

Finland's former president Martti Ahtisaari (C) officiates at the signing of a peace agreement between Indonesia's Justice Minister Hamid Awaluddin (L) and the Free Aceh Movement's (GAM) Chairman Malik Mahmood in Helsinki, 15 August 2005.

Source: Reuters/Ruben Sprich

Aceh's arduous journey to peace

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This article briefly tells the story of Aceh's journey toward peace. It provides a sketch of the major periods in Aceh's evolution between 1998 and 2006 and concludes with some observations about the nature of peace processes. Aceh's current peace is its second major effort. The first initiative ended in violence in 2003 after more than three years of highly fraught mediation by an untested non-governmental organization. It collapsed in the face of resistance from the conflict's parties. This effort's shortcomings, however, proved a boon to those brave and foresighted enough to give peace another try in 2004-2005.

This article explores three interrelated reasons for the success of Aceh's current peace initiative. First, by 2004, especially after the October election of a new president, different circumstances confronted the two key parties to the conflict, the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). Although the Indonesian military (TNI) had been incapable of dealing a knock-out blow to GAM fighters since the declaration of martial law in May 2003, GAM's battlefield capacity had been significantly degraded. Dialogue-oriented government officials were also reaching out to GAM contacts behind the scenes. Second, external mediation in 2005 was far more adroit than its unsuccessful predecessor, both in terms of managing the negotiation process and shaping the ultimate agreement. This skillful mediation, led by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, produced the third key factor. This was the incorporation of an overall political settlement as a central element of the accord, rather than a step-by-step sequenced approach taken in the earlier mediation effort. This deal not only allowed for key compromises, but it also empowered a robust peace monitoring operation central to the agreement's implementation.

Yet Aceh's 30-year journey from war to peace must also be seen in the broader context of the remarkable transformations in Indonesian politics between 1998



and 2006, in the dimensions of democratization, the dramatic eclipse of military influence in civil politics, and GAM's transition from battle-weary insurgents to electoral politicians. The December 2004 tsunami helped to push along an incipient peace process; however, it was deeper currents of change which swept Aceh toward a more durable peace.

A democratic opening? Talking peace while making war

The year 1998 was a momentous one for Indonesia, and it ushered in a three-year period of sustained upheaval and uncertainty that extended to Aceh as well. In stunningly quick succession, the Asian financial crisis sent the country's economy into freefall, Suharto was forced from office after 32 years in power, and his Vice-President B.J. Habibie was elevated to the presidency. Under Habibie, armed forces commander Gen. Wiranto declared an end to the military's heavy-handed approach to Aceh and even apologized for abuses by "individual soldiers" during the preceding decade. Habibie also agreed to a UN-supervised referendum process through which East Timor voted for independence in August 1999. Suddenly, it seemed to the Acehnese that anything – even independence – was possible.

In October 1999, Indonesia's legislature elected a new president: Abdurrahman Wahid, a Muslim cleric renowned for his commitment to political pluralism, dialogue, and reform, including his desire to reduce the

military's long-standing political influence. Known simply as Gus Dur, Wahid vacillated between a referendum or negotiations to settle Aceh's status. Fundamentally, however, he was committed to dialogue. The arrival of the Henry Dunant Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HDC) on the scene in late-1999 was therefore extremely serendipitous.

Now known as the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, the HDC was a brand-new, Geneva-based organization, established by humanitarian practitioners formerly associated with International Committee of the Red Cross and the UN and aimed at protecting civilians from armed conflict by helping to resolve underlying disputes. The East Timor crisis prompted HDC to send a senior staff member to the region, and widespread speculation about Indonesia's possible break-up induced HDC to focus on Aceh. Much to their surprise, HDC staff quickly found themselves meeting senior Indonesian officials, including Gus Dur, and reaching out to GAM leaders in exile. A dialogue process started in early 2000 soon yielded a May agreement on a *Joint Understanding on a Humanitarian Pause*, intended to open up humanitarian access to the most war-affected parts of Aceh and start a process of confidence-building between GAM and the TNI.

In a harbinger of later events in 2002-03, HDC in fact stumbled into a larger, more ambitious role as a third party than it had expected or planned for. Suddenly, HDC was faced with managing joint government-rebel committees on security and humanitarian issues,

guiding dialogue on implementing provisions in the Pause, and fielding more international staff to support expanded operations in Banda Aceh. GAM enjoyed the greater international status that the Humanitarian Pause seemed to confer and looked forward to continued talks that could further their cause, and humanitarian operations were briefly able to reach more of the war-affected population. But stinging criticism of the government by national legislators and even top military commanders underscored critical weaknesses in the Pause: that it provided cover for GAM to increase its revenue, augment its membership, and extend its control at the local level while government forces were prohibited from offensive operations. Ultimately, the HDC-led monitoring effort was unable to stem provocative let alone belligerent behaviour by the parties, and it could never get past security-focused debates at the level of "colonels and one-star generals," as one HDC staffer put it.

The Humanitarian Pause itself finally fell apart in 2001. Attacks against ExxonMobil's liquefied natural gas (LNG) facilities, blamed on GAM, caused them to be closed for the first time in Aceh's war. This only strengthened TNI claims that GAM was using the Pause to regroup if not grow. GAM retorted that the Indonesian government was talking peace while waging war. The TNI sent further reinforcements, and Jakarta finally announced its formal withdrawal from the Humanitarian Pause. By early 2001 the military leadership had begun to regain the upper hand in its struggle with the president. Faced with the patent failure of the Humanitarian Pause and limited political capital, Gus Dur authorized all-out security operations against GAM in April, and HDC-led peace efforts broke down almost entirely.

Political machinations finally led to Wahid's downfall in July. His successor Megawati Sukarnoputri was expected to bring the country greater stability and a smaller appetite for ambitious reforms. She did continue to seek a negotiated solution to the Aceh conflict, albeit half-heartedly. One of President Megawati's first acts was to sign legislation granting Aceh "special autonomy" after decades of government hostility toward this idea. This deal, while never fully implemented at the time, renamed the province Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (NAD) and provided for a strong governor's office, Islamic law (Shari'ah) within NAD, and direct elections at the provincial and district levels. It also included revenue-sharing in LNG proceeds at a generous 70-30 split in Aceh's favour during an initial period of eight years (after which revenues would be shared equally). The autonomy deal – which the national parliament passed in a non-consultative fashion that only engendered further hostility toward it – was rejected by GAM out of hand.

Humanitarian dialogue: full steam ahead in 2002

Undaunted by the collapse of the Humanitarian Pause or the resumption of large-scale military operations, HDC ploughed ahead in late 2001 and 2002. External developments aided these efforts. First, the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington suddenly changed the calculus of groups, such as GAM, that relied on violence. Megawati also appointed an urbane, popular officer, Lt. Gen. Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, as coordinating minister for political and security affairs. Dialogue was intensified in meetings in Geneva in February and May, resulting in an HDC document indicating GAM's acceptance of the autonomy law as a "starting point" and a statement on an "all-inclusive dialogue" to review possible changes to the autonomy law, and the need for an effectively-monitored ceasefire. In the eyes of HDC, these meetings produced an agreement on a sequence of steps for a more comprehensive settlement: from ceasefire to "all-inclusive dialogue" and provincial-level elections to changes to the autonomy law. The government, however, saw the already-passed autonomy law as their maximum offer, not an opening gambit, while GAM reiterated that special autonomy was not the end of their independence struggle.

Despite these fundamental discrepancies, negotiations proceeded under HDC auspices, though largely through months and months of shuttle diplomacy and draft texts faxed between key actors in Jakarta, Banda Aceh, and GAM-Sweden. Coordinating Minister Yudhoyono was reportedly indispensable in winning over President Megawati and fellow generals and ministers on key provisions in the agreement. Recognizing important failures in the Humanitarian Pause, the text envisioned a Joint Security Committee (JSC), which would be a more vigorous monitoring presence than the earlier TNI-GAM "commander-to-commander" mechanism. In the end, the JSC would be constituted as a tri-partite mechanism encompassing GAM, TNI, and a neutral third-party in the form of unarmed military observers from suitable nearby countries.

HDC announced in November 2002 that an agreement was within sight, and planning began for a December 9 signing ceremony in Geneva. To augment international awareness and backing for the deal, the Japanese government held a donor conference on December 2 in Tokyo. In the meantime, the TNI had stepped up battlefield pressure on GAM insurgents, and a HDC-organized group of former senior diplomatic and military personages from Sweden, Thailand, the US, and Yugoslavia – known collectively as the "Wise Men" – increased their entreaties that the parties conclude the

deal. The involvement of such experts seemed to confer on the process gravitas and hint at important linkages to influential countries (particularly the US) that wanted a signed agreement.

Peace deferred: CoHA and the return to war

The *Cessation of Hostilities Agreement* (CoHA) was duly ratified in a signing ceremony at HDC's Geneva headquarters. HDC quickly set about recruiting and fielding personnel to staff the Joint Security Committee (JSC), including non-active Thai and Filipino military, and hiring specialists to guide the all-inclusive dialogue (AID) and other functions. The CoHA posted some early successes such as a reduction in violence, a dramatic increase in freedom of movement, and the establishment of a limited number of so-called "peace zones." These were zones demilitarized by agreement between the TNI and GAM. Peace zone inaugurations tended to turn into pro-GAM independence rallies, however, deeply ranking to the military brass and nationalist politicians who followed these events in the media.

Almost immediately the deal began to fray. The TNI's high command was never uniformly supportive of the agreement, and GAM largely considered CoHA as a chance to advance its political struggle, not as an opportunity to compromise on core demands or build confidence with an adversary it fundamentally distrusted. In a reprise of the Humanitarian Pause, GAM used the relative openness of the CoHA period to seek new recruits, increase "taxation," and agitate for independence, despite earlier statements accepting autonomy as a "starting point." (Some GAM actions, like flag-raising and rallies, were not explicitly banned by the CoHA, which was also silent on the specific procedures for investigating or punishing the extortion that GAM considered legitimate taxation.)

Starting with a mid-January rebel ambush that resulted in a soldier's death in 2003, ceasefire violations by both parties quickly began to mount. These incidents soon surpassed the JSC's ability to investigate and adjudicate alleged violations, especially when TNI representatives on the JSC rejected two February findings against the government and top commanders openly questioned the JSC's neutrality and professionalism. This atmosphere prompted GAM to veto action on a case against their side, and the JSC soon became paralyzed by an intransigence that even the foreign military observers were not able to resolve. By March, JSC installations were being attacked by civilian mobs instigated by the security forces, and goodwill between the parties was all but gone.

Seizing on this chaos as pretext, the TNI then moved to scuttle the deal outright. By May, the Indonesian government announced its intention to launch operations to annihilate GAM within months. Efforts to save the CoHA at an international conference in Tokyo collapsed on May 18, and the following day, President Megawati, with the unanimous support of her cabinet and parliamentary leadership, imposed martial law on the province. This cleared the way for the TNI's largest-ever operations in Aceh, ultimately mobilizing some 35,000 troops. These operations proved largely effective in military terms, especially when coupled with efforts to cut off rebel supply chains, to mobilize larger segments of the civilian population in support of the counter-insurgency, and to offer amnesty to rebels prepared to turn themselves in. By mid-2004, the TNI announced that almost 2000 GAM fighters had been killed, another 2100 arrested, and some 1300 forced to surrender (although these figures were impossible to verify independently).

On the face of things, peace in Aceh began to look more and more remote. Below the surface, however, perhaps senior Indonesian officials, both civilian and military, realized that an exclusively security-driven approach would not ultimately be successful. Likewise, perhaps enough of GAM's rank-and-file had been decimated and remaining fighters driven into the more inaccessible Acehese interior that some senior field commanders – rather than GAM's leadership in exile – were ready to talk peace.

The promise of democracy

The watershed event of 2004 was Indonesia's first direct elections for the president, and this historic moment also deeply affected Aceh in ways that would not become apparent for months. The main characters in this new chapter of Aceh's drama were more moderate Acehese outside of GAM's leadership in exile and Yusuf Kalla, who was first Megawati's coordinating minister for people's welfare and then vice-president under the newly-elected president. The new president was in fact Megawati's coordinating political-security minister, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Their early commitment to continued dialogue set the stage for the later engagement of former Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari, whose organization Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) ultimately became midwife to the *Memorandum of Understanding* (MoU) in August 2005.

In early 2004 – even before the national elections that would confer on him the vice-presidency – then-Minister Kalla launched a secret process that reached out to moderate Acehese and that simultaneously also came across Ahtisaari and CMI as a potential

mediator. Once President Yudhoyono and Vice-President Kalla were sworn in, Kalla renewed his secret efforts in earnest. Through Acehese intermediaries, GAM's top field commander Muzakkir Manaf – presumably without the knowledge of GAM leaders in Sweden – authorized secret contacts in Malaysia between lower-level rebel representatives and government negotiators. In late October 2004, these delegates came to an agreement on a deal that would ensure implementation of Aceh's autonomy law and provide economic benefits for select GAM members and other Acehese constituencies in exchange for disarming some fighters.

Whether or not Muzakkir fully endorsed this agreement or merely saw Jakarta's overture as a tempting opportunity to engage in a time-honored Acehese tradition of double-crossing one's military opponent, the Indonesian government clearly interpreted this episode as evidence of an opening to talk with battle-weary GAM commanders rather than just the Swedish-based leadership. Regardless, GAM political headquarters in Sweden quickly issued a denunciation of this initiative, but clearly GAM's political leadership must also have been re-evaluating options during 2004. Meanwhile, other secret attempts by Kalla's intermediaries to contact the Swedish exiles led instead to the involvement of Ahtisaari (by way of a Finnish businessman who had earlier resided in the vice-president's home province and befriended someone who was to become a key Kalla adviser). By December Ahtisaari was told that both sides were ready to talk.

From the tsunami to Helsinki

It was just at this moment that the Asian tsunami struck in December 2004. Faced with such destruction and suddenly caught in the international spotlight, GAM declared a unilateral ceasefire, and President Yudhoyono promptly sent a government negotiating team to Finland to meet at CMI with the leadership in exile.

Including these late-January 2005 talks, a total of five rounds took place. A major breakthrough occurred early on in February when GAM accepted "self-government" as opposed to outright independence. Apparently this sudden reversal followed internal GAM recognition that talks with Jakarta could collapse once again without a decisive move on their part; debates focused on how "self-government" could be enhanced to include significant symbolic and substantive improvements over the "special autonomy" that had been on offer from Jakarta since 2001. Though this declaration provoked intensely negative reactions within broader circles of GAM sympathizers and some confused public disavowals, this new stance proved

genuinely durable and set the stage for other important concessions. For example, the government agreed that – in contrast to the terms of the CoHA – the new deal would permit the creation of local-level political parties. This was a significant departure from Jakarta's previous policy, which had hitherto insisted that all parties be national in character, and this innovation allowed for the possibility that GAM be transformed from a rebel group into a non-violent political force.

Another major improvement was to authorize a far more robust third party to monitor the agreement than the feeble Joint Security Committee that HDC attempted to manage. The MoU called for a 300-strong force of EU and ASEAN personnel, and the Chair of CMI, Ahtisaari himself, was empowered as the final arbiter of disputes that could not be resolved at lower levels.

Despite an abiding sense of betrayal and disappointment engendered by the CoHA's collapse, the parties were genuinely keen to sign the MoU in August 2005. This was testament to the changed calculus the parties had, including their view of the conflict's broader context and the need for a deal. But Ahtisaari and the negotiators also worked hard at re-establishing a climate of trust. The third-party mechanism conceived of to guide peace implementation – the Aceh Monitoring Mission (AMM) – also proved to be highly effective, as charted in Kirsten Schulze's contribution to this volume.

Peace negotiations as learning process?

Aceh's long road to conflict settlement – lasting some seven years between 1999 and 2006 – invites reflections on how learning takes place in and across peace processes. The context in Aceh did change over time, and ultimately those changes were probably critical in setting the stage for the successful efforts in 2005-2006. (In 2003-2004, the TNI had exacted a huge toll on GAM's military capacity and ability to move freely within the province, but the government was also starting to feel the mounting human and financial costs of operations that President Yudhoyono later estimated at US\$ 130 million per year.) But many of the key players on both the GAM and government sides were acquainted with each other and with peace efforts from the HDC period. The mediation team at CMI supporting Ahtisaari reportedly read up on and studied the shortcomings of those efforts.

In addition, there were important differences and indeed improvements that characterized the Helsinki effort. First, while the personal engagement of key figures in the CoHA negotiations, especially Yudhoyono,



Source: Reuters/Ruben Sprich

was indispensable, his and Kalla's commitment to the second process carried the full weight of the Indonesian government. Ultimately, they were willing to take risks and search for non-military solutions. Specifically, they probably learned important lessons from Megawati's difficulties in managing the different players at local, national, and international levels. They certainly learned the value of removing spoilers or other impediments to reform (Megawati's armed forces chief Ryacudu was one of the first victims of Yudhoyono's new administration), and they included efforts to win over those who objected to compromise in the army and the national legislature.

The other important difference was the nature of the peace talks, in both content and style. The government, for example, deliberately fielded a team that was not "Javanese" in complexion and engaged in a far more constructive, less take-it-or-leave-it fashion. Most critically, however, Ahtisaari had far greater stature and firsthand political experience as a former president than HDC mediators. He also had direct access to top decision-makers at the UN and EU as a result of his post-presidential career in international peacebuilding. In addition to appreciating the need to plan for a credible third-party monitoring mission, he aptly focused *not* on a sequenced approach to establishing a robust ceasefire first and deferring difficult political decisions for later. Rather, his mantra was "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed," forcing the parties to

come up with necessary compromises, but also creative trade-offs, as part of a larger deal. In instituting litmus tests for the parties and even traveling to Jakarta to urge the removal of military engaged in human rights abuses, he also demonstrated to both sides that he was prepared to be fair *and* tough. The parties themselves, however, were ultimately the ones who had to make the toughest calls – and choose the path toward peace.