Inconclusive peace talks between Jakarta and Acehnese separatists

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Talks in the Finnish capital of Helsinki between Indonesian officials and representatives of the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM) broke up on April 17 without any agreement on the central issue: the future status of Aceh. Despite claims of progress in the negotiations, the conflict in the war-torn province is continuing.

The talks were brokered by the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) organisation established by former Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari. Two previous rounds were held in January and February and the two sides are to meet again next month. The negotiations are the first since the Indonesian government effectively sabotaged peace talks in 2003 and gave the green light for the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) to launch a major counterinsurgency operation in the province in May of that year.

For a year and a half, the major powers turned a blind eye as 50,000 heavily armed troops and police waged a brutal war not only to suppress GAM fighters but to stamp out separatist sentiment in the province. Even though the TNI imposed a media blackout on the province, reports emerged from human rights organisations of widespread cases of detention without trial, summary execution, torture and intimidation.

The December 26 tsunami, which left at least 160,000 Acehnese dead and 500,000 homeless, focussed attention on the province. After delaying for days, the Indonesian government finally gave the go-ahead for international aid agencies, the media and foreign troops to enter the area. With the spotlight on Aceh, Jakarta agreed to restart negotiations with GAM.

Both sides attempted to put a positive face on the latest round. General agreement was reported on oil revenues, questions of tax and excise duties and wealth distribution. But on the key question of the political status of the province, no deal was reached. Self-government and security matters were deferred to later talks.

Even before the talks began, a sharp exchange took place between GAM and the CMI hosts. The CMI website referred to the aim of the negotiations as being to bring about "special autonomy" for the province. Sofyan Dawood of the GAM "Central Military Command" described the reference as an "affront," declaring: "GAM has never agreed that the conflict will or should be resolved within the framework of special autonomy, as CMI states."

From the outset, the Indonesian government has insisted that it will not accede to GAM demands for a referendum on independence for the province. Jakarta has offered a special autonomy package that would grant a larger share of Aceh's oil and gas revenues and greater provincial powers to the provincial government. GAM negotiators on the other hand have demanded that any special autonomy be linked to a future UN-supervised referendum.

Sofyan Dawood denied that rumours of a rift between the GAM military command and GAM exiles based in Sweden who have been involved in talks. A communiqué issued from Stockholm by GAM leader Malik Mahmud demanded that the CMI withdraw its statement and remove it from the website.

After the talks concluded, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono indicated there would be no concessions on the issue of Aceh's independence. "The unitary state of the Indonesian republic must be maintained and the red and white flag must fly (in Aceh)," he told a meeting of security officials. Yudhoyono, a retired general, was the top security minister in charge of launching the 2003 offensive.

Despite the talks and the devastation caused by the

tsunami in Aceh, the TNI has continued its operations against GAM, claiming, without evidence, that the rebels were attacking aid supplies. Jakarta is exploiting the disaster to intensify the pressure diplomatically and militarily on GAM.

In his opening statement to the latest talks, GAM leader Malik Mahmud outlined the escalation of TNI attacks since December. He noted that Yudhoyono had not issued a single statement since the tsunami attempting to restrain TNI operations and that half of the GAM negotiating team were still in jail.

The TNI has admitted to killing at least 260 alleged GAM rebels this year. The day before the Helsinki talks began, the army killed GAM's Blang Pidie district leader Miswar. The TNI claimed that he died with one of his men in an armed clash. GAM, however, insists that Miswar was held for three months, tortured and killed, then his body dumped to send a message to the negotiations.

A report to the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva on April 14 pointed to the TNI's intimidation of tsunami refugees. It referred to cases of displaced women from Tanah Paser in North Aceh having their children seized by soldiers for alleged involvement with GAM. The women were told that if they reported the incidents, they would never see the children again.

The UN report criticised the Indonesian government for giving the TNI a major role in overseeing the refugee camps. It stated that the army had been involved in forcibly rounding up refugees and placing them in government-run camps away from their livelihoods. While the camps ostensibly provide aid, they are viewed by the military as a means of cutting off GAM fighters from local support.

The TNI's methods in Aceh continue the brutal war waged under the Suharto dictatorship to suppress the separatist movement and maintain control over the province's oil and gas reserves. At least 12,000 people, mainly civilians, have been killed since 1976 and many more have been subject to arbitrary detention and torture. A temporary easing of tensions occurred after the fall of Suharto in 1998, only to end in 2003.

The latest round of talks in Helsinki indicates that the Yudhoyono administration and the military are unwilling to make significant concessions. The negotiations appear to be little more than an attempt to cover up the military's activities in Aceh while public attention has been focussed on the plight of the tsunami victims.

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