

Stage set for a clash between Free Aceh supporters and Indonesian security forces

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1 December 1999

Indonesian security forces are preparing for a major confrontation with supporters of the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM) on Saturday when large gatherings are expected in the province of Aceh to mark the anniversary of GAM's formation in 1976. On November 8, at least 700,000 people rallied in the provincial capital of Banda Aceh in the north of Sumatra to demand a referendum on independence.

Free Aceh leaders have set December 4 as the deadline for the Indonesian government of President Abdurrahman Wahid to announce a vote on independence. Some have indicated that the Free Aceh flag would be raised and a three-day strike commenced throughout the province unless Jakarta agrees to their demands.

Wahid planned to meet this week with Acehnese leaders but the meetings are unlikely to occur. Free Aceh spokesman Ismail Sahputra commented: "Aceh does not want to hold dialogues any more. If we are not given the option of independence, the people are ready to take up arms for a revolution... to fight against the government of Indonesia."

Already more than more than 7,000 non-Acehnese employed in government offices, social services and banking have fled the area over the last two weeks in the lead up to Saturday's rallies. According to one report, half of the doctors in Banda Aceh left over the last week. The non-Acehnese fear attacks from supporters of Free Aceh, which claims that local people are discriminated against for the best jobs.

In a bid to diffuse the situation, the Indonesian government ordered combat troops to be withdrawn from the province in early November. But the military has since dispatched hundreds of riot police to Aceh in preparation for a clash with independence supporters. National police chief General Roesmanhadi has

announced that there are now more than 11,000 police deployed in Aceh.

The military has been demanding that a curfew and martial law be imposed in areas of Aceh, which Wahid has so far refused. But the Indonesian military commander in Aceh, Colonel Syarifuddin, warned his men would fight to the death against separatism. The army has conducted a long and bloody suppression of the Free Aceh movement during which thousands of people were systematically tortured and killed.

The demands for Aceh independence have exposed the fragile nature of the so-called government of national unity and the powerful position of the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) within the cabinet. When Wahid first indicated that he would consider a referendum in Aceh along the lines of East Timor, military leaders reacted with both hostility and contempt, saying that the president was expressing his personal views, not those of the government.

TNI chief Admiral Widodo said last week that "armed disturbance groups" had increased their activities in Aceh and warned "the threats most likely to happen are disintegration and separatism," pointing to similar tendencies in Irian Jaya, South Sulewesi, Riau and Maluku, where religious and ethnic clashes have resulted in the deaths of hundreds of people this year. "The separatist movements in Aceh and Irian Jaya need to be handled and receive priority," he insisted. A rally in support of independence is due to take place in Irian Jaya today.

Newly-appointed Defence Minister Juwono Sudarsono was even blunter, making clear last week that the military would oust the government if it cut across its vital interests. "If civilian leaders aren't able to develop a healthy and independent political life, then we will, sooner or later, return to a military-dominated

role like Pakistan and some African states,” he said. Juwono announced that any referendum in Aceh would be limited to the adoption of Islamic law and that there was “no independence option”.

Wahid was compelled to make a statement ruling out any referendum on independence. “No, no, never, because all countries including the United States back Indonesia's sovereignty over all areas of the country,” he said. In a further comment that is certain to fuel anger in Aceh, he added: “I know my people. But of course there are several minorities who would like to be independent from us but they mainly come from hooligans as well as those who have the wrong impression about Indonesia.”

Wahid's comments came after a visit to Jakarta by US ambassador to the UN Richard Holbrooke and US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Stanley Roth for discussions on East Timor. Commenting on the situation in Aceh, Holbrooke said that the US did not want martial law imposed in the province and supported dialogue with the rebels. But the US has also made clear that it is opposed to independence for Aceh and Holbrooke warned against making any comparisons with the Balkans.

Over the weekend, leaders at the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and representatives from China, Japan and South Korea, issued a joint statement in Manila pledging support for Indonesian sovereignty over all its 26 provinces including Aceh. ASEAN countries are clearly concerned at the implications of Aceh separatism not only for Indonesia but the rest of the region.

The Wahid government has offered Aceh a greater degree of autonomy and a larger share of the profits flowing from the province's considerable reserves of natural gas. Indonesia is the world's largest producer of liquified natural gas and an estimated 30 percent of its output comes from the vast Arun gas fields in northern Aceh. In the past Aceh has only received around 5 percent of the gas revenue but Jakarta is proposing to increase the share to 30 percent.

It is highly unlikely that any deal will be negotiated with Acehnese leaders before Saturday, and the stage is set for a clash between separatist supporters and the security forces. Any protracted conflict will only further open up the deep divisions within the Indonesian government.



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