

Indonesia signs shaky peace deal with Acehese separatists

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On August 15, the exiled leaders of the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM) signed a pact with the Indonesian government in the Finnish capital Helsinki to end their 29-year struggle for independence. The terms were worked out in five negotiating sessions held in Helsinki since January, under the auspices of the Crisis Management Initiative Organisation headed by former Finland President Martti Ahtisaari.

Under the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), GAM has formally abandoned its central demand for a separate state on the northern tip of the island of Sumatra and agreed to disarm its fighters. In comments last month, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono stated: "If the conflict is declared over, then within about three months GAM will be expected to hand over its guns, which would then be destroyed."

GAM has accepted a form of limited autonomy. The provincial Acehese authority will have the right to retain 70 percent of the revenues from oil and gas production, and other economic concessions are extended. In addition, the peace deal will free up some \$US5 billion in foreign aid that was promised earlier this year for tsunami relief.

Significant aspects of the MoU are open to interpretation and have the potential to lead to its breakdown. The most contentious issues are the provisions covering an amnesty for GAM members and the disarming of its fighters, GAM's political rights, the withdrawal of TNI and paramilitary police from the province and the monitoring of the process by unarmed observers from the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the European Union (EU).

GAM was represented at the talks by its exiled leaders based in Sweden, who themselves expressed concerns over whether Jakarta could be trusted. GAM spokesman Bakhtiar Abdullah told Reuters on August 12: "We [the GAM exiles] hope we can go back to Aceh one of these days, but I don't think it will be soon as first we have to see some kind of guarantees that we will be safe."

GAM representative Nur Rahman told the AKI news service that while he believed the Indonesian government was committed to the peace settlement, he was "less confident about its implementation and the government's ability to control hardliners in the Indonesian military". He claimed that an additional 900 troops had been moved into Aceh and that at

least 10 GAM fighters and 300 to 400 civilians had been killed since July 17.

There are ample reasons for the scepticism. In April 2003, the government of president Megawati Sukarnoputri, in which the current president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, served as chief security minister, sabotaged talks by imposing new conditions and arresting senior GAM officials who were part of a group monitoring the ceasefire in the province.

In May 2003, Jakarta imposed a state of emergency and launched a massive military offensive against GAM, involving 50,000 heavily-armed troops and paramilitary police. The Indonesian armed forces (TNI) clamped a media blackout on the province but persistent evidence emerged of torture, extrajudicial killings and other abuses of democratic rights by troops. While the emergency was eased following the December 26 tsunami, the TNI exploited the disaster to weaken GAM and force it to the negotiating table on Jakarta's terms.

Yudhoyono, who won the presidency last year, is already under pressure to back away from the agreement. Megawati's Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), the second largest faction in the House of Representatives (DPR), has accused the president of permitting international interference in a domestic issue by allowing the deployment of foreign monitors in Aceh.

Equally contentious is allowing GAM to function as a political party. Under Indonesia's anti-democratic electoral law, a party must be organised in at least half the country's 32 provinces—a provision that excludes GAM, which specifically appeals only to Acehese. Last month the PDI-P refused to join Vice President Yusuf Kalla and nine parties in agreeing to change the law to allow for the locally-based parties in Aceh.

As a result, the agreement was signed this week without any changes in the electoral law. The MoU states only that there will be "a new law on the governing of Aceh" by March 31, 2006 and that elections will take place in the province in April 2006. It declares that "full participation of all Acehese people in local and national elections will be guaranteed in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia" but makes no direct reference to GAM.

The document is vague on the granting of amnesty. The MoU states "all persons" involved in GAM will be granted an

amnesty within 15 days of signing, providing they cease all military actions against the government. A later part, however, refers to amnesties being granted only to “all pardoned political prisoners”.

Last month, Communications Minister Sofyan Djalil declared that the amnesty would only cover GAM prisoners charged with treason and not criminal offences. Indonesian human rights advocates point out that most GAM prisoners have been charged with criminal offences, including firearms charges and the illegal collection of taxes. Between 1,300 and 2,500 GAM members are in custody.

Moreover, while GAM fighters are committed to disarming under international supervision by December 31, the Indonesian military retains the right to a substantial presence in the province—14,700 “organic” TNI troops and 9,100 local police. Even this limit applies only to “normal peacetime circumstances”. TNI commander General Endriatono Sutarto has already publicly hinted that as many as 20,000 extra troops will remain in Aceh in case of “frictions within the GAM structure”.

Despite the criticisms of the PDI-P, much of the political establishment in Jakarta regards the deal as a significant victory. Aceh is one of the country’s key oil and gas-producing areas and there are hopes that peace will encourage foreign investment in the province and elsewhere in Indonesia. The end of fighting in Aceh will also enable the TNI to redeploy forces to West Papua to crush separatist opposition to Jakarta’s rule.

The Aceh agreement will assist Yudhoyono’s efforts to re-establish military relations with the US. The TNI’s brutal record of repression, particularly in East Timor, Aceh and West Papua, led to US Congressional bans on ties between the US and Indonesian militaries. The Bush administration will use the deal to argue for the lifting of the remaining bans and a return to the close relations that existed under the Suharto dictatorship.

There is no doubt that the TNI’s operations over the past two years and the December 26 tsunami had an impact on GAM. At least 160,000 people out of the province’s population of four million perished. As of July 7, Aceh’s Development Planning Board calculated that there were still 518,450 internally displaced persons in the province, of whom 58 percent are living with host families, 30 percent in tents and 12 percent in government Transitional Living Centres. The struggle for survival preoccupies most of the population, including many GAM supporters.

However, GAM’s willingness to abandon its longstanding struggle for independence has more fundamental roots. The demand for a separate Acehnese state represented the class interests of a privileged stratum. From the sixteenth century on, the Aceh Sultanate defied Portuguese, British and Dutch attempts at colonisation. Aceh did not come under effective Dutch control until 1904, much later than the rest of the Indonesian archipelago, and resistance to Dutch rule never

completely ended.

The Acehnese ruling class agreed to join the Indonesian republic following World War II on the basis that they would enjoy considerable autonomy. By 1954, violations by the Jakarta government, which wanted greater control over the province’s natural resources, had provoked a separatist uprising. Over the course of three years of fighting, the rebellion was suppressed.

The resentment of the local elite toward the Suharto dictatorship’s plundering of oil and gas revenues together with broader anger over the TNI’s repressive methods led to the formation of GAM in 1976 and the launching of a guerilla war. Like other nationalist movements that emerged at the time, it was based on mixture of sectarianism and ethnic exclusivity. It made no attempt to connect the struggle in Aceh with the wider opposition throughout Indonesia against the dictatorship. Instead, the Acehnese elite looked to Brunei as its model—an oil-rich Islamic mini-state amid hundreds of millions of people living in poverty and backwardness.

GAM based its perspective above all on the possibility of winning great power backing for an independent statelet. In the wake of the collapse of the Suharto junta in 1998, the Acehnese separatists saw the opportunity for realising their perspective, particularly after the Australian-led UN intervention into East Timor in 1999, which led to the establishment of that half-island as a separate nation.

Having secured their interests in East Timor, Washington and Canberra were deeply concerned about the implications the breakup of Indonesia and sought to repair relations with Jakarta. Both countries publicly declared their support for the national integrity of Indonesia, effectively giving the green light for a crackdown on separatist movements in Aceh, Papua and other areas of Indonesia. Unlike the hypocritical hue and cry that was raised over the actions of the TNI in East Timor, its brutal operations in Aceh were studiously ignored.

Without any imperialist backing, the GAM leadership concluded it had no choice but to cut a deal, no matter how one-sided the terms. Having concluded the agreement as a junior partner to Jakarta, the Acehnese elites will seek to shore up their privileged position at the expense of the masses of ordinary Acehnese, who will continue to suffer economic and political oppression.



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