

An uneasy peace deal signed between Indonesian government and Aceh rebels

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After more than two years of negotiations, representatives of the Indonesian government and the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM) signed a six-page peace accord on December 9 in Geneva aimed at bringing 26 years of armed conflict to an end.

The main provisions of the accord include a cease fire and partial demilitarisation followed by talks over greater autonomy for Aceh—an oil and gas rich province on the northern tip of Sumatra. Elections for a regional assembly are due to be held in 2004.

Under the agreement, GAM fighters are to begin surrendering their weapons to cantonment areas under international supervision in two months time and to complete the process within five months. In return, Jakarta is to withdraw most of its troops from the province, including the notorious paramilitary police brigades.

The process for “demilitarisation” is not clearly defined in the document and has been left to a Joint Security Committee (JSC) to work out “a mutually agreed upon process,” in which “peace zones” are to be defined and troops from both sides withdrawn.

The JSC will include representatives of GAM, Jakarta, the Swiss-based Henry Dunant Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HDC) and an independent monitoring team of military observers from Thailand and the Philippines. The 15-member committee, headed by Thai Major-General Thanongsak Tuvinan, will oversee 150 ceasefire monitors, including 50 international representatives, who began to arrive in mid-December.

While the deal has been hailed in the international media as a major breakthrough, it rests on shaky political foundations. Both sides are wary about winding back their military forces. It is still unclear if the GAM will proceed with the handover and storage of

its weapons.

More fundamentally, however, the underlying political issues remain unresolved. GAM has not renounced its demand for an independent Aceh, to which the administration of Indonesian president Megawati Sukarnoputri and the armed forces (TNI) are completely opposed.

GAM has already indicated its intention to run candidates in the 2004 elections on a platform of complete independence. Commenting on his organisation’s aims in signing the accord, GAM leader Ahmad Marzuki declared: “We hope to convert our struggle into a political struggle, but its goal remains unchanged: independence.”

GAM’s demands reflect the interests of sections of the Achinese ruling elite, who are seeking greater political power and control over the province’s substantial resources. Megawati has offered a form of provincial autonomy, including an increase in the share of oil and gas revenue to 70 percent, as compared to 5 percent under Suharto, and the right to implement reactionary Islamic *sharia* law.

A great deal is at stake. Aceh’s large Arun gasfield accounts for 30 percent of Indonesia’s production. Moreover any concessions to GAM’s demand for independence would encourage similar calls in other resource-rich provinces. Riau, for example, has large oil fields and is also on Sumatra. Already a number of local leaders in Riau have been calling for a greater proportion of the province’s oil revenues.

The Indonesian military has its own interests to protect by preventing any declaration of independence and maintaining a strong presence in the province. In Aceh, as in other areas rich in natural resources, the security forces derive significant income from an extensive network of lucrative businesses, both legal

and illegal, including drug running, arms sales and extortion rackets.

Under the Suharto dictatorship, the TNI ruthlessly maintained its grip over Aceh, suppressing any opposition and thereby sowing the seeds for the armed conflict that erupted in 1976. Fighting between GAM and the TNI has cost an estimated 12,000 lives, including 1,700 in the last year alone. After the fall of Suharto in 1998, moves towards a settlement began, first under President B.J. Habibie, then his successor, Abdurrahman Wahid.

Wahid's tentative suggestion of a ballot on independence along with his decision to allow pro-independence supporters the right to publicly display their flag and hold public rallies were regarded as impermissible concessions by the military. Wahid's stance on Aceh and West Papua was a major factor in the TNI's support for the protracted impeachment process to oust him and insert Megawati Sukarnoputri as president.

After Megawati came to office in mid-2001, the number of police and troops in Aceh almost trebled to 30,000 and a major crackdown was launched against GAM and pro-independence supporters. Sections of the military have been pushing for the declaration of a state of emergency to allow them an even greater hand in the province. At the same time, however, Jakarta has been under pressure from the major powers, including the US, to negotiate with GAM to find a means to end the protracted war.

The peace talks have been through the Henry Dunant Centre. The HDC was established in 1999 with the financial backing of the US and a number of European countries, including the Netherlands, the former colonial power in Indonesia. Its director is Martin Griffiths, a former British diplomat and UN official.

Some 20 countries agreed to provide aid if a settlement was reached. Just prior to the signing of the accord, the US and Japan sponsored a meeting in the province to work out an aid program. On December 16, a 10-member UN team arrived for a three-day assessment of the humanitarian programs needed for Aceh.

The Bush administration has played a key role in putting pressure on both sides. Significantly retired US General Anthony Zinni—former head of Central Command and special US envoy to the Middle

East—has been present at most negotiating sessions, including in May when Jakarta outlined its autonomy plan. Early last year, US deputy assistant secretary of state Matt Daley visited exiled GAM leader Hasan di Tiro in Sweden to insist that the autonomy offer be accepted.

The giant US ExxonMobil Corporation owns part of three big gas fields in Aceh along with the Arun liquefied natural gas plant. Caltex, owned by ChevronTexaco Corporation, operates the oil fields in Riau. Aceh sits at the northern entrance to the Malacca Strait and Riau forms most of the south-western shore directly across the strait from Malaysia. It is one of the busiest and most strategically important waterways in the world, linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans. As the Bush administration prepares to invade Iraq and destabilise the Middle East, access to Indonesia's oil and gas and secure shipping routes in South East Asia make stability in Aceh a high priority.

The Indonesian military, however, remains a major stumbling block. Every significant turn in the negotiations has been marked by a provocative reaction by sections of the security forces. In the lead up to the signing of the accord, several thousand soldiers backed by tanks surrounded a GAM headquarters in northern Aceh and threatened to overrun it. Since the agreement was signed, at least 14 people have been reported killed in clashes including two soldiers.



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