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Indonesian Separatist Movement in Aceh

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Summary

Indonesia faces a major separatist insurgency in the province of Aceh in northern Sumatra. The Indonesian government has proposed autonomy for Aceh, but insurgents demand independence. Two years of negotiations have been unsuccessful. Indonesian civilian leaders have been unable to control the Indonesian military, whose aggressive actions in Aceh produce frequent reports of human rights abuses and alienation of the populace. The Bush Administration has urged Indonesia to seek a political settlement; but it has been hesitant to deal with the military's actions and seeks renewed ties with the military in order to cooperate against terrorism.

The Indonesian government faces separatist movements in several parts of the Indonesian archipelago. The emergence and/or growth of these movements have been influenced by the collapse of the Suharto government in 1998 and East Timor's decision for independence in a United Nations-sponsored referendum of August 31, 1999. The most serious of these movements is in the province of Aceh. Aceh is located on the northern tip of Sumatra, the westernmost of Indonesia's major islands. Aceh is positioned on the Malacca Strait opposite Malaysia, a strategic waterway connecting the Pacific and Indian oceans. Aceh's population is estimated at five million. The population is predominantly Muslim. Aceh has abundant resources of natural gas and timber. Exports of natural gas from Aceh provide the central government with about \$1 billion annually.¹

The Separatist Movement

Aceh Merdeka (Free Aceh or GAM) came into existence in the 1970s and issued a declaration of independence in 1976. GAM is waging an insurgency with a military force estimated at 3,000-4,000 (the Indonesian commander in Aceh gave a figure of 3,692 in July 2002). GAM conducts guerrilla-style attacks in much of the province. It appears to have substantial public support, as evidenced by pro-independence demonstrations in November 1999, which drew over 500,000 people. It has a political organization throughout Aceh and collects taxes. Indonesian commanders in Aceh acknowledge that

¹ Arnold, Wayne. Exxon is Preparing Return to Rebel Area in Indonesia. *New York Times*, June 19, 2001. p. W1.

community leaders, religious leaders, and local government officials do not support Indonesian security forces against the GAM.² GAM has been criticized for using heavy-handed and abusive tactics against civilians and for attacking schools and economic infrastructure. Such tactics may have reduced its popular support, but this seems to be a relatively small loss because of the more extensive human rights abuses of the Indonesian military (TNI).³

GAM professes the aim of establishing Aceh as an Islamic kingdom but not as a fundamentalist Islamic state. It reportedly has received material assistance from Iran and Libya, although most of its arms reportedly come from Southeast Asian sources through supply routes in southern Thailand. Its official leader, Hasan de Tiro, is exiled in Sweden. He is U.S.-educated, at Columbia University in New York and Plano University in Texas. He describes himself as pro-U.S. and says he would seek U.S. support. GAM condemned the September 11 terrorist attack on the United States and voiced support for the U.S. campaign against terrorism.⁴ However, GAM attacked the Arun natural gas facilities of the U.S. company, Exxon-Mobil, and drew a warning from the U.S. State Department. GAM claims that Exxon-Mobil collaborates with the TNI and is complicit in the human rights abuses committed by the TNI in the area around Arun.⁵

Several other Acehese groups have separatist leanings, but some of these appear to differ with the insurgency strategy of the GAM and oppose a GAM monopoly in negotiating with the Indonesian government. Muslim religious leaders are influential. Student groups have become important as pro-independence sentiment emerged into the open after 1998. A conference of civic and political Acehese leaders from throughout Aceh met on November 14, 2000, and adopted a declaration that demanded a return of sovereignty to the Acehese people and for mediation by the United Nations and foreign governments.⁶

The causes of separatism and alienation in Aceh are a combination of four factors:

(1) Aceh has a distinct history as an independent kingdom from the 15th century until the beginning of the 20th century. It maintained diplomatic and consular relations with several states, including Great Britain. It exchanged diplomatic notes with the United

² TNI Faces Legal Barriers to Resolving Aceh Problem. *Jakarta Post* (internet version), July 26, 2002. Major General Djali Jusuf, TNI commander in Aceh, stated in an interview that GAM guerrillas “hide behind and amongst the general Acehese public” and that “the local Acehese administration is no help at all.” See also: Reid, Anthony. Which Way Aceh? *Far Eastern Economic Review*, March 16, 2000. p.36. Aceh Local Gov’t at a Loss Over Conflict. *Suara Karija (Jakarta)*, January 13, 2000. p.3.

³ McBeth, John. Give War a Chance. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, July 25, 2002. p.12-14.

⁴ Lintner, Bertil. Giving No Quarter. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, July 29, 1999. p.18-19. Lintner, Bertil. Birthday Bash. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, December 13, 2001. p. 22.

⁵ Perlez, Jane. A Long War Slices Deep in Indonesia. *New York Times*, June 17, 2002. p. A3.

⁶ International Crisis Group. Aceh: Escalating Tensions, Brussels, December 2000. P. 6.

States.⁷ In 1873, the Dutch invaded Aceh and conquered it after a war that lasted until 1904. Hasan de Tiro is a descendant of the last Sultan, who was killed fighting the Dutch.

(2) There has been a progressive alienation of the population in reaction to the policies of successive Indonesian governments since Indonesia won independence from the Netherlands in 1949. The Indonesian government abolished the province of Aceh in 1950, prompting the first revolt of the Acehnese in the early 1950s. In 1959, the Indonesian government declared Aceh a special territory with autonomy in religious and education affairs, but the government never implemented this special status. From the 1960s, Aceh was subject to increased centralization of power in Jakarta under President Suharto. Revolts, aiming at independence, occurred in the 1970s and late 1980s.

(3) Extensive human rights abuses by the Indonesian military has been documented. Successive Indonesian governments relied on military repression in dealing with dissidence in Aceh. Military abuses of civilians reportedly became common in the 1970s and 1980s. This peaked during the revolt in the late 1980s. In congressional testimony in 1992, Sidney Jones, Executive Director of Asia Watch, detailed killings, disappearances, and torture committed by the Indonesian military in Aceh.⁸ Mass graves were uncovered in 1998 by Indonesia's National Commission on Human Rights. Several Indonesian military crackdowns occurred after 1998, including heavy military operations in 2001 and 2002, resulting in the killing of 2,000 people in 2001 and a likely equal number in 2002 (many reportedly massacred by the military), widespread destruction, and over 100,000 people fleeing their homes.⁹

(4) Aceh's wealth has gone to the central government. By the 1970s, discontent arose over the flow of wealth from Aceh's natural resources. Upwards of 80-90% of this wealth has gone to Java, Indonesia's most populous island and the center of Indonesian political power.¹⁰ This prompted dissident Acehnese to claim that Aceh was the object of Javanese colonialism, which had replaced Dutch colonialism.

Indonesian Policies

Indonesian policies toward Aceh have been influenced by three factors since the fall of the Suharto government in May 1998. One is the weaknesses in the governments that followed Suharto. The governments of Abdurrahman Wahid (October 1999-July 2001) and Megawati Sukarnoputri (July 2001 to the present) have been coalitions of individuals and groups with little or no prior government experience or little experience in top

⁷ American University, Foreign Area Studies. *Indonesia: a Country Study*. Washington, Department of the Army, 1983. p.27. Gardner, Paul F. *Shared Hopes, Separate Fears: Fifty Years of U.S.-Indonesian Relations*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1997. p.9.

⁸ U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations. *Crisis in East Timor and U.S. Policy Toward Indonesia*. Hearings. 102nd Congress, 2nd Session. Washington, U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1992. p.30-36.

⁹ McBeth, Give War a Chance, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, July 25, 2002, p. 12-14. Richburg, Keith. Indonesia's Other War. *Washington Post*, August 16, 1999. p.A9. Perlez, A Long War Slices Deep in Indonesia. *New York Times*, June 17, 2002, p. A3.

¹⁰ *The Far East and Australasia 1999*. Europa Publications Ltd., 1999. p.422.

decision-making levels. The same is true of the parliament elected in June 1999. Second, the Indonesian body politic remains resentful over the loss of East Timor, blames the United Nations and foreign governments rather than Indonesian policies, and is determined that Aceh will not separate. Third and most important is the volatile relationship between the new governments and the powerful military since Suharto's fall. Civilian leaders have tried to exert control over the TNI with only slight success. The TNI continues to assert its authority over policy in Indonesia's outer islands and resists the central government's attempts to assert its authority in these places, including Aceh.

The government's political response includes an offer of autonomy to Aceh. In early 2001, the parliament passed a special autonomy law for Aceh. It provides that Aceh will receive 70 percent of the revenue from the sale of the province's natural resources. It gives the provincial government the right to impose Islamic sharia law. However, the special autonomy law has not been implemented. The provincial government has not passed needed implementation legislation. Moreover, it has been reported that the actual level of revenues to Aceh from natural resources will be much smaller originally touted and that Exxon-Mobil's gas production is expected to run out by 2014.¹¹

The government also negotiated with GAM. The talks have been held under the auspices of the Henry Dunant Center, a Swiss organization. Negotiations since 2000 produced several cease-fires, which quickly broke down. The talks made little progress on key political issues. The government holds that negotiations must be conducted solely on the principle of special autonomy, meaning that GAM must accept the special autonomy law. GAM contends that negotiations can take up special autonomy but must also take up GAM's proposal of a referendum on the question of independence. GAM holds that there should be an international role in the settlement of the Aceh question; the Indonesian government opposes a role by other governments or the United Nations.

The government issued a seven point policy on Aceh in August 2002. The main points were a restoration of security "by crushing the separatist movement," negotiations with GAM only if GAM accepts the special autonomy law, setting a deadline of the end of 2002 for GAM to accept the autonomy law and "end armed struggle," and a warning that "the government will intensify security operations" if GAM does not meet the conditions and the deadline.¹²

The government's political policies are influenced heavily by the TNI, which has a distinct policy on Aceh. The TNI leadership favors a policy of crushing the rebellion by military means, and it is suspicious of negotiations with GAM. It has pressed several times since 1999 for the imposition of martial law measures in Aceh, which would give the TNI unquestioned authority over the province. The last such pressure came in the summer of 2002, which resulted in the government's seven point program and the ultimatum to GAM to accept the government's terms by December 31, 2002. Since President Megawati assumed office in July 2001, the TNI has put more troops into the province, reacting to the freer hand she gives the TNI compared to President Wahid. In

¹¹ McBeth, John. Exxon-Mobil Under Siege. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 8, 2002. p. 36.

¹² Unidjaja, Fabiola Desy. Government Steps Up Pressure on GAM. *The Jakarta Post* (internet version), August 20, 2002.

July 2002, there were about 30,000 troops and police in Aceh, and the chief TNI commander in Aceh reportedly was pressing for at least an additional 3,000-4,000 troops.¹³ The TNI gave slightly more emphasis to human rights in training programs beginning in 2001; but it defies outside criticism and pressure to improve its conduct toward Acehese civilians. Despite constant reports of acts of violence by the TNI against civilians, no trials of TNI personnel have occurred since April 2000.

The military's abusive tactics toward civilians have been well documented. One is the murder, torture, and intimidation of politically active Acehese. This includes members of non-government organizations (NGOs), including foreign and human rights NGOs.¹⁴ Retaliation is a major source of abuses. In response to GAM attacks and ambushes, military units enter nearby villages and summarily execute residents, usually the male residents. Sometimes these executions reportedly are unprovoked by any action by GAM.¹⁵ The TNI reportedly extorts money from local business as payment for "protection." In 2002, the TNI facilitated the entrance into Aceh of Laskar Jihad, the militant and violent Islamic group that has attacked Christians in other parts of Indonesia.¹⁶

U.S. Policy on Aceh

Following the violence-ridden separation of East Timor from Indonesia in 1999, the United States began to pay more attention to Aceh. U.S. policy developed within the context of three broader policy objectives toward Indonesia that came out of East Timor's separation and the fall of the Suharto government. The first was to support political evolution in Indonesia towards democracy. The second was to support Indonesia's territorial integrity – to reassure post-Suharto leaders that the United States would not repeat its East Timor policy of 1999 towards other parts of Indonesia where there were separatist movements. The third, advocated by the Pentagon and the U.S. Pacific Command, was to restore links between the U.S. and Indonesian militaries, which had been cut because of the East Timor situation. Within this policy context, the Clinton Administration urged GAM to negotiate a settlement within a united Indonesia, and it took a cautious approach toward TNI human rights abuses in Aceh.¹⁷ A State Department statement of April 26, 2000, condemned violence "by all parties," but it criticized specifically only GAM.

¹³ Murphy, Dan. Military Reasserts Power, Casualties Mount in Aceh. *Christian Science Monitor*, July 24, 2002. p. 7. McBeth. Give War a Chance, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, July 25, 2002. p. 12-14.

¹⁴ Djalal, Dini. Silencing the Voices of Aceh. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, July 5, 2001. p. 25-26.

¹⁵ Murphy, Dan. Failure of Courts Hurts Jakarta's Effort to Control Rebels. *Christian Science Monitor*, August 23, 2002. p. 7. Perlez, A Long War Slices Deep in Indonesia, *New York Times*, June 17, 2002, A3.

¹⁶ Rosenberg, Tina. A Guerrilla War Stoked by a Thirst for Cash. *New York Times*, December 27, 2001. p. A18. Timberlake, Ian. In Indonesia, Guerrilla War Hits Civilians Hardest. *Washington Times*, February 22, 2002. p. A14.

¹⁷ *Banda Aceh Serambi Indonesia* (internet version), June 16, 2000, reported U.S. Ambassador Robert Gelbard's description of GAM's platform of independence as "very unrealistic."

The impact of the September 11 terrorist attack on the United States was to add a policy priority of securing Indonesian cooperation against terrorism. This did not conflict with the three existing policy goals but reinforced them. The Bush Administration worked hard to restore links between the U.S. and Indonesian militaries and institute counter-terrorism training programs for the Indonesian police and the TNI. In August 2002, Secretary of State Colin Powell announced a \$50 million package of such programs. The Administration also influenced Congress to drop the prohibition on TNI participation in the U.S. International Military Education Training Program (IMET), the “Leahy amendment,” which had been in foreign operations legislation since 1999. The prohibition on U.S. financial arms sales (FMS) remains.

This intense attention to Indonesia also created more attention to Aceh. The Administration apparent goal is to prevent the situation in Aceh from worsening U.S.-Indonesian relations and reducing the possibilities of anti-terrorism cooperation. This danger to U.S. policy came in part from the Leahy amendment, whose initial versions demanded Indonesian accountability for actions in East Timor in 1999. In the special operations bill for FY 2002 (P.L. 107-115), Congress added references to all of Indonesia and the condition that Indonesia allow the United Nations, international humanitarian organizations, and human rights organizations into Aceh and other troubled regions. The Administration’s main effort was to influence negotiations. In spring 2002, Assistant Secretary of State, Matt Daley, met with Hasan di Tiro in Sweden and urged him to accept special autonomy.¹⁸ The Administration also offered retired Marine General Anthony Zinni in a mediator’s role; Zinni visited Indonesia and Aceh in July 2002. The Administration continued the cautious approach towards TNI human rights abuses. It reportedly pressured the Indonesian government in the summer of 2002 not to accept the TNI’s recommendation of imposing a state of emergency in Aceh;¹⁹ the Administration no doubt viewed a state of emergency as symbolizing too visibly the TNI’s policies in Aceh. The Administration also came out against a human rights lawsuit in U.S. courts filed by the International Labour Rights Foundation against the U.S. Exxon-Mobil Corporation for complicity in human rights abuses by TNI units guarding the company’s natural gas installations in Aceh. In a letter of July 29, 2002, to a federal judge, the State Department argued that the lawsuit could lead the Indonesian government to discriminate against U.S. firms and stop cooperation with the United States against terrorism.²⁰

The Administration’s policy contains at least three challenges. One is to influence GAM to at least negotiate on the basis of special autonomy. Two is to influence the Indonesian government to implement in good faith the special autonomy law – an important task given Jakarta’s long history of breaking promises of autonomy to Aceh. Three is to influence the TNI against policies and attitudes that could lead to a big human rights crisis in Aceh (such as a major massacre of civilians) that would spur new congressional legislation to restrict the Pentagon’s dealings with the TNI. The lack of progress on one likely would make exceeding difficult positive movement on the others.

¹⁸ Perlez, A Long War Slices Deep in Indonesia, *New York Times*, June 17,, 2002, A3.

¹⁹ Muklis, Ali and Yates, Dean. Indonesia Backs Away from Immediate Aceh Crackdown. Reuters News Agency, August 19, 2002.

²⁰ Hiebert, Murray and McBeth, John. Calculating Human Rights. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 15, 2002. p. 19.