

Aceh

Geography and history

Aceh is located on the northern tip of Sumatra, bordered on the north by the Malacca Strait and on the south by the Indian Ocean. About 4 million people live in the province, which covers an area of nearly 250,000 square km. The capital is Banda Aceh and the main language spoken (next to Bahasa Indonesia) is Acehnese.

Since 1988, the conflict in Aceh is said to have claimed 30,000 lives.¹ Many thousands more have been traumatized by the random brutalities, murder, rape and torture committed by the armed forces under the pretext of suppressing an armed separatist movement and protecting the unity of the nation. The injustices suffered by the Acehnese have led to a strong call for independence as the first, if not only solution to the problems.

The Acehnese, like people in most of the outer regions, unanimously voice a common grievance: that the tremendous profits from the exploitation of natural resources have returned no real benefit to their community. Yet the roots of the conflict date back to the end of the nineteenth century when the Dutch colonial powers decided to expand their colonial rule to the sultanate of Aceh, starting a war which lasted for 40 years. In the end the Dutch were able to establish control because the Acehnese lacked unity: the Acehnese nobility were only interested in protecting their own respective territories. The last sultan of Aceh was exiled in 1907 and by 1913 the Dutch had established administrative control over Aceh. Since Aceh was staunchly Islamic and very distinct from the rest of Sumatra and what is now called Indonesia, the Dutch tried to depoliticize the ulamas (religious teachers). Still, a reformist religious revival led to the formation in 1939 of the All-Aceh Ulama Association (PUSA) which

became an umbrella group for anti-establishment forces in Aceh in the period before the Second World War. When the Japanese invaded in 1942 they were welcomed for ridding the Acehnese of the Dutch, even though the Japanese carried on with the same colonial practices. After the war the Dutch did not attempt to reoccupy Aceh, but this did not stop the Acehnese from joining the independence struggle to free themselves of the traditional local gentry who had been collaborating with the Dutch and the Japanese. In the process, the PUSA ulamas took over the leadership role from the traditional aristocracy.² As long as the war for independence kept the 'central government' busy, the PUSA leadership operated with full autonomy over Aceh. Once independence was won, Aceh was incorporated into the province of North Sumatra and PUSA's political control was eroded.

In 1953 a rebellion broke out, led by PUSA leader Daud Beureueh. The movement had widespread popular support and the central government was unable to quell the movement by force. Aceh was granted provincial status in 1957 and the insurgency ended. Two years later Aceh obtained 'special region' status with autonomy over religion, customary law and education.

Aceh and the New Order

Problems started in 1969 when Suharto's New Order regime began to centralize power further, leaving no room for regional autonomy or forces like Islam. All independent institutions and alternative sources of power were brought under the control of the regime, creating new institutions when necessary. What was left of the traditional village structures after the independence war was either destroyed or co-opted by the New Order government. The ulamas in general, and PUSA in particular, were

brought under the control of the state and lost their traditional role as political and religious leaders.

The economic development under the New Order favoured particular elites, which resulted in the decline of other social groups. All regional development – as we have seen in previous sections – was centrally planned and paid for with central government funds, and staffed by people from the centre. The local government was often not even aware of these development plans and had no control over them. Although Aceh's 'special region' status was never revoked, it only existed on paper. In practice, the deep penetration of the New Order into traditional structures, and the many social changes this brought, made the Acehnese very hostile towards the regime and its imposed symbols of 'unity' and 'nationalism'. Violence committed by security personnel, mainly by the military, in their role 'as agents of Indonesian unity', led to the belief that the idea of 'a united Indonesia was terrifying in itself'.³

Oil and gas

The discovery of massive reserves of natural gas in northern Aceh in 1971 and the development of the Lhokseumawe Industrial Zone (ZILS) five years later represented a turning point in contemporary Acehnese history. There is a direct link between the discovery of huge natural gas reserves and the increase in military activity, eventually leading to all-out repression and human rights abuses on a massive scale.⁴ Paradoxically the richness of its resources turned Aceh – one of the most fiercely independent regions – unwillingly into the main financial backer of the central government. There were now huge sums of money to be earned. For the local population, the impact of the new industries was mainly negative.

Livelihoods were destroyed by the appropriation of land. The industries provided employment only for skilled labour from outside Aceh. Transmigrants were brought to Aceh to set up food-crop sites, and to work on plantations and timber estates for the pulp and wood-processing industries. The sites were opened in forest areas, depriving local communities of forest resources and increasing the rate of forest destruction. The improved infrastructure and utilities were not immediately available to the local population. Instead local prices were driven up by the demand of the residents of the industrial complexes, and pollution reduced the quality of life of the local population. Meanwhile, the local economy stagnated and landownership diminished.

For the national government and its close ally the army, the industrial zone was an important 'national' asset. The Jakarta authorities desperately needed the income generated in Aceh to pay for economic development. The slightest disturbance would have a national impact. Thus the national ideology of 'economic development and political stability' needed to be enforced strictly at the expense of the development of the province of Aceh and its people.

The Free Aceh Movement and the counter-insurgency operation

The repression by the army, the social transformations and the profound economic injustices reinforced both the sense of separateness and the deep distrust the Acehnese felt towards the secularism of the state, and can be marked as the root causes of the current conflict. The grave injustices left the people in shock and, with the destruction of traditional leadership, they were left without any appropriate channels for political expression. So when the Aceh-Sumatra Liberation Front (ASNLF), led by Hasan M. Tiro declared Aceh an independent state on the 4 December 1976, his movement began to draw considerable attention and sympathy. The ASNLF was crushed by the army but it revived again some years later as the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM). Relatively little is known about the history of GAM. To begin with, GAM was not successful because it did not have the support of the village ulamas. GAM rhetoric attacked Javanese

exploitation but it did not have an Islamic agenda. It also lacked arms, serious preparation and foreign assistance, and, as a resistance force, it was no match for the military. In the 1980s, the military actions against GAM increased people's fear of the army. While the powers of the lowest level of government were eroded, GAM regrouped, re-armed and developed an ideology to win the support of the masses. GAM re-emerged in the beginning of 1989, taking the central and even the local government by surprise.

The counter-insurgency operation by the army (Dareah Operasi Militer, DOM) started in 1989 and was designed as a campaign that would terrorize the population and make them withdraw their support for GAM. The army was at the height of its power and thought itself essential to the survival of the New Order. In the first two years of the DOM, 2,000 unarmed civilians were killed by the military.⁵ Many more were harassed, tortured or made to disappear. Thousands of women were widowed, their husbands murdered or kidnapped. Children were orphaned. Some women faced sexual violence from soldiers, in part as a deliberate instrument of terror against their communities. These women became pariahs in their own communities, as some people did not want to associate with those singled out for such attention by the military. These single women, with children to support, could no longer go out safely to work in the fields. Some of these women now work for other people in return for a few kilos of rice. Others are reduced to feeding their family on boiled trunks of banana trees.⁶

Then developments in Jakarta took an unexpected turn as President Suharto started to shift his power-base from the armed forces to the Islamic movements. Suharto stimulated a national debate on reducing the role of the armed forces in civilian affairs.⁷ The army became less sure of its position and needed the conflict to continue, both to secure its role as the sole guarantor of the New Order's interests and to maintain its financially profitable position in Aceh.⁸ Crushing the Acehnese rebellion completely was therefore not in the best interest of the military. During the mid-1990s the army fought GAM only half-heartedly.⁹ For the population this meant that the incredible suffering continued unabated. During that period, thousands of Acehnese civilians were killed, raped and

tortured and children were left orphaned.

After the New Order

During reformasi (reformation era), after the fall of the New Order regime, a formal ending of military operations and a partial troop withdrawal was announced. The resulting power vacuum provided GAM with the opportunity to re-establish itself. As the political climate changed, civil society in Aceh revived and blossomed. The people of Aceh found the courage to come forward and bring the years of terror and brutality to the attention of the national and international communities.¹⁰ There are now close to 100 NGO groups working in the provincial capital, Banda Aceh. The student movement became a new channel to air the continuing frustration of the population. The fast-growing non-violent movement for a referendum served as a focus for the common will of the Acehnese and as a measure of their political activism after years of suppression under DOM. The student and NGO activists have built up wide networks, penetrating the villages and cooperating with local people to strengthen their communities' local defence. This resulted in a decline in influence as well as in popular support for GAM.

Inspired by the events in East Timor, where the referendum in September 1999 resulted in Indonesia being forced to give up its claim on the territory, the people of Aceh demanded to be given a similar choice. In November 1999, just after Abdurrahman Wahid became president, nearly 2 million of the province's 4 million inhabitants rallied in Banda Aceh in support of a referendum, and an end to military violence.

President Wahid had extended several olive branches to the Aceh militants as well as to the population, but most did not mean much in terms of improving the security or the human rights situation, nor have they had any effect on the people of Aceh's overwhelming sense of injustice.

In an attempt to deal with the issue of justice, an Independent Commission to Investigate Violence in Aceh, was established by presidential decree no. 88/1999. It compiled evidence on five cases. The first case was brought to trial in a combined civilian-military court in May 2000. While 24 soldiers and one civilian were convicted of killing a religious leader and 50 of his students, only

ordinary soldiers and junior officers were convicted. Senior officers escaped trial after the 'disappearance' of a commanding officer, who was a key witness on the links with higher levels of the military. The trial failed to meet popular Acehese demands for justice for the massive human rights abuse, particularly during the anti-insurgency campaign of 1990–92, nor did it meet international standards of independence and impartiality. For many Acehese it was just another sign Jakarta was not serious about delivering justice.¹¹

In that same month the government of Indonesia and GAM formally agreed to a pause in the conflict to distribute humanitarian aid. The Joint Understanding on Humanitarian Pause, as the agreement is called, was seen as a first step towards peace. On 2 June 2000, 15 days after the signing of this historic accord, fighting between Aceh rebels and Indonesian forces was to be suspended for an initial period of three months. Two weeks later a six-point agreement, 'The Permanent Procedure of the Joint Committee on Security Modalities', was signed in Banda Aceh. This document stipulates that the Committee set up non-offensive monitoring procedures, draw up basic implementation rules, and reinstate and specify police peacekeeping duties.

The Indonesian government claims the accord is not a recognition of GAM, nor an indication that both sides enjoy similar status. President Wahid – contrary to earlier promises that he would allow a referendum (though without specifying the contents of such a referendum) – has since emphasized that his government has no intention of withdrawing troops or of conducting a referendum on Aceh's independence. Wahid's refusal to grant self-determination is consistent with his belief in maintaining the unity of the country. In signing the agreement he may well have hoped to prevent the domino-style disintegration of Indonesia.

In contrast, those GAM leaders who desire peace consider the agreement a step towards achieving their goal of an independent Islamic state. The agreement on a Humanitarian Pause, while hailed at the time as a breakthrough, proved to be a setback for civil society, which had flourished briefly after a period of repression. It led to a decrease in media-reported violence, but in fact the everyday violence faced by the population, as well as the intimidation and ter-

ror, actually intensified. The pause was meant to halt the violent aspects of the conflict temporarily, to allow humanitarian aid and development aid to flow into the impoverished province. In addition to reducing the suffering of the local population, this aid was to serve as a confidence-building measure, and to help move towards a peaceful solution. In this respect the agreement has been unsuccessful: a year after the first negotiations were held, while millions of dollars were promised by the international community, no significant aid, humanitarian or otherwise, has reached Aceh. The Humanitarian Pause provided no punishment for taking up arms and, despite Wahid's intentions, the agreement gave acknowledgement as well as formal (international) recognition to GAM. The movement in turn took advantage of the new security situation to consolidate its hold over villages and embark on a terror campaign, in which killings, disappearances and cases of arson and intimidation have become common practice.¹² Children have been severely traumatized by their experience of the war and by being displaced. Hundreds of schools have been burnt. According to one report, the war has disrupted schooling for more than 11,000 Acehese children.

Since the signing of the Pause and the subsequent extensions, the killings and kidnappings have continued unabated. Acehese are forced to make financial contributions to GAM.¹³ Wealthier villagers, such as business people, found themselves openly harassed by GAM members demanding money. People have had their houses burned down or, worse, are being killed when they refuse to contribute. In such a situation, criminal elements, often consisting of renegade troops, take advantage and create further suffering for the population.

Anyone who openly questions GAM's stance on independence has reason to fear for his or her life. Acehese journalists say they now continuously fear retribution from both the army and GAM, and say it has become impossible to report accurately.¹⁴ Human rights workers, ulamas and university staff are in the same position. Many are targeted and killed, others have disappeared and schools have been burned. 'Police look for GAM in the hills, but actually they are your neighbours', complained one human rights lawyer.¹⁵ With the violence now coming from all directions it is difficult to identify the perpetrators. The

result is the same: the moderate and democratic voices – those who should be consulted in a dialogue for peace – are quickly disappearing from Acehese society. They are being intimidated and silenced by both groups.¹⁶

The armed struggle between the Indonesian army and the Aceh Freedom Movement has been disastrous for the civilian population. Tens of thousands of people have been uprooted and chased from their homes. Either they fled from the fighting or were forced to leave by troops and now huddle in make-shift camps. Living conditions in many camps are appalling. Many have only plastic sheets as shelter. Malnutrition is rampant among pregnant women and children. Sickness due to lack of clean water and exhaustion is commonplace. Dozens of babies have been born in the camps, with few or no medical facilities.

In the Islamic province, which calls itself the Veranda of Mecca, it is women who suffer a double burden. Like the men, they face the brutality of the state. But they also continue to be repressed by patriarchal social practices. Men make all the decisions in the camps. Women, many of them war widows without male family members, are deprived of information and of facilities.

Non-Acehese minorities in the province have become the target of GAM attacks during the last decade. During the period before the June 1999 elections, transmigrant sites were targeted by GAM: death threats were posted on the houses, warning transmigrants not to vote and to leave Aceh. At the same time, the military put pressure on transmigrants to use their vote.¹⁷ The settlers, mostly from Java, were unjustly branded as tools of Suharto's attempt to enforce national unity and Javanese hegemony through social engineering. Many transmigrants responded to death threats by leaving sites en masse and fleeing to neighbouring North Sumatra or back to Java.

While the people of Aceh rally behind the call for a referendum on independence, the real issues and demands cannot be debated in this climate of fear. GAM hardly qualifies as a popular democratic movement, and its leader, di Tiro, is not revered as a sultan's descendant, as he likes to portray himself. While not all Acehese would express support for GAM or for outright independence, all of them hold the Indonesian government responsible for their suffering. The popular demands therefore include:

working to secure the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples

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1. accountability and redress for past and ongoing injustices and abuses, including trials and sentences of the most notorious offenders from the military;
2. more provincial power at the local level along with more economic wealth shared within the province by Acehese;
3. increased international interest and presence (UN, NGOs, etc.) accompanied by effective pressure from appropriate foreign and regional powers upon Jakarta to reform the military, correct human rights violations and devise a new power arrangement for Aceh.

Despite its gestures of reconciliation, the new authorities in Jakarta have failed to move quickly to reduce tensions in Aceh, and have thereby made any alternatives to independence increasingly less acceptable. Until the government shows a real commitment to fulfilling the Acehese's basic demands on justice, human rights, economic rights as well as autonomy, there is no reason to think that this will change.

Extracted from 'Indonesia: Regional Conflicts and State Terror', by Mieke Kooistra, 2001. © Minority Rights Group International

Notes

- 1 Figures according to the pro-independence movement. This is an unconfirmed figure. In fact, it is probably on the high side. Amnesty International estimates that 2,000 were killed between 1989 and 1993 at the height of the military operations against GAM. Indonesia's National Commission for Human Rights has confirmed 1,021 deaths and 864 disappearances. According to the Aceh Human Rights Care Forum, 393 people were killed in 1999 and 841 between 1 January and 10 December 2000. The total number of deaths since 1988 probably lies somewhere between the 2,000 cited by Amnesty and the 30,000 figure used by the pro-independence movement.
- 2 Kell, T., *The Roots of the Acehese Rebellion, 1989–1992*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1995.
- 3 Quote from the chair of the Indonesian Legal Aid and Human Rights Association (PBHI) Hendardi (interview, October 2000).
- 4 Kooistra, M., *The Role of Oil and Gas in Conflict*, Henry Dunant Centre, Geneva, 2000.
- 5 Amnesty International estimates that around 2,000 civilians, including women and children, were killed between 1989–93 alone.
- 6 Interviews with NGOs in Aceh.
- 7 Schwartz, *op. cit.*, pp. 282–6.
- 8 The security forces are involved in legal and illegal businesses and earn huge sums of money through the 'protection' of industrial installations such as those of Exxon-Mobil. See Kooistra, *op. cit.*
- 9 Based on analysis of newspaper reports and personal interviews.
- 10 Some villagers started suing Mobil Oil Corp. for allegedly allowing the Indonesian military to use its base to hold and torture civilians and borrow their equipment to dig mass graves.
- 11 International Crisis Group (ICG), 'Indonesia: justice and reconciliation', paper for ICG seminar on Truth, Justice and Reconciliation, Jakarta, September 2000.
- 12 Interviews with monitors and other well-informed sources on Aceh. For security reasons the author protects the identity of these sources. The fact that nobody feels confident to criticize GAM openly underlines the extent of fear of GAM retaliation.
- 13 'When asked for money you can never refuse. The average contribution is 20,000 rupiah (US \$2.10) each time' (Confidential Interview, Banda Aceh).
- 14 Interview with Acehese journalists, October 2000.
- 15 Djalal, D. 'A bloody truce', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 5 October 2000.
- 16 Things are made more complicated by the fact there is more than one GAM. There is the armed wing called A-GAM and there are several other splinter groups. One of the aims of the agreement signed in Switzerland in May 2000 is to eliminate the criminal or rogue elements and unite the 'real' GAM under the current leadership, which then can enter into a political dialogue with Jakarta.
- 17 TAPOL, *A Reign of Terror: Human Rights Violations in Aceh 1998–2000*, London, TAPOL, 2000, p. 13.