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Indonesia's Aceh Problem:

Measuring International and Domestic Costs

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Conclusions

Secession remains the greatest fear of Indonesia's military and civilian leadership. While every country seeks to protect its territory, Indonesia's post-independence history of secessionism and rebellion, combined with its extraordinary heterogeneity, gives such fears special resonance. Aceh (unlike East Timor and Papua) has been part of Indonesia since independence, and successful Acehnese secession, the government fears, might set a precedent for the unraveling of the state. Therefore, Indonesia will strive to retain Aceh as part of the state.

Indonesia's current military offensive, which began in May 2003 following the rejection of the 9 December 2002 peace agreement, must be seen in this light. The military has accused the Acehnese separatists, the Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* or GAM) of not disarming, of using the agreement to regroup, and of refusing to drop its independence demands.

While the decision to end peace talks lies with the Government of Indonesia, both sides are at fault. Acehnese secessionists have failed to transform themselves into a mainstream political movement and continue to use violence against soldiers and civilians alike to achieve their aims. The Indonesian government has been both impatient, in terms of demanding the rebels drop independence goals, and imprudent in its use of force, which has resulted in civilian deaths during the latest military offensive.

Despite the fact that many Acehnese support independence (although not necessarily the GAM movement and its use of violence), there is no prospect for Acehnese independence in the foreseeable future. In addition to Indonesia's unwillingness to countenance it, no other country in the world recognizes Acehnese demands for independence (in direct contrast to East Timor). The international community has reaffirmed its support for Indonesia's territorial integrity. Not only is non-intervention in domestic affairs at the heart of international conduct, but Indonesia's strategic importance to Southeast Asia and world shipping through the Malacca Straits means that the international community has a strong stake in Indonesia's cohesion. However, the international community is also deeply worried that Indonesia's renewed military offensive in Aceh will lead to a humanitarian disaster.

The countries most interested in the Aceh dilemma, including the United States, are keenly aware that shortsighted and heavy-handed Indonesian government policies in the past have increased independence-minded sentiment in the province. The Aceh problem is a point of difference between Washington and Jakarta with the latter disappointed by a lack of U.S. support for its military offensive. Jakarta has also accused the United States of not being empathetic to Indonesia's battle with what it deems Islamic terrorists. A recent U.S. Congress decision to block the renewal of military-to-military ties was based partly on opposition to Indonesia's offensive in Aceh. However, the conflict in Aceh will not derail the broader Indonesia-U.S. relationship, especially as the United States needs good relations with Indonesia to proceed with the war against terrorism in Southeast Asia.

Indonesia's Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) neighbors are concerned about the conflict in Aceh but hesitate to do or say anything that will be construed by Indonesia as interference. ASEAN has therefore done little more than reaffirm support for Indonesian state sovereignty. Equally, the ASEAN countries desire Indonesian unity so as not to destabilize the region. It is principally western countries and the UN Secretary General who are urging Indonesia to return to the negotiating table, not because they support GAM, but out of an interest that Indonesia remain intact.

Conclusions (cont.)

For President Megawati, the domestic political implications of military action in Aceh are unlikely to be negative. Despite the drain on the state coffers, and some criticism abroad, the Megawati government will likely shore up its support among the Indonesian public—who share the government's fixation with state unity.

The key domestic implication of the Aceh military action for the Megawati administration is a clear demonstration that the Indonesian military (TNI) is able to directly influence and shape government policy. The decision to abandon the peace agreement is a concession to hawks within the TNI who did not support the peace process in the first instance.

Introduction: Roots and Realities of the Aceh Conflict

In May 2003, Indonesia launched its largest military operation in Aceh since former President Soeharto's campaign in the province from 1989 to 1998. A December 2002 peace agreement between GAM and the Indonesian government now lies totally in ruins. The Indonesian military failed to support the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (COHA) from the start, arguing that it gave the rebels time to consolidate, while the Acehnese separatists accused the military of violating the agreement by continuing military operations in the province. The bottom line is that neither the Indonesian military nor civilian authorities will tolerate a secessionist movement within Indonesia. Although many Acehnese nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and ordinary civilians support independence, this should not be confused with support for the armed rebels. Unfortunately, the Indonesian military often fails to distinguish between armed secessionists and non-violent political activists critical of military conduct.

Many observers have drawn questionable conclusions about the nature of the conflict in Aceh. The first misconception, especially among many Indonesian commentators and officials, is that the conflict reflects the Acehnese propensity for warfare and rebellion dating back to the Dutch invasion of 1873. The Acehnese mounted the most serious resistance to Dutch rule that the colonial authorities had ever seen. After Indonesian independence, many Acehnese supported a local variation of the Darul Islam movement that had emerged during the 1950s in support of an Islamic state. Although fueled in part by local grievances, Darul Islam was not a separatist movement and its leaders in Aceh were eventually granted amnesty and incorporated into the Indonesian state and allowed to remain the ruling authorities in the Aceh province.

GAM emerged as a small and marginal separatist movement after it declared independence in 1976. GAM claimed lineage from Darul Islam but was actually different because it promoted secessionism and did not have an overtly Islamic identity. This indicates that Aceh has not been in perpetual rebellion against the Indonesian state since Indonesian independence in 1945. Support for independence among the Acehnese is more recent and gained strength in response to Soeharto's oppressive rule during the late 1980s and 1990s. GAM—headed by Hasan di Tiro, who has lived in exile in Sweden for most of his life—has grown from a small, relatively insignificant organization of 200 in 1976, to a widespread movement within the province despite its armed wing having been crushed on the battlefield by the Indonesian military on a number of occasions.

The second misconception is that the Acehnese rebellion stems from Aceh's separate identity encompassing a more orthodox understanding and practice of the Islamic faith. In fact, GAM itself has never advocated an Islamic state (although a minor breakaway group did). GAM has carefully distanced itself from Islamist terrorist groups and radical Middle Eastern states. Successive Indonesian governments have granted Aceh autonomy to implement aspects of *Shariah* law and then expressed surprise when it has failed to undermine public anger in Aceh against the Indonesian state. It is highly doubtful that giving greater autonomy in religious affairs will make any difference to the situation because the key drivers of the secessionist sentiment within Aceh are not religious. The first driver of secessionist sentiment has been the massive level of human rights abuses committed by the Indonesian security forces (especially during the 1990s). However, Acehnese discontent with the Indonesian security forces does not automatically translate into support for GAM. GAM has an unfortunate record of targeting civilians too, particularly those of Javanese descent. The second is the perception of economic exploitation. Even though Aceh is one of Indonesia's most important provinces for mineral extraction, the Acehnese remain amongst Indonesia's poorest citizens. GAM has been able to take advantage of this anger against the central state as a recruiting tool.

The current military campaign, which may decimate GAM once again in the battlefield and has already cost civilian lives, will further erode the legitimacy of the Indonesian state within Aceh and strengthen secessionist sentiment. This leaves the international community with a tricky juggling act of supporting Indonesian territorial integrity, urging Indonesia back to the negotiating table, and asking the Indonesian security forces to respect the rules and norms of warfare.

Attempts at Peace

Since the beginning of Indonesia's democratization process in 1998, there have been attempts to bring a negotiated settlement to the Aceh situation. A cease-fire agreement, called the Humanitarian Pause, facilitated by the Switzerland-based NGO called Henri Dunant Centre (HDC), was signed on 12 May 2000. Although initially successful in reducing violence, the fighting soon resumed, and the following year was the worst on record for war-related deaths (around 1,500 in a population of four million). Dialogue has continued since 2000 between GAM and the Government of Indonesia negotiating team. On 9 December 2002, GAM and the Indonesian government reached another agreement known as the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (COHA) which, on paper, was groundbreaking. GAM made a major concession in accepting Jakarta's decision to grant autonomy to Aceh (now known as *Nanggroe Aceh Darusalam*). Previously GAM had refused to acknowledge Indonesian laws relating to Aceh. The regional autonomy deal means that Aceh may implement aspects of *Shariah* law and retain 70 percent of revenues from mineral extraction (up from less than five percent). Indonesia made a major concession when it agreed to allow foreign observers to monitor the COHA agreement. COHA also established a timetable for the disarmament of GAM and the withdrawal of non-organic, or external, Indonesian security force units, particularly the detested mobile police brigade (BRIMOB). The agreement also promised to establish "peace zones" where both the Indonesian security forces and GAM were permitted to enter as long as they were unarmed. The COHA also allowed GAM to become a political party to contest elections—though this last provision remained ill defined. (Current Indonesian law does not allow provincially based political parties or those advocating separatist ideologies to participate in elections.)

The COHA agreement, however, failed to achieve peace in Aceh. The Indonesian military, which had launched a major offensive against GAM in the run-up to the signing of the agreement (offering the reason that they were forcing GAM to the negotiating table), openly expressed deep reservations about COHA. Prominent army generals publicly questioned whether this gave GAM breathing space to consolidate its support and

capabilities in the Acehnese countryside. Yet it was the military that consolidated in a major way, increasing the number of soldiers to nearly 50,000. Both the Indonesian military and civilian leadership, almost immediately after the agreement was signed, made the additional demand that GAM drop its independence objective. Indonesia and GAM announced new talks in early May after Indonesia gave the rebel movement a deadline of May 12 to comply with its demand to recant independence. GAM's unwillingness to cease its secessionist struggle is cited by the military as the main reason for its late May 2003 offensive in the province. With the passing of the May 12 deadline for GAM to renounce independence, the military soon resumed its campaign—largely overshadowed by the U.S. war in Iraq—with last-minute talks in Tokyo on 17–18 May failing to patch up the peace agreement.

Through March and April a series of violent pro-Indonesia demonstrations threatened the Joint Security Committee (JSC) monitors across Aceh. Not only did the security forces fail to deal with the excesses of some demonstrators, the Army Chief of Staff, General Ryamizard Ryacudu, expressed sympathy for the protesters and argued that they represented the true feelings of the people of Aceh. The JSC monitors were withdrawn to Banda Aceh by early April and subsequently left Aceh altogether, while the GAM members of the JSC were arrested.

Role of the Military and the Latest Offensive

Ten to fifteen thousand people have died in Aceh since the beginning of the 1980s as the result of war. Human rights groups claim that the vast majority of the victims are civilians who are not protagonists in the conflict. Both GAM and the TNI have eliminated critics and attempted to terrorize local populations. It is fair to say that the population dislikes both GAM and TNI, but the role of the Indonesian military is most deeply resented in Aceh, and remains a leading cause of pro-independence sentiment.

The Indonesian military has been the subject of a number of official government human rights investigations since the fall of Soeharto in May 1998. Large numbers of civilians were killed under a deliberate phase of "shock therapy" in Aceh during the latter Soeharto years. Furthermore, it became routine to terrorize villages suspected of sympathy for GAM. House burning and sexual violence were systematically employed throughout the province. While the security forces have taken care to avoid bad publicity in the post-Soeharto era, there is incontrovertible evidence of ongoing violence against non-combatants. Foreign governments fear that a renewed military campaign in Aceh will involve a great deal of "collateral damage." Even former Indonesian foreign minister Ali Alatas, in a 14 May 2003 interview with the *Jakarta Post*, called on Indonesia to avoid the human rights abuses of the past, which, he said, had been so counterproductive in the case of East Timor—although he equally chastised GAM for not renouncing independence.

President Megawati signed Presidential Decree No. 28/2003, which imposed martial law on the province from midnight on 19 May. Parliament delivered a message of support to the president on her decision to establish martial law and allow a resumption of the military campaign. Martial law also involved serious curbs on media reporting, while authorities in Jakarta have begun to monitor the activities of Acehnese living within the capital city. With the resumption of the military campaign thousands within the province became refugees. Three hundred schools were systematically torched within a two-day period following the announcement of martial law, which the military and GAM blame on each other. Since the establishment of martial law, the military says it can destroy GAM (around 3,000 to 4,000 strong) within six months, and claims it has already killed 150 separatists. Both foreign and Indonesian media sources have challenged that all those killed are GAM members. Particularly notable was an event in Bireuen in which a number of suspects, including a 13-year-old boy, appear to have been executed by the military in cold blood.

The International Community's Response

The lesson GAM has learned from East Timor is the importance of sympathy and support from the international community. GAM had hoped the presence of international observers would internationalize the Aceh problem. However, Aceh is recognized by the international community as a part of Indonesia's sovereign territory, in direct contrast to East Timor—which was never legally recognized as part of the Indonesia nation/state. Nor has GAM transformed itself into a solely political movement and renounced violence (in contrast to Xanana Gusmão's Falintil organization in East Timor).

Meanwhile, Indonesia is extremely sensitive about international attitudes toward its territorial integrity. No country in the international community supports Acehnese independence, and Indonesia has been regularly reassured by its neighbors and key relationship partners about this stance. Though the international community has not supported GAM's independence struggle, Indonesia has not been successful in completely turning off GAM's ability to operate outside of Indonesia. For example, Ali Alatas has made a representation to Sweden, home to a number of GAM leaders in exile, including Hasan di Tiro, to rein in the activities of the separatist group. Sweden has refused to arrest these activists on the grounds that they are now Swedish citizens and have not contravened the laws of Sweden.

Indonesia's current foreign minister, Hassan Wirajuda, has made the claim that all countries respect Indonesia's borders and that he has received no condemnations from abroad for the military campaign in Aceh. While this is true to some extent, it is also the case that many interested countries are disappointed with the resumption of a military campaign in the province. U.S. Ambassador to Indonesia, Ralph Boyce, stated during the GAM-Indonesia negotiations that the United States would be "deeply disappointed" if the negotiations failed (but hastened to add that the United States supported Indonesian territorial integrity). Such a statement is a clear diplomatic message, particularly occurring in the midst of the negotiations. Similar sentiments have come from the European Union. Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the UN, has stated he is "deeply concerned" about the military offensive. By contrast the ASEAN countries have remained quiet on the issue, and Aceh has not been discussed in ASEAN meetings. Indonesia's neighbors remain watchful of Aceh—Thailand and the Philippines have been prepared to send monitors there—but ultimately the members of ASEAN will refrain from even veiled criticisms of Indonesia, the largest, most populous member of the Southeast Asian community.

Domestic and Regional Security Implications

Domestically, the military offensive in Aceh is a clear demonstration of the growing influence of the TNI within the Megawati administration. Strong support has also come from parliament, and opinion polls suggest that the Indonesian public backs attempts to rein in the Acehnese rebels. War in Aceh does not have strong domestic ramifications for Megawati, and may even improve her popularity in a country obsessed with maintenance of national unity. Aceh has not been a major factor in domestic Indonesian politics, and there is no reason to assume this will change. (East Timor became a massive domestic issue because it actually broke away from the Republic.) Megawati's rivals for the presidency in 2004 are unlikely to seek to capitalize on the Aceh situation to criticize Megawati because the criticisms will have little resonance with the voting public.

The conflict in Aceh does not have immediate strategic implications for the ASEAN region. The insurgency in Aceh is relatively contained—with the exceptions of illegal small arms shipments out of Thailand and the suggestions of funding from sympathetic elements in Malaysia. The war in Aceh also has no serious implications for the Global War on Terrorism, as the problem

is judged (by the United States and others) to have little to do with international terrorism or even Islamic fundamentalism. Although elements of GAM have engaged in terrorist acts, GAM is not linked to the al Qaeda movement or to any other movement that threatens western interests. In this sense, Aceh has been judged differently from the problem in Mindanao. The separatist problem in Mindanao is layered with religious identity issues (crudely, "Christian" versus "Muslim") in a way that Aceh is not. While groups like al Qaeda have tried to contact Moro independence groups in the Southern Philippines, there is little evidence this has occurred in Aceh.

Issues for the Future

There are no easy solutions for the conflict in Aceh. It is clear that military might alone cannot solve the underlying problems in the province. Key compromises on both sides are necessary to bring a semblance of settlement to the ongoing conflict. First, GAM will need to give up, at some point, its armed struggle even if it does not renounce independence in the short term. Although GAM has failed to do this on the grounds that it will leave independence supporters defenseless, its maintenance of an armed force has provided the basis for the military to continue counter-insurgency operations in the province that have resulted in the deaths of civilians. There is also the issue of atrocities committed by GAM's rebel army, which undermines any international and domestic sympathy it hopes to attract. GAM's only real option for the future is to accept autonomy within Indonesia. There is no prospect that GAM can defeat the TNI on the battlefield.

Second, and related directly to the possible evolution of GAM, is for Indonesia to allow independence sentiment in the province to find expression through a legitimate political movement. This would not amount to an acceptance of Acehnese independence, but would allow a widespread sentiment to be channeled through the democratic framework. Nonetheless, the military and key elements of the political elite will be loath to allow this to occur, despite the numerous overseas examples of independence movements transforming themselves into autonomy movements through these means (e.g., the Moro National Liberation Front in the Southern Philippines). The Indonesian state remains fearful that allowing a separatist organization to stand for election would hasten the unraveling of the republic.

Third, the Indonesian government needs to be more realistic about its insistence that GAM renounce independence when it is the *sine qua non* of the movement itself. Persuasion (through the processes of negotiation and local democracy) is vastly superior to coercion in this case.

Fourth, the involvement of the TNI and the police in generating their own revenue in the Aceh province (and elsewhere) seriously confuses the objectives of the security forces and needs to be restrained. Informal taxation collection across the province has given rise to widespread resentment of the security forces. Coupled with GAM's extortion of businesses and private citizens, the economy of Aceh will remain seriously depressed for some time. According to former U.S. Pacific Command Admiral Dennis C. Blair and David Phillips, writing in the *International Herald Tribune* on 23 May 2003, the Indonesian military gains only 25 percent of its income from the national budget and has long used Indonesia's conflict zones as a means to help make up the shortfall.

Implications for U.S.-Indonesia Relations

The United States has a clear interest in the cohesion of the Indonesian state, as does the rest of the international community and Indonesia's near neighbors in ASEAN. An independent Aceh, unlike the illegally acquired East Timor, would raise the specter of Indonesia's possible breakup. The United States has also monitored the Aceh conflict closely because of large U.S. investments in the PT Arun LNG gas plant at Lhokseumawe (one of Indonesia's largest extractive investments).

The United States has steadfastly refused to place GAM on the list of international terrorist organizations or to link the secessionist war with the Global War on Terrorism. This has annoyed the Indonesian government, which has accused Washington of only caring about terrorist threats when they target western interests. It would be a mistake to frame the conflict in Aceh as part of Washington's war on terrorism. In particular, the United States would be unwise to give carte blanche approval to TNI actions in Aceh, especially if Washington wishes to avoid the emergence of violent anti-Americanism within the Acehnese population. The Indonesian military is detested in parts of the province and the United States should avoid being perceived as part of the "oppression" that has been visited on the province. While GAM itself has committed acts of violence against civilians, especially people of Javanese ancestry, there seems little sense for the United States to unnecessarily make an enemy out of GAM when it is essentially a guerrilla movement unconnected to international Islamist groups. The United States is well advised to continue to urge both sides back to the negotiating table.

While the conflict in Aceh does not have direct bearing on the Global War on Terrorism, there are some indirect consequences. Indonesia's overall stability and cohesion are important to U.S. security. Dissatisfied local populations are breeding grounds for extremism, which may come to threaten local and U.S. interests. The United States, similar to the rest of the international community, finds itself on a tightrope between supporting Indonesian integrity on one hand, and urging Indonesia's restraint on the other. The Bush administration will also struggle to convince a skeptical Congress that restoring military-to-military ties is an acceptable course of action. Congress recently voted down the restoration of military links, with members citing the deaths of two U.S. citizens in Papua—most likely at the hands of the military—and the offensive in Aceh. The chief implication of Aceh's recent history is that the military has largely been responsible for unwittingly spreading independence sentiment across the province because of its abuses. It is in the interest of the international community to urge the Indonesian government to find political solutions to the Aceh problem, as the military option is a proven failure and threatens to undermine the very stability it claims to uphold.

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