

In the aftermath of the 26 December 2004 tsunami, much has been changing in Aceh. The loss to life, livelihoods, property and infrastructure devastated the hardest-hit areas on the west coast, not least in the environs of the provincial capital of Banda Aceh. Efforts by the Indonesian government, the UN system, and myriad local, national and international organizations to address this complex humanitarian emergency, as well as the subsequent reconstruction phase, have also contributed to a changing social landscape, no more so than in Banda Aceh, with its budding 'international ghetto.'

From the lifting of the civil emergency in June 2005 to the forthcoming direct elections of local officials (*pilkada*), important political changes are also underway in Aceh. The signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the government in Jakarta and the separatist movement, GAM (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*) on 15 August 2005, formalized a peace agreement that, so far, has held sway. Under the auspices of the Aceh Monitoring Mission (AMM), the peace process has gained added momentum with the decommissioning of a stipulated number of GAM weapons (840) and the relocation of 25,890 government military troops and 5,850 police accomplished by December 2005.

In this context, it is all the more striking that the lives of IDPs have remained, in important respects, defined by their displacement. On the one hand, after more than a year, only a small fraction of the more than half a million people displaced by the tsunami have been able to return to their homes and communities, or to become active participants in the processes involved in the rebuilding of their lives. On the other hand, even with a peace process well underway, the right to return has yet to be successfully realised for thousands who were forcibly displaced due to militarised conflict in the years preceding the tsunami.

More than a year on, some 80 percent of those displaced by natural disaster in Aceh and Nias Island remain in some form of temporary shelters.ⁱ Although conditions vary, many such shelters share common problems of poor sanitation and location, which, in turn, continue to affect inhabitants, especially as regards their health, livelihood and education. While the Indonesian armed forces have been removed from their earlier prominent and, in places, unmediated role in dealing with those displaced to temporary relocation sites, concerns remain about shortcomings in meeting the rights to protection in temporary shelters, not least for women and children.

A recent sample survey of IDPs in host families also suggest that such arrangements, which predominantly involve relatives, have become rather more permanent, or at least long-term, than many had hoped a year ago. Reportedly, more than half of IDPs surveyed have been living with the same host communities or families since the day the tsunami struck, while about a third arrived at their current location some 2 months later.ⁱⁱ The destruction and/or unfinished reconstruction of their house were the most commonly cited reasons for the long stays with host families. While the vast majority of IDPs in host families have been registered 'as IDPs', with commensurate rights to assistance and protection, there are serious questions as to the extent to which such issues become de facto family matters, and the implications thereof upon household economies and social relations alike.

Until quite recently, another category of host community IDPs had remained largely invisible in the wider context of post-tsunami Aceh – those displaced by conflict during the militarised campaigns of counter/insurgency. While the IOM had reported that some 1,800 conflict IDPs were still in camps only days before the tsunami,ⁱⁱⁱ for example, there was no corresponding figure for those who had sought refuge from militarization and violence with relatives or friends. This is not surprising, given the informality and fluidity of such arrangements compared to the official registration and regulation of IDPs in designated shelter areas. Nonetheless, host community conflict IDPs outnumbered by a considerable margin their encamped counterparts at the time.

Recent developments highlighted the extent to which local political conditions have continued to loom large on the horizon of host community IDPs of conflict, shaping their efforts and prospects of recognition, as well as return. For example, it was only in the aftermath of the peace agreement and the implementation thereof, notably the demilitarisation of host community areas, that conflict IDPs in Bireuen and Pidie sought to organise a return movement to Bener Meriah and Aceh Tengah, two districts in the central highlands of Aceh. Moreover, seeing as it was an attack on the Takengon local office of the international monitoring body, the Joint Security Council, that broke the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement in 2002, it is perhaps no coincidence that these conflict IDPs have remained in displacement for such a long period of time since fleeing violent conflict in May-June 2001. Nor is it surprising that IDPs eventually seized on collective action in their efforts to secure a return to central Aceh, where so-called militia groups have gained particular notoriety -- militia groups which, significantly, are not included in the MoU but still enjoy the backing of local businessmen, as well as civilian and military officials.^{iv}

After several unsuccessful attempts by individuals and families to return to their communities in central Aceh, a collective effort was launched on 10 December 2005 by some 5,000 conflict IDPs in Pidie and Bireuen, two adjacent northern districts.^v As transportation promised by local government officials failed to materialise on the day, IDPs turned this planned collective return into a protest march, and made their first stop at Abu Beureueh mosque in Beureuneun (Pidie), a prominent site of resistance and refuge alike in the social imaginary of many Acehnese. They then continued some 10 kilometres to Lumputot (Bireuen), where, along with IDPs joining from host communities in Bireuen, they eventually boarded trucks and buses headed for the interior highlands of central Aceh, stopping to set up large make-shift tent camps by the mosques at two locations known as Km 60 and Ronga-Ronga.^{vi}

Since the start of this return march on 10 December, these conflict IDPs have faced serious humanitarian problems, including some 60 people collapsing from exhaustion and starvation within the first week,^{vii} and, as a result, it is estimated that as many as half had returned to their host families in Pidie and Bireuen by year's end. On their return to central Aceh, IDPs have also experienced intimidation and forcible relocation at the hands of military and police, as well as various interventions by local civilian government officials which seem to have been aimed at the silencing of a collective voice (e.g., meetings without IDP leaders) and the demobilisation of the return movement (e.g., dispersals of IDPs to sub-district and village levels). There have also been reports of violence targeting returning IDPs and/or their property, as well as cases of fighting with local youths or (former) militia in places where local leaders have refused to provide security guarantees.

To date, the situation of these IDPs is one of considerable uncertainty. On the one hand, immediate concerns remain as to the overall conditions in make-shift camps, which have become more difficult to reach and monitor on account of their proliferation and relocation to villages in the central highlands, as well as to the broader issue of security, or the lack thereof, especially in communities where no security guarantees have been agreed with local officials. On the other hand, while some IDPs have been able to return to survey or even begin clearing their lands, the government has yet to involve IDPs in longer-term livelihood and house-building projects.^{viii}

According to the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, “[c]ompetent authorities have the primary duty and responsibility to establish conditions, as well as provide the means, which allow internally displaced persons to return voluntarily, in safety and with dignity, to their homes or places of habitual residence” (Section V, Principle 28:1). At a minimum, such conditions include a commitment to uphold and strengthen the ongoing peace process, including local government officials offering security guarantees and, where desired, hosting *peusijuk* (traditional ceremony of welcome or forgiveness). It also requires a greater measure of transparency and participation in the very processes of securing a safe return and, significantly, reintegration of IDPs.

However, the current situation and prospects of these conflict IDPs may also be affected by broader political developments. Significantly, a prospective division of Aceh province, currently debated in the national legislature in Jakarta, could threaten the entire peace process, thus undermining the conditions for a safe return and reintegration to communities in the central highlands. While president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has come out against such a division, there is nonetheless a coalition of local government officials in Aceh and so-called ‘nationalist’ or hard-line parliamentarians in Jakarta in favour of passing a proposed clause which would allow for the creation of new districts, regencies or provinces.^{ix}

There is strong indication that conflict IDPs who wish to return to their communities in the central highlands of Aceh view such developments with great alarm. Indeed, the timing of their return movement on 10 December followed on the heels of the 4 December rally in Jakarta where 7 local *bupati* unilaterally declared their secession from Aceh and their proposal for two new provinces -- ‘Aceh Leuser Antara’ (ALA) and ‘Aceh Barat Selatan’ (ABAS) – to be forged out of Aceh Tengah, Aceh Tenggara, Aceh Singkil, Gayo Lues, and Bener Meriah, and Aceh Barat, Aceh Barat Daya, Aceh Jaya, Nagan Raya, and Simeulue, respectively.^x In the current context of Aceh, it is an open question, and a critically important one, whether local government officials, by pushing for the division of the province, and thus jeopardizing the peace process, may also be in violation of the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, which state that “[s]uch authorities shall endeavour to facilitate the reintegration or returned or resettled internally displaced persons” (Ibid..)

ⁱ Oxfam Briefing Note, “A Place to stay, a place to live: Challenges in providing shelter in India, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka after the tsunami” (14 December 2005).

ⁱⁱ UNORC, “IDPs in Host Families Sample Survey Summary Report” (14 February 2006).

ⁱⁱⁱ International Organisation for Migration, 2004. “Update on the IDP situation in Aceh” (20 December 2004).

^{iv} See, for example, Imparsial Team, “Report Post MoU Monitoring on Aceh, Aug 15 – Oct 15, 2005” (October 2005).

^v According to the Center for Humanitarian and Social Development (CHSD), a local NGO in Pidie working with the IDPs, some 5,000 names were collected at the outset of the return march. Author’s interview, Pidie 11 January 2006.

^{vi} See, for example, “*Pengungsi Kembali ke Koloni*” *acehkita*, 12-18 December, p. 10.

^{vii} World Bank – DFS, “Aceh Conflict Monitoring Update 1- 31 December 2005.”

^{viii} World Bank – DFS, “Aceh Conflict Monitoring Update 1- 31 January 2006.”

^{ix} See, for example, “Aceh, the crucial step,” *Jakarta Post* (31 January 2006).

^x “Pemekaran Aceh Idak Jadi Prioritas,” *acehkita.com* (7 December 2005).