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THE ACEH PEACE ACCORD 2005: BREAKTHROUGH, AT LAST?

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BARRING any last-minute glitches, the Aceh peace accord brokered in Helsinki on July 17 is likely to hold. The key sticking point - the Acehnese demand to form their own political party in Aceh – is not something that cannot be resolved through compromise. If the accord goes through the legislature, and the Indonesian military as well as the ultra-nationalists are reined in, a landmark agreement will be signed on August 15 between the government of Indonesia (GoI) and the separatist Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM), the Free Aceh Movement. The signing will bind both sides to peace - and history will be made. Acehnese separatism, one of the most intractable problems confronting modern-day Indonesia, will then finally come to an end.

The symbolism of peace

But why August 15 to formalise the historic agreement? There is a good reason: This will be two days before Indonesia celebrates its independence day on August 17. So if the peace accord is inked as scheduled, it will spill-over into the independence day celebrations to underscore the supremacy of the Indonesian nation-state. This will make this year's independence day all the more meaningful and pregnant with symbolism.

For President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, it will also be a brilliant feather in his cap as he approaches the first anniversary of his rise to power. Never mind the fact that it is his vice-president, Jusuf Kalla, who is the figure behind the current peace drive. So, there is a strong motivation for the Indonesian president to see this peace deal through, what with his position being affected by unpopular policies of late, such as the fuel price hike. But with the House now controlled by his vice-president through Golkar, the peace accord will, in all likelihood, be adopted. There is simply too much to lose if emotion gets the better of the MPs.

Imagine, for the first time in history, Aceh's place in the Indonesian nation-state will be beyond question and doubt. No more ifs or buts. It is a choice that the Acehnese, through GAM, have decided to make and which the international community will back. Indeed, the European Union and ASEAN have been invited to monitor the implementation of the peace accord. If GAM leaders turn up in Jakarta for the August 17 celebrations, it will further mark, unequivocally, the end of the long-standing Acehnese quest for their own homeland.

Historically Aceh was an independent state – a proud sultanate - even before the Indonesian nation was born in 1945. This recognition was extended by the British in 1819. Although the 1824 Anglo-Dutch Treaty treated Sumatra as part of the Dutch sphere of influence, the British continued to acknowledge Acehnese sovereignty. But following the 1871 Treaty of

Sumatra between the two colonial powers, the Dutch began a drive to subjugate the Acehnese.

But the Acehnese were among the fiercest in the struggle against Dutch colonialism. They joined the Republic of Indonesia upon its birth in 1945. But a sense of betrayal over the question of autonomy led them to break away to join the pan-Indonesian Darul Islam movement for an Islamic state. Although the Darul Islam rebellion was crushed, Acehnese resentment of domination by the centre persisted.

By 1976, GAM emerged to spearhead a new separatist campaign. It is this struggle that has since been the bane of the Indonesian government. Previous peace initiatives by external parties failed to resolve the Aceh issue. But the current one by the Helsinki-based Crisis Management Initiative (CMI), led by a former Finnish president, proved surprisingly productive. It culminated in the July 17 accord to end the 30-year conflict once and for all.

The Helsinki talks would not have made any headway had GAM not signalled a willingness to drop its quest for independence. That was in itself a breakthrough which encouraged the Indonesian side to press on. Surprisingly, GAM even went on to drop its quest for a referendum on the future of Aceh – in return for a future role as a local political party. Although President Yudhoyono initially rejected this as it would be against the Constitution, a compromise saved the deal. If the Indonesian legislature endorses the compromise, the Acehnese will form their own local parties, but with at least one key caveat: There must never be any attempt to use these vehicles to press for a referendum on independence.

The rush to peace - the tsunami effect

Why did the two sides agree to end the conflict now when previous peace initiatives had ended in failure?

The most important factor, of course, is the tsunami effect. The calamity has triggered a new dynamic in Aceh. Both sides now see a real need for peace and are eager to bury the hatchet. They have seen the pointlessness of fighting while thousands have died or are dying from nature's wrath. The Yudhoyono government feels the burden of reconstruction but GAM knows it too bears the moral responsibility to alleviate the miseries of the Acehnese people. But the reconstruction of Aceh cannot proceed unhindered unless there is peace and security. Foreign volunteers have been shot at, making international donors nervous. Without peace, reconstruction can be derailed and the billions of dollars of international aid that have been committed will be jeopardised. If this happens, both the Indonesian government and GAM will lose international goodwill.

The cost of the conflict on the Indonesian side is also high. Funding the war is not cheap for a government or a military that is facing growing budgetary pressures. Peace will remove the cost of war and divert precious funds to the more pressing need for reconstruction.

At the same time, Aceh, like Papua – the other separatist province – is facing an unusual erosion in its natural wealth, according to Indonesian analysts. There are signs that some of Aceh's rich natural resources, such as natural gas, are depleting. Also, the viability of the ASEAN fertiliser plant in the province has been in doubt. In other words, the economic imperative for an independent Aceh is losing steam. The prospect of an independent, but resource-poor, Aceh is also contributing to the changing dynamics in the conflict.

Conclusion

In other words, the post-tsunami scenario is putting heavy pressure on both sides to end the war - fast. The international community, especially those who have pledged huge funds for Aceh's reconstruction, would not be unhappy if some arm-twisting had been applied to get the conflict resolved. It is not a surprise therefore that GAM has given up several of its key demands, including self-rule – which was supposed to be its alternative to independence. What both sides fear most is missing what may well be the final chance for peace. If the Helsinki round fails to deliver, the prospect of Indonesia and the Acehnese being condemned to perpetual war is frightening.

But is this all a clever ploy by GAM, as the sceptics in Jakarta say, to buy time and secure independence from within the system? Will GAM try to capture power in Aceh through the democratic process and subsequently fight for a referendum on independence – a referendum that GAM leaders believe they will easily win?

This is unlikely. Giving up the quest for independence after a long struggle is no small thing. GAM must know that once it fully and completely abandons the idea of a separate state to join Indonesia, a future secession will not be easy. GAM clearly has made a huge sacrifice for the sake of the Acehnese people. It would not be unreasonable to expect Jakarta to give something in return for a permanent and enduring peace under the banner of a united Indonesia.

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