



IDSS COMMENTARIES (36/2005)

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The Aceh Conflict: A New Hope for Peace

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23 June 2005

THE ACEH conflict has been too prolonged and bloody. An estimated 12,000 people have been killed during the 30-year struggle for independence by the Acehnese. The peace talks held in the Finnish capital of Helsinki from 26 to 31 May 2005 between the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka), better known as GAM, were the latest attempt to bring peace to the province. Can they lead to a final resolution?

This series of peace talks was not the first effort to resolve the longstanding conflict. In the previous dialogues held following the collapse of the Suharto regime, distrust and insincerity were the main obstacles to a peace agreement. The situation was worsened by Jakarta's domestic politics, especially the rivalry between the civilian government and the TNI (Indonesian Armed Forces). This resulted in the government's inability to control the conduct and activities of the TNI units on the ground.

The relatively positive tone at the fourth meeting recently has fostered optimism that a peace agreement may be reached in the next round of talks scheduled for July 2005. In the course of the latest four rounds of the peace talks, several fundamental issues appear to have been resolved. The details for implementing the agreement will likely to be the focus of the next round of negotiations. Looking at the past experiences, however, the only way to ease the way for a settlement is for both sides to show flexibility in their positions and demands.

Learning from the Past

Prior to this series of talks in 2005, there were already efforts by the two parties to end the conflict through dialogue. The first of such attempts took place during the reform era in October 1999, specifically during the administration of Abdurrahman Wahid. The mediator was the Swiss-based Henry Dunant Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HDC). After a few rounds of talks, a ceasefire, referred to as the Humanitarian Pause for Aceh, was put into effect on 2 June 2000.

When Megawati replaced Abdurrahman, there were more dialogues between the two sides that resulted in the Cessation of Hostilities Framework Agreement (COHA) signed on 9 December 2002 in Geneva. However, mutual distrust that resulted in violations of the ceasefire by both sides proved to be stumbling blocks to the peace process. The last peace talk held in May 2003 ended in failure when five GAM negotiators were arrested. The Acehnese negotiators failed to obtain required permission to leave Banda Aceh for the talk. On 18 May 2003, Megawati placed Aceh under military emergency and the peace process

formally collapsed.

The Latest Dialogues

The current series of talks was initiated by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, head of the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI). Under the auspices of this process, GAM representatives and the Indonesian government have met on three previous occasions in Finland since January 2005 in an attempt to resolve the longstanding conflict. The tsunami disaster that hit Aceh at the end of last year opened the door to international involvement and fundamentally transformed the political landscape.

Even though both parties expressed optimism that a peaceful resolution could be reached following the fourth round of talks, one should keep in mind the experiences and outcome of the three previous attempts before reaching any conclusions. Obstacles surfaced very soon after the initiation of the first round of talks, when both parties insisted on their own views on the status of Aceh. This resulted in a failure to achieve any agreement that could form a basis for the peace dialogue.

In the second and third rounds of talks, GAM offered to withdraw their independence claim in exchange for the Indonesian government's commitment to pull out 40,000 of its police and military personnel and permit a neutral third party to monitor a ceasefire. This offer was the long-awaited turning point. The talks proceeded into the next phase with a discussion of basic proposals from both parties regarding special autonomy for Aceh. However, both disagreed on how to interpret and implement GAM's proposal for self-government.

The Indonesian government insisted that any notion of self-government must come under the framework of NKRI (The Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia). Even so, it did allow GAM participation in direct local elections (Pilkada). Other issues discussed included the possibilities of a cessation of the armed struggle; Aceh's formal name, which is currently known as Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam; and the management of Aceh's natural resources.

Following the third round of talks, there was a change of status in Aceh from Civil Emergency to Civilian Order on 18 May 2005. It was hoped that this change of status would create a more conducive environment for further dialogue. Reports of armed clashes between TNI troops and GAM following the change of status, however, indicated that little had changed in reality. One possible explanation for this stalemate was the Indonesian government's decision not to reduce the number of troops in Aceh.

The reason given by the Indonesian military commander, Endriartono Sutarto, was that any change in Aceh's political status was to be decided by the Jakarta government, whereas security-related concerns of an operational nature were to be determined by the TNI. He further explained that this policy was taken in order to counteract the activity of GAM's military wing. The TNI assumes that GAM still possesses considerable military capacity in Aceh.

In truth, this perception, and the TNI's response of maintaining troop levels, has done little more than to further complicate the search for a successful peace process. Both parties must learn from their past experiences. In particular, the Indonesian government must realise that much depends on its ability to control the conduct and activities of TNI units on the ground.

In the fourth round of talks, the issues discussed included local elections and the formation of local administration, amnesty for the rebels, security and law enforcement, and economic development. Agreement on security and ceasefire procedures was significant, especially following the change of status in Aceh. Regarding this, both parties agreed to involve international peacekeeping experts from the European Union (EU).

Concerning the establishment of independent local elections, Malik Mahmud, the Prime Minister of GAM, requested approval for the formation of a local political party. He urged the Indonesian government to revise its election law since the current one does not give GAM the opportunity to participate in elections. To date, the Indonesian government has not acceded to this request.

GAM's agreement to withdraw its call for independence demonstrated the movement's sincerity in the search for peace. Likewise, it is expected that the Indonesian government respond by being more accommodating and giving GAM an opportunity to participate in local politics. The opportunity for GAM to contest local elections would not only benefit GAM, but will also improve the image of the Indonesian government in the eyes of the Acehnese.

In fact, what should be the foremost consideration of both parties is the basic democratic right of the Acehnese to choose their own future. In order to achieve agreement, both sides must be willing to make sacrifices. This is the best way to prevent a collapse of the peace talks. But, more importantly, it is also the only way to bring an end to the longstanding conflict on the northern-most tip of Sumatra.

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