

Jakarta pressures Acehese rebels over peace deal

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Talks in the Finnish capital Helsinki between the Indonesian government and the exiled leadership of the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM) ended on May 31. The outcome of the meeting, the fourth since the devastating Boxing Day tsunami, has been praised by spokesmen from both sides and the Finnish mediators as a major step forward.

A final deal by August is mooted. The Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) organisation, headed by former Finnish President Martii Ahtisaari, has been charged with drawing up documents for a fifth round to begin on July 12. These are to serve as the basis for an agreement to end the 30-year conflict that has cost at least 12,000 lives. European Union (EU) observers, who attended the May talks, have offered to mediate in the implementation of any settlement.

It is clear that any agreement will involve major concessions from GAM. Its participation in the talks was on the basis that it would temporarily give up its demands for full independence in return for political concessions in the form of increased autonomy and a measure of “self government”.

At present, however, it is not even certain that GAM will be permitted to take part in local elections. Indonesian negotiators, headed by Justice Minister Hamid Awaluddin, ruled out any change to constitutional and electoral law prohibitions on locally-based political parties and on the advocacy of separatism. Indonesian law requires all political parties to be nationally based and have extensive organisation in at least half of the nation’s 33 provinces.

These anti-democratic laws effectively prevent GAM from participating in the first-ever direct provincial rency elections due to take place by October. Even if it were to end any agitation for secession, GAM, which is based solely in Aceh, would not be able to meet the

legal requirements to be registered as a political party.

Another significant stumbling block remains GAM’s demand for the demilitarisation of the province. Over the past two years, the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) have waged a ruthless counter-insurgency operation against GAM, involving 56,000 heavily-armed troops and police. Until recently, the province was under emergency rule, providing the military with sweeping powers and resulting in widespread abuses, including torture and extra-judicial killings.

The points of agreement at the talks were limited to disbursement of royalties from the oil and gas enterprises operating in Aceh and a number of administrative measures. Despite his publicly expressed optimism over the result of the latest talks, CMI head Ahtisaari admitted to the AKI news service that GAM’s participation in politics remained “problematic”.

If a final agreement is in sight, it indicates that the TNI offensive, combined with the impact of the December 26 tsunami, has seriously weakened GAM. The tsunami killed about 160,000 people, rendered another 500,000 homeless and wrecked about one third of the province. All foreign relief aid is being channelled through Jakarta and much of the reconstruction is premised on a political settlement of the separatist conflict. Moreover, the military is involved in supervising refugee camps as a means for cutting GAM off from sections of its social base.

Sidney Jones, an analyst with the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG), commented to Radio Singapore International on May 11: “[After] more than 20 months of martial law or emergency period, GAM has been fairly severely damaged. That is, while most of the leadership is intact, a lot of the fighters and soldiers at a lower level have either been captured or

killed or made to surrender, or have voluntarily surrendered.

“GAM has been pushed out of the villages in much of Aceh. And we’re talking about an area where in 2001 there was an official estimate that GAM was in control of 80 percent of the villages in Aceh. Now, for the most part, they are out of the settlement areas and have been pushed back to camps in the hills, and many GAM field commanders and fighters are looking for an exit strategy.”

On May 18, in the lead up to the latest talks, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono issued a decree ending the “civil emergency” status in Aceh. However, no troops have been withdrawn from the province, operations against GAM continue and the media remains under tight control. Sofyan Dawood, GAM’s military spokesman in Aceh, described the lifting of the emergency as a “cruel joke” while the government’s negotiators in Helsinki “serve up warm words across the table”.

GAM negotiators, who are mostly in exile in Europe, have talked up the results of the Helsinki meeting. Senior official Bakhtiar Abdullah told the media: “The spirit of cooperation is there and both sides have made significant compromises and concessions. This has brought us closer towards a final settlement.” Another GAM spokesman Mohammad Nur Djuli echoed sentiments expressed by Ahtisaari, saying he hoped for a final agreement in August.

Indonesian Vice President Jusuf Kalla was also upbeat, claiming that 90 percent of issues had been resolved. “We are right on track ... [the talks] have been very positive and progressive,” he said, adding that all points on the question of an amnesty and the province’s economic and political system had been agreed upon. Kalla said any monitoring would be conducted by the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), with the EU having only observer status. Jakarta has ruled out any role for the UN.

The character of any final agreement was made clear during a session of Indonesia’s House of Representatives (DPR) national defence committee, prior to the latest negotiations. The committee declared that a deadline had to be set if the government failed to “make the rebels agree” to accept a deal based on a 2001 law providing for special autonomy for Aceh. In other words, GAM would have to agree to the

proposals that it rejected prior to the TNI counter-insurgency operations launched in May 2003.

According to the *Jakarta Post*, opposition parties strongly criticised the negotiations. Committee member Effendi Simbolon, from former President Megawati Sukarnoputri’s Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), declared that the previous rounds had been “fruitless” and more talks would only allow GAM time to consolidate. Muhammad Hikam, from of the National Awakening Party (PKB), said the talks had no real status and there had been no meeting of the minds on Aceh’s administrative status.

Chief negotiator Awaluddin reassured the parliamentary committee that the government would convince GAM to agree to the 2001 autonomy deal. “We managed to reduce GAM’s demands since the first talks from independence to self government,” he said. Security Minister Widodo Adi Sucipto stated that no deal would be reached outside the government’s special autonomy offer.

Following the talks, President Yudhoyono reaffirmed that the “best solution is helping Aceh with the special autonomy status”.

It remains to be seen if GAM will agree to completely abandon the basis on which it has fought for nearly three decades. The negotiations are clearly producing tensions in the organisation—the most visible being between military leaders in Aceh and the exiled political leadership.

One thing is certain, however. There is no likelihood of any significant TNI withdrawal from the province. Jakarta obviously feels it has gained the upper hand as a result of the two-year offensive and the devastation caused by the tsunami and intends to exploit its advantage to the hilt.



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