the organisation's director, Mr Ahmad Humam Hamid, 14 November 2000.

²⁵ Amnesty International Press release ASA 21/069/2000 of 22 November 2000.

²⁶ Information Centre for an Aceh Referendum.

²⁷ AP, 22 November 2000.

continued in the following days, and the death toll continued to mount. Rally organisers claim that the tactics of the security forces were responsible for this year's rally only having about half the turn-out of the previous year's.²⁸

On 12 November, the GAM representatives in the Henry Dunant-brokered talks, acting on instructions from GAM leader Hasan di Tiro in Sweden, pulled out of negotiations scheduled for a few days later in Geneva, arguing that they could not negotiate in Switzerland while the carnage in Aceh continued.²⁹ The Indonesian Foreign Ministry reacted to this move by saying that they felt the talks would go ahead and that since it was the purpose of the talks to end the violence, the talks were more important at a time of increased violence.³⁰

On 14 November, partly fuelled by the repression, a second rally took place, again starting out at the mosque then moving on to the ground of the campus.³¹ That day, leaders from across the province adopted a declaration of independence from Indonesia. The declaration demanded the return of Acehnese sovereignty to the people of Aceh and the withdrawal of Indonesian security forces. It also called on the government to recognise its responsibility for atrocities in Aceh and for intervention and mediation by the UN and foreign governments. This declaration was read to the rally and received with enthusiastic approval. The leaders called on the rally to observe a campaign of civil disobedience beginning 27 November and lasting until 3 December if the Indonesian government failed to act on the call for independence by 26 November.

On 20 November 2000, the leader of SIRA, Muhammad Nazar, a 28 year old graduate of the Islamic Institute, answered a police summons for 'public disturbance' on 17 August, the Indonesian national day, when he had distributed posters calling for independence.³² He was questioned by police for ten hours and then detained for twenty days. On 21 November, SIRA called off the threatened campaign of civil disobedience due to begin on 27 November.

On 4 December, GAM held its 24th anniversary celebrations with minimum interference from the security forces. Its main ceremony in Bireuen was attended by reporters from Jakarta, and interviews with GAM leaders were broadcast on national television. The rally was attended by 500-1000 uniformed GAM troops who listened to the reading of a message from the patriarch, Hasan di Tiro, and a speech by its military commander, Abdullah Syafi'i. It was after this rally, however, that six GAM members returning to their home district were killed in East Aceh in a clash which saw no military casualties. However, in another

²⁸ AFP, 11 November 2000.

²⁹ ICG interview with Mr Otto Syamsuddin Ishak of the Institute for Civil Society Empowerment, 11 November 2000, Banda Aceh.

³⁰ Reuters, 13 November 2000. On 15 November, the Indonesian Foreign Ministry announced that GAM had agreed to resume the talks in Geneva. On 29 November 2000, the *Jakarta Post* and the state wire service Antara reported that the two sides agreed to talk again, but there was no agreement as to the date.

³¹ This time there was hardly any mention of 'referendum'; 'merdeka' was lovingly repeated over and over again by speaker after enthusiastic speaker. There was manifest exhilaration and relief at uttering the once forbidden word. 'Referendum' may always have meant for the people 'merdeka', but the language has changed almost overnight.

³² AFP, 21 November 2000.

incident in North Aceh, a marine was killed by GAM. Reportedly, similar flag-raising ceremonies were held at thirty other places in the province.³³

In the capital, Banda Aceh, GAM members attended a ceremony in the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque where a GAM leader reaffirmed the movement's commitment to winning independence. Although the GAM flag was not raised, in compliance with police instructions, it was unfurled in the mosque and showered with white flour in a traditional Acehnese ceremony. GAM flags were raised at the Syah Kuala university campus and in several townships along the north coast, but these were taken down by security personnel without incident.³⁴

V. JAKARTA'S VIEW: AUTONOMY YES, INDEPENDENCE NO

At the beginning of his Presidency, Abdurrahman Wahid remarked (in the context of events in East Timor) that Aceh could also hold a referendum, but since then he said that it was only to suggest that the Acehnese could choose between several forms of autonomy, including the option of implementing syariah law.

In the first half of November, when the above incidents were reported from Aceh, President Wahid said he would summon Armed Forces Commander, Admiral Widodo Adisutjipto, Army Commander, General Endriarto Sutarto, and Chief of the National Police, General Bimantoro, to explain the use of violence. 'Acehnese people are my religious brothers', he reportedly said. 'I want to ask, since when are guns used in negotiations? If you are using guns, then please retire'.³⁵ The Jakarta weekly, *Tempo*, quoted him as saying on the same occasion, 'It is just like the Dutch, firing shots as they please. Do they want to fight or talk things out'.³⁶

While there is some disagreement between the civilian and the military branches of Indonesia's government over how to handle Aceh, both agree that it should not be independent. The talk from presidential quarters supports more peaceful and reconciliatory approaches. Military officers tend to be more confrontational and have been pressing for the introduction of a military emergency. The middle ground was taken by the Coordinating Minister for Political, Social and Security Affairs, retired General Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who offered three options. 'The most ideal', he said would be a continuation of the 'humanitarian pause' together with 'substantive negotiations' with GAM, SIRA and other elements in Acehnese society. Second, if violence and confrontation continued, the 'humanitarian pause' would end and the government would turn to 'intensive' security measures. Finally, the least desirable option was the introduction of emergency rule.³⁷

On 26 November, after a meeting between key ministers and parliamentary leaders, Yudhoyono and the speaker of the parliament, Akbar Tanjung, announced that it was agreed to continue dialogue instead of declaring a civil emergency status. They also agreed that the parliament would draft a bill on

³³ *Kompas*, *Jakarta Post*, 5 December 2000.

³⁴ *Kompas*, *Jakarta Post*, *Republika*, 5 December 2000.

³⁵ AP, 11 November 2000.

³⁶ *Tempo*, 20 November 2000.

³⁷ *Jakarta Post*, 23 November 2000.

special autonomy for Aceh based on a proposal from the provincial parliament. Yudhoyono said the government would seek further agreements with other groups in Aceh for formal dialogue processes. In support of this agreement, the Chief of the Armed Forces, Admiral Widodo, said on 1 December that a civil emergency would only be declared as a last resort if the dialogues failed.

Further negotiations between the government and GAM in Geneva were postponed in the wake of the violence in November, but are now likely to take place in mid-December.

VI. INTERNATIONAL REACTION

No states recognise or sympathise with the independence ambitions of Aceh. Australia used the occasion of the recent upsurge in violence to re-assert its support for Aceh's remaining part of Indonesia,³⁸ while Japan's Foreign Minister, Yohei Kono, told President Abdurrahman Wahid that he believed that the majority of Acehnese wanted to stay part of Indonesia.³⁹ Nevertheless, the government's actions in Aceh, and its failure to move forward more quickly on its promises of greater autonomy, have begun to attract international criticism. Human Rights Watch Asia has likened the police actions of early November to the worst days of the Soeharto era. On 22 November, the UN Human Rights Commission asked Indonesia to investigate allegations of summary executions of civilians and human rights activists, and torture and sexual abuse of detainees.⁴⁰ Some Indonesian human rights groups, such as the national group Kontras, have called for a thorough international investigation of the recent violence.⁴¹

VII. CONCLUSION

The race for the political high ground in Aceh is entering a new phase. Popular support for the holding of a referendum, and the almost universal expectation that a referendum would lead to independence, means that the stakes have become very high. Although the government has often promised progress for the Acehnese in the past, it has never showed determination in ensuring delivery. Belatedly, it now seems to be responding to the many grievances of the Acehnese people. But past experience has taught the Acehnese to be wary of Jakarta's concessions. It is now up to Jakarta to prove that it is really serious in meeting Acehnese grievances, and up to the international community to continue to encourage it to do so. The alternative of continuing military repression is for no-one a long-term solution.

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³⁸ CNN, 17 November 2000, citing the Australian Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer.

³⁹ Reuters, 17 November 2000.

⁴⁰ Reuters, 24 November 2000.

⁴¹ Reuters, 13 November 2000.