

Indonesian government walking a political tightrope on Aceh truce

Mike Head
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Facing mounting international pressure to resolve the 24-year-old conflict in Aceh, the oil-rich province of 4.6 million people on the northern tip of Sumatra, the Indonesian government of President Abdurrahman Wahid has signed a temporary truce with the secessionist Free Aceh Movement (GAM).

Since 1976, the Swedish-based separatist leadership has mounted armed attacks against Indonesian military rule. The "Memorandum of Understanding" signed between Wahid's government and the GAM in Geneva on May 12 proposes a three-month "humanitarian pause" in the hostilities, commencing June 2.

The accord does not affect the government's intensive police-military engagement in the province, nor alter Jakarta's rejection of an East Timor-style ballot on secession. The agreement's precise terms remain secret, but none of the estimated 11,000 security personnel will be withdrawn from the province. The official statement merely referred to two joint committees, one to coordinate humanitarian aid deliveries and the other to "ensure the continuing of normal police function for the enforcement of law and the maintenance of public order".

At the last minute, after months of secretive negotiations to reach a deal with the GAM leaders, Wahid decided not to send Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Shihab to sign the pact. Instead, Indonesia's ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, Hasan Wirayuda, carried out the formalities with GAM health spokesman Zaini Abdullah.

Shihab was pulled out after Wahid faced sharp criticism from within the Indonesian political establishment for making such an agreement. "Initially, Alwi Shihab was scheduled to be present in Geneva, but due to many criticisms from inside the country, the government has ordered him not to show up," Wahid told reporters in Jakarta.

Wahid also played down the significance of the deal, declaring that his government did not recognise the GAM as a legitimate representative of the Aceh people, or support the GAM's demands for independence or a referendum. "This deal is called a humanitarian pause," he said. "So there is no business about giving recognition to anyone by anyone."

At least three prominent members of the national assembly (DPR) accused Wahid of exceeding his constitutional authority in making the agreement without a vote in the DPR. They raised fears that the accord could strengthen secessionist pressures across the Indonesian archipelago.

Thahir Saimima, an MP from the Islamic United Development Party, said DPR members "strongly object" to the peace plan and would declare it "null and void". Wahid had "no prerogative right" to make the agreement without consulting the DPR.

Amin Aryoso, chairman of the DPR's 57-member Commission II, called a press conference in the Sumatran city of Palembang to denounce the truce. He said Wahid was headed down the same road as his predecessor B.J. Habibie, who unilaterally offered a referendum in East Timor last year.

A third MP, Laode Jeni Hasmar, told the Indonesian Kompas news agency that the Geneva accord could trigger similar demands from the Netherlands-based South Maluku Republic, as well as from the Free West Papua Movement.

Many in the Indonesian elite regard Aceh as even more critical than East Timor to the maintenance of an integrated Indonesian state. Unlike the former Portuguese colony, which the Suharto regime annexed in 1975, Aceh was part of the Dutch East Indies and was included in Indonesia when it was afforded independence in 1949.

In response to the parliamentary criticisms, Wahid insisted that the government had the "prerogative and executive right" to sign the accord. He said the truce was "part of a comprehensive settlement at home" that would include a proposed Aceh Peoples Congress.

His administration is hoping that the agreement will appease anti-Jakarta feeling in Aceh and garner some support for his government's offer of limited autonomy. The autonomy plan promises provincial leaders a 75 percent share of the oil and natural gas revenues derived from the territory and the right to impose Islamic law, provided they accept continued Indonesian sovereignty.

Wahid, at the head of an unstable multi-party coalition, is attempting a precarious political balancing act. On the one side, he is trying to quell the wide movement in support of secession, which last November saw nearly one million people rally in Banda Aceh demanding a self-determination referendum. This movement, given new impetus by the fall of General Suharto, has been fuelled by three decades of military atrocities, during which nearly 5,000 civilians have been killed, with another 4,000 missing.

On the other side, his cabinet rests on the support of the military whose commanders, from Suharto down, are deeply implicated in all the crimes committed in Aceh. Last year the military chiefs

issued thinly veiled threats of a Pakistani-style military coup after Wahid uttered vague remarks about offering to hold a ballot in the province. Wahid was forced to back down and cobble together a revamped autonomy proposal.

The day before the May 12 truce was signed, Indonesia's armed forces chief, Admiral Widodo Adisucipto, expressed his support, telling journalists: "We hope this [accord] will contribute significantly to solving the problems in Aceh."

Various major powers, notably the United States—whose oil companies have substantial investments in Sumatra—have pointedly backed the truce. For months they have been applying intense economic and diplomatic pressure for a settlement of the destabilising conflict.

Last Monday in Washington, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright held a joint news conference with her visiting Indonesian counterpart Shihab. Albright praised the May 12 agreement as "a genuine act of political courage on both sides". She declared, however, that it was only a first step, stressing the need for "a comprehensive political settlement which addresses the core grievances which have [aggravated] conflict in the province".

Albright foreshadowed the dispatch of US "humanitarian" aid to the province. This could signal stepped-up US involvement in the region, although Albright provided no details. She then joined Shihab in mutual declarations of the need to preserve the "territorial integrity" of Indonesia. Like the Indonesian regime, the Clinton administration fears the unpredictable consequences if the country begins to break apart.

Wahid's administration is also under acute pressure from global financial markets and the International Monetary Fund. In April, the IMF withheld a \$400 million bailout loan, demanding further measures to open up the entire economy—formerly dominated by Suharto cronies and military leaders—to transnational control. Indonesian share prices have fallen 27 percent this year and the Indonesian rupiah has plunged 18 percent against the US dollar.

Five days after finalising the Aceh truce, Wahid's government signed a new contract with the IMF, which then released the \$400 million.

The conflict in Aceh has considerable geopolitical importance. The province lies at the head of the Malacca Strait, one of the most strategic waterways in the world, linking the Pacific and Indian oceans.

Aceh also contains the Arun gas field, one of Asia's largest, operated by a local subsidiary of ExxonMobil. The gas is exported to Korea and Japan, and represents about 30 percent of Indonesia's total gas production. In recent months Mobil's facilities have been attacked by machine guns and grenades, but GAM leaders said their targets were Indonesian soldiers, not Mobil, which has never been attacked by the separatists.

Just to the south Caltex, jointly owned by Chevron and Texaco, operates even larger oilfields in the neighbouring province of Riau. These fields provide 60 percent of Indonesia's oil and gas exports.

In a related bid to secure support for its autonomy proposal, Wahid's government recently set up a joint civilian-military tribunal to hear charges against troops who killed 56 students and a teacher from an Islamic boarding school last year. The killings occurred in the central Aceh village of Beutong Ateuh during a

military operation to arrest Tenugku Bantaqiyah, the teacher, who was said to be a GAM member.

Just days after the May 12 truce was signed, the tribunal handed down a farcical verdict. The five judges cut short the hearing, which was expected to continue for several more weeks, and announced that 24 lowly-ranked soldiers and one civilian were guilty of murder.

Troops then took the judges to Banda Aceh airport in an armoured personnel carrier to be quickly flown out of the province. The proceedings had been guarded by hundreds of police, while protesters picketed outside.

The 25 defendants, who received sentences of less than 10 years, were obviously made scapegoats to protect the military officers and political leaders responsible for the massacre. Military spokesman Vice Air Marshall Graitto Usodo expressed satisfaction at the outcome.

In the course of the trial, 13 soldiers admitted executing 26 injured students but insisted they were only following orders from the operation's commander, Lieutenant Colonel Sudjono. Sudjono has since conveniently disappeared, preventing the tribunal from examining the higher chain of command.

Acehnese leaders and international human rights groups immediately criticised the outcome. "The trial has proven nothing," GAM spokesman Ismail Sahputra said. "It has stirred no other feelings among our people but more distrust, because we know [it] is but a mere scenario made by the government." GAM holds former armed forces chief General Wiranto and former president Habibie responsible for the murders.

In the wake of the cease-fire agreement, Indonesian troops and police have continued to attack civilians. In the week since the truce, soldiers have wounded and killed at least a dozen villagers in several locations.

The killings follow the pattern that the military has set over the past three decades of carrying out reprisals against villages and individuals who support the separatist movement.

In signing the truce with the Jakarta regime, the GAM leadership is seeking to contain popular unrest, in return for support from the major powers. It hopes to win diplomatic support and commercial partners for its goal of establishing a separate state. Speaking in Geneva, Abdullah said the GAM entered into the accord because "we need to get the support of international bodies". But as in Brunei, the setting up of an oil-rich mini-state would benefit only a thin wealthy layer, not the masses of Aceh.

For its part, the Indonesian ruling elite, both civilian and military, is desperate to maintain its grip over the entire far-flung chain of islands.



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