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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. Negotiations and cease-fires 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 5,000. GAM's political goals appear to have substantial public support, especially for the proposal to hold a referendum on independence vs. union with Indonesia. However, some of GAM's tactics — forced "taxation," kidnapping, assassinations of pro-Indonesian Acehnese, and criminal activities — have drawn criticism from Acehnese. GAM has a political organization throughout Aceh. Indonesian

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

commanders in Aceh have acknowledged that community leaders, religious leaders, and local government officials do not support Indonesian security forces against the GAM.²

GAM professes the aim of establishing Aceh as an Islamic kingdom but not as a fundamentalist Islamic state. 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. GAM condemned the September 11 terrorist attack on the United States and voiced support for the U.S. campaign against terrorism.³ 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 Indonesian military (TNI) and is complicit in the human rights abuses committed by the TNI.⁴

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 States.⁵ 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 TNI have been documented. Military abuses of civilians reportedly became common from the 1970s to the present. Abusive tactics have included the murder, torture, and arbitrary arrests of politically active Acehnese (especially those who advocate a referendum), members of non-government organizations (NGOs), and human rights workers. Retaliation is a major source of abuses. In response to GAM attacks and ambushes, military units often enter nearby villages and summarily execute residents, usually the male residents. Some of these executions

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 Acehnese public” and that “the local Acehnese administration is no help at all.” See also: Reid, Anthony. Which Way Aceh? *Far Eastern Economic Review*, March 16, 2000. p.36.

³ 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.

⁴ Perlez, Jane. A Long War Slices Deep in Indonesia. *New York Times*, June 17, 2002. p. A3.

⁵ 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.

reportedly are unprovoked by GAM.⁶ The TNI reportedly extorts money from local businesses as payment for “protection.”

(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.⁷ 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. They have been coalitions of individuals and groups with little or no prior government experience or little experience in top 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. The third is the relationship between the new governments and the military since Suharto’s fall. Civilian leaders have tried to exert control over the TNI with minimal success. The TNI retains 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 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 in Aceh, which would give the TNI unquestioned authority over the province.

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 province’s natural resources. It gives the provincial government the right to impose Islamic sharia law (but sharia reportedly is not popular among many Acehnese). It provides for local elections. However, the special autonomy law has not been implemented. The provincial government has not passed needed implementation legislation. According to a report by the International Crisis Group in July 2003, the central government controls all policies and programs in Aceh, and revenue from Aceh’s resources goes to the TNI. The provincial government is considered to be corrupt; it is accused of siphoning off economic aid and humanitarian aid funds that pass through it.⁸

⁶ Perlez, Jane. A Long War Slices Deep in Indonesia. *New York Times*, June 17, 2002, p. 3. 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. Sidney Jones, Executive Director of Asia Watch, gave detailed testimony of human rights abuses committed by the Indonesian military in Aceh.

⁷ *The Far East and Australasia 1999*. Europa Publications Ltd., 1999. p.422.

⁸ International Crisis Group. Aceh’s Best Chance for Peace: Executive Summary and Recommendations. February 28, 2003. p. 2. International Crisis Group. Media Release, July 23, 2003. Mapes, Timothy. Sold Short. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, October 9, 2003. p.20.

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 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.

These issues were key to the breakdown of the cease-fire signed in December 2002. The truce provided for TNI and police units to withdraw from specified positions. GAM would turn over its arms in specified locales under supervision of the Henry Dunant Center and Thai and Filipino military monitors. GAM agreed to refrain from advocating independence. Political negotiations were to ensue. The cease-fire initially reduced violence. However, it began to break down after February 2004. Independent observers agreed with the TNI accusation that GAM used the cease-fire to rearm and reorganize. GAM cadre reportedly propagandized among villagers that independence would soon be achieved. GAM delayed turning over arms to the international monitors. The TNI refused to withdraw from the specified forward positions. Offices and automobiles of the international observers were arsoned; most observers accused the TNI of these acts. The Indonesian government, under apparent pressure from the TNI, took uncompromising positions in negotiations. It demanded that GAM renounce independence and accept special autonomy "within the framework of the unitary state of the Republic of Indonesia." It refused to offer GAM a role as a political party. In May 2003, the TNI arrested five GAM negotiators who were preparing to fly to Tokyo, the site of talks.⁹ They were subsequently sentenced to 12-15 years imprisonment.

In the spring of 2003, the TNI held a meeting of over 48 commanders in Aceh. The apparent aim was to pressure the government to end the cease-fire and give the TNI full authority, including authority over the police. On May 18, 2003, President Megawati declared martial law in Aceh for six months. The TNI and the police deployed 45,000 troops into the province. Security forces gained control over major towns and the main roads; security improved in these locales. GAM guerrillas reportedly dispersed into smaller units "all over Aceh," according to TNI Commander General Endriartono Sutarto.¹⁰ On December 31, 2003, the police commander in Aceh stated that since the imposition of martial law, 580 GAM members and 470 civilians had been killed; 50 soldiers and 26 policemen had been killed. The TNI earlier had claimed over 1,000 GAM members killed, apparently including civilians killed in the GAM figure. In November 2003, President Megawati extended martial law for another six months. The government also set forth preconditions for negotiations, that GAM must disband and accept "special autonomy." GAM called for a European government to mediate the conflict.

With martial law, the TNI closed off Aceh from contact with outsiders with a few exceptions under TNI control. Foreign journalists were denied access to the province and

⁹ McBeth, John. A Futile Fight. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 5, 2003. p. 16-17. Murphy, Dan. SE Asia Tries 'shock and awe.' *Christian Science Monitor*, May 20, 2003. p.A1.

¹⁰ Aceh: TNI to Change Pattern of Military Operations, Switching to Small Teams. *Kompas* (Jakarta, internet version), November 11, 2003.

were prohibited from contact with GAM. Cellular telephones were blocked. The TNI expelled foreign aid workers until December 2003 when five United Nations organizations were allowed access. Foreign human rights groups were denied access.

The TNI also subjected Indonesian and Acehnese human rights groups to pressure and intimidation. This was part of a broad pattern of TNI and police human rights abuses that were reported. The State Department's human rights report for 2003 stated regarding Indonesia that "Human rights abuses were most apparent in Aceh province." The report attributed to the TNI killings, beatings and torture, rapes, and arbitrary arrests of people for voicing pro-independence views.¹¹ Indonesian human rights groups, including the government's Human Rights Commission, made similar allegations, describing the forcible evacuation of 40,000 people, mass graves, and TNI orders for people to fly the Indonesian flag. The international organizations, Human Rights Watch and the International Crisis Group, issued similar reports. Former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid declared that the "basic rights of the Acehnese have been put aside" by the TNI.¹² GAM also was criticized for abuses, including the burning of schools, kidnappings, extortion, and killings of civilians.

U.S. Policy on Aceh

U.S. policy developed within the context of three broader policy objectives toward Indonesia that came out of East Timor's separation in 1999 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.

The U.S. war against terrorism added 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 Clinton and Bush administrations have tried to influence the Aceh situation but in ways that would prevent Aceh from worsening U.S.-Indonesian relations and reducing the possibilities of anti-terrorism cooperation. The United States urged GAM to accept special autonomy within Indonesia. It supported cease-fires; retired Major General Anthony Zinni reportedly played an important mediating role in the negotiation of the cease-fire of December 2002. The United States tried to persuade the Indonesian government on several occasions against the imposition of martial law in Aceh and work instead for a political solution; this diplomacy included the dispatch of National Security

¹¹ U.S. Department of State. Country Reports on Human Rights Practices — 2003.

¹² Siboro, Tiarna. End Martial Law in Aceh. *Jakarta Post* (internet version), November 15, 2003. Sipress, Adan. War on Separatists Leaves Aceh in Turmoil. *Washington Post*, August 19, 2003. p.A12. Reuters News Agency report, December 17, 2003.

Council official, Karen Brooks, to Jakarta in July 2003, a statement by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz (former U.S. Ambassador to Indonesia) to Indonesia's Defense Minister in Singapore in May 2003; and a tripartite statement with Japan and the European Union in November 2003. The Bush Administration has resisted Indonesian pressure to declare GAM a terrorist organization under U.S. law. The State Department criticized TNI human rights abuses, including extensive criticisms in its 2003 human rights report. However, high level Bush Administration officials refrained from public criticism. President Bush apparently did not raise Aceh during his visit to Indonesia in October 2003, concentrated exclusively on cooperation with Indonesia against terrorism and the case of Americans killed in Papua in August 2002.¹³ The Administration also opposed 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.¹⁴

Congressional-imposed prohibitions on U.S. arms sales to Indonesia also affect the U.S. role in the Aceh situation. These restrictions, in the form of the "Leahy amendment" to foreign operations appropriations legislation, have existed since 2000 in reaction to TNI abuses in East Timor. Foreign operations legislation for FY2004 demands that the Indonesian government act against members of the TNI who abuses human rights. Aceh is not mentioned; but these provisions would appear to apply to TNI abuses in Aceh.

In addition to the U.S. priority to terrorism, another limitation on U.S. policy on Aceh is the low U.S. influence in Indonesia. Polls show a substantial majority of Indonesians critical of the United States because of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and strongly supportive of the martial law policies in Aceh. The Indonesian government and the TNI reportedly calculated that the U.S. war on terrorism and attack on Iraq would make the United States less critical of martial law in Aceh. The government imposed martial law during the U.S. invasion. Anti-U.S. sentiment appears to be strong in the TNI. General Ryamizard Ryacudu, TNI Chief of Staff, declared to TNI senior officers that future U.S. training of TNI personnel would be unnecessary and counter-productive.¹⁵

¹³ Sanger, David and Perlez, Jane. Greeted Coolly, Bush Urges Indonesia to Bolster Democracy. *New York Times*, October 23, 2003. p.A6.

¹⁴ Hiebert, Murray and McBeth, John. Calculating Human Rights. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 15, 2002. p. 19.

¹⁵ Perlez, Jane. Indonesia Says Drive Against Separatists Will Not End Soon. *New York Times*, July 9, 2003. p.A3.