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Armed Separatism and the 2004 Tsunami in Aceh

By Arno Waizenegger *

Executive Summary

The Indonesian province of Aceh, situated on the northern tip of the island of Sumatra, was the first and most severely affected region hit by the tsunami that devastated many countries around the Indian Ocean on December 26, 2004. Some 170,000 people in Aceh lost their lives and economic loss was estimated as being



equivalent to the annual GDP of the province. For three decades before the tsunami hit, the region had seen conflict between a secessionist movement — the

Free Aceh Movement (GAM) — and the Indonesian government, leading to widespread repression and human rights abuses by the Indonesian military (TNI). In the wake of the massive devastation of the tsunami, there were hopes that the rescue and recovery effort would help bring an end to the hostilities and possibly restore the dignity and self-rule first lost at the hands of the former Dutch colonial rulers in the early 20th century. Although disasters bring the potential for political transformation, the few studies of the political impact of natural disasters

suggest this rarely happens. The escalation in hostilities in Sri Lanka between that government and the Tamil Tigers following the tsunami underscores this. In fact, rather than reconciliation, studies suggest that disasters tend to foster conflict and that the effects of so-called “disaster-diplomacy” are rarely long-lasting. In this regard, the post-tsunami negotiated settlement of the secessionist conflict in Aceh has proven to be a rare example of success: the tsunami and recovery activities in the wake of the disaster created a window of opportunity for a negotiated end to the separatist conflict between GAM



and the Indonesian military. This paper maintains that conditions for a negotiated settlement to the conflict were well advanced before the undersea earthquake set off the disaster. It explores the positive

political implications this disaster had for peace-building initiatives in Aceh, including the reaching of a Memorandum of Understanding for peace between the Government of Indonesia and GAM.



* Arno Waizenegger is an MA student in Geography, Cultural Anthropology and Indonesian Philology at the University of Cologne, Germany. He studied at the University of British Columbia on a DAAD scholarship and was a Junior Research Analyst for the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada in 2006. A Hampton grant by UBC supported his research. This paper builds on 61 interviews conducted in English or Bahasa Indonesia in Aceh, Medan and Singapore in May and June 2006, on international and domestic media and policy reports, as well as on academic literature.



False Promise of the Tsunami

Disasters can have an impact on the most entrenched conflicts. That was the hope for Aceh after the devastating tsunami of December 26, 2004 hit Indonesia's northern-most province. For three decades before the disaster, the region had seen conflict between the secessionist the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Indonesian government. In fact many promises were made in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, most notably that of an immediate ceasefire. Following a unilateral commitment to a ceasefire by GAM on December 27, the then-Chief of Staff of the Indonesian military (TNI), General Endriartono Sutarto, indicated that in order to allow relief efforts to go ahead, the military would respond in kind. Indonesian President Yudhoyono also called "on those who are still fighting, to come out . . . let us use this historic moment to join and be united again." However, the reality in the province was somewhat different. Skirmishes between TNI and GAM continued as senior TNI officers in Aceh insisted that "calamity will not be seen as a way for the military to suspend military operations against GAM . . . raids to quell

the tsunami. In light of continued bloodshed, and pointing to the military background of the new President, critics argued that "the chances for a just, peaceful, and redistributive solution to Aceh's problems seem further away than ever."

Their pessimism was a little premature. One month after the disaster, official negotiations began between the government and GAM. Rather than a totally new initiative, these negotiations flowed from secret talks initiated during the previous year by the Indonesian Vice President, Jusuf Kalla. Four days before the tsunami struck Aceh, former Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari was invited by Kalla and Finish businessman Juha Christensen to facilitate negotiations, following an agreement for further talks between the government and GAM negotiators. Ahtisaari, the Chairman of the Finnish NGO Crisis Management Initiative (CMI), gained the approval of the Sweden-based GAM leadership to mediate and invited the two parties to Helsinki. While the January negotiations focused on addressing the urgent needs of



secessionists in Aceh will continue unless the President issues a decree to lift the civil emergency." In fact, Yudhoyono only did this officially months later, on May 19, 2005. The President, however, issued a regulation ordering the TNI and the Indonesian Police (Polri) to continue operations to "restore safety in a more defensive way." But at the end of January 2005, the TNI Chief of Staff announced that the troops of the TNI had killed 208 GAM members in 86 incidents of armed conflict since

post-tsunami relief and reconstruction, a second round of the peace talks on February 21-23, 2005 centred on the initiation of a comprehensive peace process. Before this second meeting, GAM announced that the movement would set aside its demands for independence, supposedly under the indirect stipulation by Ahtisaari that continuing talks would require that GAM drop this demand. As a compromise between "special autonomy" and "independence," GAM suggested the concept of "self-

government.” GAM’s concession greatly facilitated further discussion and prevented the talks from stalling or breaking down.¹ A second important element was the participation of the EU Council Secretariat and the European Commission and their proposal to have an EU-led monitoring mission as GAM did not appear to trust monitoring only by ASEAN members – as initiated under earlier failed processes in 2000 and 2002.

On July 17, 2005, the parties initialed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which was officially signed on August 15, 2005. The impact of the tsunami was specifically recognized at two levels within the MoU: first, that “the parties are deeply convinced that only the peaceful settlement of the conflict will enable the rebuilding of Aceh . . . to progress and succeed,” and second, that “GAM will nominate representatives to participate fully at all levels in the commission established to conduct the post-tsunami reconstruction.” The MoU stipulated that GAM had to decommission 840 weapons and to demobilize its forces. Indonesia would have to withdraw all police except those carrying out normal policing activities as well as TNI; grant a general amnesty for GAM prisoners; provide compensation for GAM; compensate the Acehnese population for the loss of property and human rights abuses resulting from the conflict; rehabilitate GAM; change legislation to allow for the formation of local political parties; ensure

provincial entitlement to 70% of revenues from all current and future hydrocarbon deposits and other natural resources; judge all civilian crimes committed by military personnel in civil courts in Aceh; and set up a truth and reconciliation commission. The Aceh Monitoring Mission (AMM), comprising EU and ASEAN monitors, would oversee the implementation of the MoU. Three months after the stipulated deadlines, and after several demonstrations in Banda Aceh, the Indonesian House of Representative endorsed the new Law on the Governing of Aceh. GAM and the politically close Aceh Referendum Information Center (SIRA) have indicated their rejection of the law which falls short of MoU guarantees, with the cancellation of the judicial accountability of Indonesian forces in Acehnese civil courts for human rights abuses; the reduction of the revenue share from natural resources from 70% to between 15% and 55%; and the imprecise role of Indonesian forces remaining in Aceh. The implementation of the Law on Governing Aceh fostered among others the MoU-stipulation of local elections that were held on December 11, 2006. The result in the race for provincial governor revealed an unexpected landslide victory by GAM’s spokesman, Irwandi Yusuf, and his running mate Muhammad Nazar (head of SIRA). Seemingly content with this outcome and confident in the peace process, on December 15, 2006, the AMM officially terminated its mission.

Peace in the Wake of Tsunami?

“The tsunami produced an overwhelming moral, political, economic, social imperative to end the conflict . . . I was criticized by those who did not see any benefit from renewed talks with GAM. But I was more concerned about the judgment of history for missing this rare window of opportunity to resolve the conflict.” (President Yudhoyono, opening speech, “Building Permanent Peace in Aceh: One Year After The Helsinki Accord” conference, August 14, 2006.)

Disasters can influence the evolution of conflicts through direct and indirect factors operating at local, national and international levels. Two main arguments are generally made regarding disasters and political change. The first

is that disasters open a window of opportunity for political change, which could facilitate efforts for conflict prevention and peacemaking. The second argument is that context matters. Not only are disasters political events, but they are also the product of, or happen within, the complex of politics. Natural disasters do not occur in historical vacuums: the vulnerability of populations and ecosystems reflect pre-disaster politics. The political character of disasters is strongly situated within particular political, as well as cultural and economic contexts. Post-disaster political transformations would more often represent an acceleration and amplification of pre-disaster social and political dynamics than the “new departure” perceived to be morally necessary after such devastation. The revolutionary potential of disasters, in other words,

would be first and foremost influenced by pre-existing political conditions. These two arguments underline the importance of timeliness and context-sensitivity in responding to disasters, most notably with regard to the dynamics of conflicts, so as to seize the opportunity of a post-disaster context to bring about a termination, or at least prevent the recurrence or escalation of hostilities.

The consequences of disasters on conflict transformation can be examined along three major dimensions relating politics and vulnerabilities: military, socio-political and socio-economic (see Table 1). These do not operate in isolation from each other, but are often closely related. These are the three main dimensions against which the transformation of conflict in Aceh can be examined.²

TABLE 1
Major Dimensions and Processes in Post-disaster Conflict Transformation

Dimensions	Processes
Military	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced capacity of belligerent parties • Opportunistic behavior
Socio-political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced 'morality' of conflict • Opened political system • Internationalization
Socio-economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transformed endowments and entitlements, including displacement and loss of assets • Allocation of relief and reconstruction assistance

Military Dimensions

The pattern of military control in Aceh largely determined the relative impact of the tsunami on TNI and GAM. The tsunami heavily affected both the government security forces and GAM, but to different degrees and in different ways. The TNI and Polri were proportionally more severely affected than GAM since the TNI's posts, weapon depots and residential compounds were largely situated in coastal areas. According to official Indonesian documents, a total of 2,698 security personnel were either killed or missing. Other sources estimated that around one-third of the Indonesian security forces were either injured or killed by the tsunami. The TNI also lost an estimated US\$55 million, and Polri US\$66 million, worth of weapons and equipment. Moreover, roads and bridges were severely damaged and thereby greatly limited ground movement.

In contrast, according to GAM-spokesman (now Aceh governor) Irwandi Yusuf, GAM lost only 70 combatants as its forces were mainly in the forests and foothills when the tsunami hit. Another 100 GAM members were

reported to have drowned in flooded prisons, many of them political rather than military members. While the TNI could draw on its nationwide resources, including Navy and Air Force, the supply lines and support systems of GAM were further undermined by devastation in coastal areas such as Banda Aceh, Aceh Besar, Aceh Jaya and Aceh Barat. Besides the physical impact of the tsunami, GAM's willingness to fight was also reduced. Moreover, GAM had been severely weakened in the previous two years. Having lost up to one-quarter of its combatants, including top GAM Commander Ishak Daud, who was killed by the TNI, a number of GAM commanders were actually eager for some kind of exit strategy by the time the tsunami struck.

In the direct aftermath of the disaster, approximately 80% of the TNI were initially redirected to humanitarian and related security tasks, while 20% continued to conduct "safety restoring operations" (military operations against GAM). Although TNI Chief of Staff General Ryamizard Ryacudu asserted that by the end of January, about 40%

were still engaged in humanitarian relief operations while 60% were directed to combat GAM, TNI reports indicated that only 5% directly contributed to the humanitarian effort, and then mostly in highly media-visible Banda Aceh and as humanitarian military escorts. The government/TNI also sent 6,173 more troops to Aceh, a move that US security analysts saw as a guarantee by Yudhoyono to have more troops on hand “to clean [GAM] out . . . if GAM does not agree to settle the problem peacefully” (according to a report on the World Socialist Website). Disaster relief was also the object of a bitter propaganda

struggle, between the two sides. The portrayal of GAM by the government forces as a criminal and terrorist organization impeding or looting the provision of relief was aimed at weakening the political legitimacy of the secessionist group and justification for renewed counter-insurgency operations. GAM, for its part, repeated its commitment to a ceasefire to facilitate aid provision, while denouncing repeated assaults on its units by TNI. Overall, more agencies complained about delays or diversion of relief aid and transportation “taxes” by TNI, than about GAM.

Socio-political Dimensions

Three major tsunami-related socio-political dimensions influenced the evolution of the conflict: the moral imperative of peace, political opening up and internationalization of conflict resolution. These three dimensions, in turn, transformed public discourse on Aceh and the governable space in the province.

Compassionate interpretations of the disaster and acts of solidarity transformed the Indonesian public discussion on Aceh from one of threat and danger to one of suffering and solidarity. Although hostilities continued until the MoU agreement was reached between the parties, a military solution to the conflict became widely opposed

by Indonesians generally and by Acehnese. Aceh had long been a place of suffering, but the sheer scale and immediacy of a disaster that killed directly at least ten times more people than nearly three decades of conflict, transformed Aceh from a dangerous and threatening place into one of national commiseration (and business opportunities, this time not mostly for the military). A year before the tsunami, 50% of Indonesians supported some form of military intervention in Aceh. Following the tsunami, Indonesian television reports were full of tears and prayers, with the leading TV news channel covering the tsunami calamity for 40 days around the clock under the title “Indonesia is Weeping.”

TABLE 2
Comparison of Service Providers and Satisfaction in First 48 Hours After Tsunami in Indonesia (Aceh), Sri Lanka and India

	Aceh	Sri Lanka	India
Service Providers (%)			
Government	5	12	31
International NGO	2	14	4
Local NGO	2	10	10
Private Individual	86	44	8
Corporate Sector	0	4	5
Religious Organization	4	14	10
Village Community	n.a	n.a.	20
Satisfaction (1-5, 5 highest)	1.6	3.0	3.8

Source: adapted from A. Thomas and V. Ramaligan, “Recipient perceptions of aid effectiveness: rescue, relief and rehabilitation in tsunami affected Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka,” Fritz Institute, San Francisco, 2005.

Besides the compassionate aspect of this shift away from violence, the tsunami was also widely interpreted as an act of God by the Acehnese and Indonesian populations, which gave impetus to the moral imperative of successfully negotiating an end to the conflict. The most popular interpretation is that the tsunami was a “wisdom” (*hikmah*) or “sentence” (*vonis*) from God: “as followers of Islam, we believe that with every event, even more so a calamity, Allah always gives us a ‘*hikmah*.’ Among other things, this is a way used by Him reminding us to return to the right path,” was the explanation given by one local NGO representative. According to Dr. Humam Hamid, an Acehnese sociologist of Syiah Kuala University in Banda Aceh, the second “bitterness” of the overwhelming destruction brought upon many Acehnese by the earthquake and tsunami might also help to overcome the “first bitterness” of war, thereby contributing to reconciliation. There remains the risk, however, that the tsunami will add to the victimization process of the Acehnese population, creating one more layer of martyrdom.

Compassion and solidarity was internationalized through massive international aid donations, but it was first experienced at a local level through intra-community assistance. As shown in Table 2, however, victims in Aceh relied mostly on other individuals for help and received least support from government, NGOs or religious and community organizations in the first 48 hours after the disaster, as compared to victims in Sri Lanka and India. Not surprisingly, victims in Aceh were also the most dissatisfied with relief services in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami. This institutional failure can be in part explained by the devastation brought on local organizations and the isolation of many communities resulting from the impact of the tsunami on transportation infrastructure. But along with the continuation of hostilities, this failure initially discredited the government in the eyes of many Acehnese. There also remained many complaints about the responses to the disaster, most notably with regard to action by the Indonesian authorities. In contrast, however, 83% of Indonesians assessed the response of the government as “good” or “very good,” and seriousness in responding to the disaster ranked fourth among issues contributing to President Yudhoyono’s popularity.

The second socio-political dimension was the restriction on government actions as a result of the direct impact of the devastation and the following internationalization of relief, conflict resolution and reconstruction. Although the province may have been “ungovernable” in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami due to the collapse of infrastructure and institutions, TNI quickly took control again, while local government capacity had decreased by 9% in the province and 20% in the provincial capital Banda Aceh, according to the government. In parallel,



the sweeping international public sympathy and awareness also influenced the scale of action citizens and their governments took and thus affected the

international significance of the conflict and governance in the province.³ In turn, the government and GAM were put under national and international pressure to achieve a political breakthrough on the conflict, facilitate democratization, and manage efficiently relief and reconstruction. The influx of foreign relief personnel to Aceh limited to some extent the ability of TNI and GAM to proceed openly with military operations or human rights abuses toward the Acehnese population, even if TNI attempted to delineate separate “spaces of relief” and “spaces of war” until the MoU was signed, through travel restrictions, military escorts, and anti-GAM security statements directed at aid personnel.

As civil society and international relief organizations stepped into, and broadened the gap between the local population and Jakarta, the disaster contributed to opening up political space within Aceh. This came by way of the massive and rapid influx of aid organizations and the rise of civil society organizations, with 430 national NGOs supported by dozens of UN and foreign government agencies as well as 124 international NGOs active in Aceh in 2005. External involvement in conflict resolution through negotiations facilitated by Martti Ahtisaari and strong EU backing of the peace process,

including through direct monitoring, meant that Indonesian authorities and TNI were not able to regain “full control” of the province. Political parties, civil society organizations and citizens also became active, with several major demonstrations taking place in Banda Aceh and other Acehese cities. Greater political openness and new standards of security and freedom of speech were mutually reinforced and propelled by the activity, motivation, effectiveness and number of activists engaged. Mutual acceptance and collaboration also eased tensions between the government and civil society, while helping NGOs to strengthen and institutionalize. Many exiled Acehese returned to Aceh, even before official international monitoring was in place. Finally, the government responded to challenges to its authority through a mix of measures: it required all foreign military to leave by March 26, 2006; all foreign aid workers operating in places other than Banda Aceh or Meulaboh were required to register and have military escorts; and a Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency (BRR – *Badan Rehabilitasi dan Rekonstruksi*) was created. Considered as an “independent body,” the BRR could not only secure foreign assistance more easily, but also insulated the government from conflicts over aid misallocation, mismanagement or fraud.⁴ The overall record of the BRR, however, has come under strong criticism notably in terms of extremely slow provision of housing.

The presence and intent of foreigners also proved controversial, most notably with critics of opportunistic US and EU involvement, as well as the religious proselytizing by Christian organizations. Critics denounced the self-interest characterizing some of the international solidarity, notably the “opportunistic use of Asian suffering by US leaders.” US Secretary of State Colin Powell publicly argued that disaster relief “dries up those pools of dissatisfaction that might give rise to terrorist activity . . . [and] . . . does give to the Muslim world . . . an opportunity to see American generosity, American values in action . . . [so that] . . . value system of ours will be reinforced [in the region].” The dispatching of naval personnel and uniformed troops showed the humanitarian face and values of a US military that was seen as guilty of human rights abuses in Iraq. It reportedly succeeded in reducing opposition to the US and support for Osama bin Laden. However, the humanitarian military engagement of the US did trigger resentment about foreign interference.

The EU sought to avoid the same image by adopting a more civilian – yet politically rewarding – engagement as a “world actor” capable of taking over large peace-building responsibilities in cooperation with other regional organizations such as ASEAN.

The impact of donor agencies on local groups is controversial. Newly created ties to politically and financially powerful international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), as well as the commitment of some of these organizations to raise and increase the capacity of civil society groups, has added new potential to the power of civil society in post-conflict and post-tsunami Aceh. The very competitive environment created by INGOs may also have raised the performance of local NGOs. However, local groups also face problems of brain drain and competition for budgets with INGOs. The predominant top-down approach followed by many donors and INGOs impeded the full unfolding of the potential of local NGOs, in effect weakening their independence of action, with many becoming simple sub-contractors. Some local groups also used NGOs as launching platforms for future political parties.

So the impact of the tsunami on the existing socio-political system was significant at the institutional level. The inability of local authorities to respond to the massive scale of the disaster led to an internationalization of relief and reconstruction, which in turn opened up political space in Aceh while shoring up a more civilian control of the government and bolstering the prestige of President Yudhoyono. GAM, which had been in a weakened military position prior to the tsunami, was reinforced politically and legitimized internationally while TNI saw its influence undermined. The tsunami also further strengthened the influence of the *ulama* (religious leaders) in Acehese society, with the heads of mosques seemingly taking on an even more active role in local politics after having long been considered as relatively impartial in the conflict (both parties being secular). International presence is crucial, and many Acehese fear that once monitors, foreign relief agencies and journalists depart, Aceh will be hermetically sealed again and left to the mercy of the Indonesian military and government officials in Jakarta. Local ex-GAM commanders pleaded with foreigners to stay.

Socio-economic Dimensions

The tsunami had major economic effects on Aceh. Production losses were estimated at US\$1.2 billion and reconstruction needs (including upgrades) at about US\$7 billion. The burden of losses was not equally shared among Acehnese, with those in northern and western coastal areas being the worst affected. The tsunami also generated an estimated US\$8.8 billion in pledges of reconstruction assistance. Balancing tsunami losses and windfalls is a precarious exercise, with high risks of corruption, unfair allocations, and mismanagement, potentially aggravating the conflict. Scandals involving social reconstruction funds allocated as part of earlier peace initiatives and former President Megawati Sukarnoputri's failure to remove Aceh's reputedly corrupt governor had undermined the previous ceasefire agreement. More optimistic scenarios saw the disaster providing the opportunity to rebuild a "better Aceh," in the words of the World Bank, and improve governance. Overall, the economic dimensions of the tsunami did contribute to promoting a resolution of the conflict, notably by offering major business and political opportunities for the local and some national elites that relied in part on a sustained peace. In the absence of fair and broad support to impoverished populations, however, "buying peace" through the support of the elite fails to address many other aspects of the conflict.

A further economic dimension is the restructuring of TNI and GAM economic agendas in the province, which in the past had contributed to prolonging and aggravating the conflict. The departure of about two-thirds of TNI troops, changes in the legislation governing TNI's economic activities, as well as official disaster-related Indonesian funding and foreign assistance should have lessened the economic incentives of the TNI. TNI's and Polri's involvement in the illegal logging industry and bribery practices in transportation have not ended, however. Beyond the TNI, fraud and corruption are also alleged in the administration and implementation of reconstruction projects. As Akhiruddin Mahjuddin, an accountant investigating aid spending for the Aceh Anti-Corruption Movement (GERAK) asserts, "30% to 40% of all the aid funds, Indonesian and international, have



been tainted by graft."⁵ GAM officials are also profiting from the aid money, but in more legitimate ways. Firstly GAM-related companies can

now more easily operate, without the restrictions of TNI. Secondly, due to high prestige and reputation, many high-ranking GAM members have succeeded in gaining highly paid jobs in the reconstruction, rehabilitation and reintegration business.

Chronic poverty and long-term conflict exacerbate the socio-economic tensions resulting from the impact of the tsunami.⁶ Many Acehnese, direct or indirect victims of the tsunami but also of decades of military repression, feel excluded from the rehabilitation and reconstruction process and complain about unequal levels of assistance.⁷ They claim that wealthy people benefit from the presence of international agencies, while the poor sometimes only bear the rising costs of INGO-induced inflation, thus polarizing existing social divisions and opposition to particular projects and implementation agencies.⁸ Demonstrations in front of the BRR office repeatedly raise these issues. Unequal distribution of aid and unequal benefits are already leading to increasing assistance-induced economic disparities at the local level as well as on an inter-communal and inter-regional scale. Significant and potentially politically sensitive variations in aid allocation could in turn abate or contribute to grievances and conflicts. Some critics feared that aid would primarily reach areas loyal to the government, mostly Banda Aceh and the west coast, while depriving "disloyal" and rebellious areas on the east coast and in the interior. Banda Aceh, the provincial hub, and close by villages did receive a lot of attention, especially from INGOs allegedly seeking a high media profile. By December 2005, however, 70% of tsunami-affected farmers in the east had received assistance compared with only 20% in the west.

Conclusion

The tsunami was a tragic window of opportunity for conflict transformation in Aceh. Transition to peace would have been highly unlikely in Aceh without the tsunami, despite GAM being at its weakest point militarily before the disaster struck. The tsunami did not trigger peace-building efforts between the government and GAM, yet the successful transition to peace and self-governance in Aceh has had much to do with the exceptional circumstances and processes resulting from the disaster. The tsunami accelerated and amplified pre-disaster political trends at different levels, which favoured a rapid resolution of the conflict. Among these were the democratization and decentralization of Indonesian politics; continued negotiations under Vice-President Kalla; the President's own commitment to resolving the conflict peacefully as well as his relationship to the military; GAM's weakened military capacity and desire for a political exit; and a general slowing down of the conflict. Other factors included a US interest in resolving the conflict and a general EU interest in demonstrating its capacity in fostering a negotiated rather than a military outcome.

Moreover, the disaster was an exceptional opportunity for peace-building efforts since it created a political need for peace, which added to the pre-existing political will of both parties to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. For both GAM and the government, this need for peace first related to the requirements of massive and prolonged response to the disaster, and the associated national and international attention and scrutiny they suddenly received. For the government and TNI, opportunities to improve foreign relations for strategic and economic reasons were at stake. For GAM, the tsunami created an extremely favourable condition to continue the internationalization of the conflict. The post-tsunami setting internationalized the peace-building process through the deployment of the Aceh Monitoring Mission and massive international presence.⁹ This ensured a favourable bargaining position as well as a greater accountability and commitment to potential agreements with the government. Lastly, the sympathy and solidarity

factors as well as the psychological impact of this catastrophic disaster helped bring about a MoU between GAM and government and consolidated the best chances of durable peace in Aceh in the last three decades.

Despite an end to vertical GAM-government conflict in the year following the MoU, there remain many questions about the long-term durability of peace. There are uncertainties about the adequacy of the Law on Governing Aceh and, according to the World Bank, local level disputes are increasing. Disbursement of reconstruction funds is scheduled to end in 2008, and a year later the main gas processing plant in the province may be closing, bringing the prospect of a fiscal and economic crisis in Aceh. The durability of civilian rule in Aceh is also under question, with GAM being transformed into a political party and TNI redefining its role as a protector of ethnic minorities in Aceh while potentially making a re-entry in the context of conflicts between newly empowered political parties or different communities and "criminal" groups.

If peace lasts in Aceh, it will be the first time a separatist conflict in Indonesia has been settled by political means (although under continued military pressure). Peace in Aceh is therefore perceived by many observers not only as a test case for international efforts to bring about peace in a disaster-struck region, but also an indicator of Indonesia's performance in its transition to democracy. The fact that the Indonesian regime needed a humanitarian catastrophe to catalyze the end of 29 years of armed conflict suggests that democracy and civil society in Indonesia are still not powerful enough to generate transformations to peace on their own. There is hope that the national and the emerging local civil society will become influential enough to contribute to developments for lasting peace; a true rapprochement of Indonesian civilians, especially of those from Java, requires their appreciation for Acehnese suffering prior to the natural disaster. This is necessary since peace building will not succeed without the support of Indonesians and local and national civil society.

Endnotes

¹ As stated by GAM Representative Nur Djuli in (Nezar and Suud 2005).

² See also the comparative paper on post-tsunami conflict dynamics in Aceh and Sri Lanka: LeBillon, Philippe & Waizenegger, (2007): Peace in the Wake of Disaster? Secessionist Conflicts and the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. in "Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers."

³ The Indian Ocean tsunami was also a 'perfect media event' that reached an international coverage on a par with the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks during the first 45 days and dwarfed other natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies. Pre-tsunami media restrictions in Aceh silenced the effects of the disaster there during the first few days as the media mostly focused on Thailand, but Aceh came to prominence after 10 days with an estimated 300-500 journalists present on-site.

⁴ Remarks at U.S.-Indonesia Society Dinner by B. Lynn Pascoe, U.S. Ambassador to Indonesia. March 23, 2006, Jakarta, Indonesia. Retrieved on July 22, 2006 from: <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/64028.htm>

⁵ GERAK is partly funded by foreign donors and its findings are regarded as credible by embassies and aid agencies.

⁶ Approximately 76% feel that life had become even harder since the peace deal. This is mostly due to soaring prices of basic commodities and high rates of unemployment. In particular, prices for basic food and transportation have gone up, along with rents (Diani 2006).

⁷ For example, in the case of housing, varying size and quality. In the case of socio-economic support programs, some communities or individuals receive grants, some loans, some temporary employment, some nothing (Eye-on-Aceh and AidWatch 2006).

⁸ A survey by Oxfam found that aid had tended to go to businesses and landowners, exacerbating the divide between rich and poor (Oxfam 2005), see also (Eye-on-Aceh and AidWatch 2006).

⁹ While in the month before the tsunami, Vice President Jusuf Kalla made remarks that third-party involvement in the peace process are not welcome by the government, the MoU half a year later, included international monitoring by the AMM (Shie 2004).

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