Aceh refugees and conflict transformation
the Penang connection

Kamarulzaman Askandar

Penang, Malaysia has provided not only a safe haven for Acehnese refugees but also a platform for many of the activists among them to continue their peace work. Through its Aceh Peace Programme (APP), the Universiti Sains Malaysia’s Research and Education for Peace (REPUSM) unit was the base for much of this activity, providing financial, institutional, intellectual and moral support.

There has always been close cultural solidarity between Aceh and Penang, making Penang the perfect choice for the Acehnese to conduct their peacebuilding activities. Despite the many challenges, including political and security sensitivities in Malaysia, the REPUSM and APP managed to transform the Aceh conflict through peace support based on advocacy, capacity building, networking, institutional building, and local (Acehnese) ownership of the activities.

The Aceh conflict

Aceh province is located at the northernmost tip of the Sumatra Island in the Indonesian archipelago. It is an area rich in natural resources, especially natural gas, yet it is one of the poorest provinces in the country. Exploitation of the riches of Aceh, by a combination of the Indonesian state and foreign interests, contributed to internal calls for Aceh’s independence in the 1970s.

The Free Aceh Movement (GAM) was formed in 1976, led by the late Hasan Di Tiro. The Acehnese had traditionally been proud of their Islamic heritage and identity, and claimed sovereignty over their land. They fought the Dutch colonisers fiercely and supported the Indonesian independence movement in the 1940s.

The period from 1951-59 marked the first phase of the Aceh conflict. Many Acehnese joined the Darul Islam rebellion in Indonesia in the 1950s after claims that they were cheated by the new Indonesian government with regard to both Aceh’s inclusion in North Sumatra province, and the adoption of the Pancasila as the national ideology instead of Islamic Sharia law. Between 1959 and 1999 intermittent demands for autonomy developed into a full secessionist rebellion. A Military Operations Zone (DOM) was imposed on Aceh by the Indonesian government from 1989-98. Harsh counter-insurgency measures and human rights abuses by the Indonesian military during this period fuelled popular support for independence.

The last phase of the conflict (1999-2004) was triggered by a chain of events including the Asian economic crisis in 1997, the removal of Indonesian President Suharto in 1998, and the reformasi (reformation) of Indonesian society, which resulted in a referendum in East Timor and the eventual democratisation of Indonesia. In Aceh, this period saw the resurgence of demands for independence – for example a 1999 rally to demand a referendum on independence for Aceh, attended by more than a million people – as well as greater civil society pressure for justice and the resolution of the conflict. It also saw the start of peacemaking efforts by both parties.

The Indonesian government under the leadership of President Abdurrahman Wahid initiated the involvement of a third party, the Henri Dunant Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HDC), as a facilitator to peace talks. However, talks collapsed in 2003, followed by the introduction of a military and civil emergency soon after.
The tsunami of 26 December 2004 that devastated Aceh was a catalyst for the two armed actors to rethink their focuses, goals and strategies. It also accelerated the process of building the foundations for peace through dialogue, which had until then been carried out quietly between the Indonesian government, led by then Vice President Jusuf Kalla, and the GAM.

The Penang connection

REPUSM is located within the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in Penang, Malaysia. It was set up in 1995 to facilitate peace research and education at the university. It has an outreach programme and had been involved in peace support activities, not only within Malaysia but also throughout the Southeast Asian region. In 2001 REPUSM became the Regional Secretariat for the Southeast Asian Conflict Studies Network (SEACSN), tasked with enhancing the study of peace and conflict in the region and fostering collaborations between peace academics and researchers. Four special peace programmes were created at REPUSM, including the APP, Mediation and Reconciliation Services, the Mindanao Peace Programme and the Southern Thailand Peace Programme.

The APP was launched in 2001 for five main reasons. Firstly, Aceh’s proximity to Malaysia means there has been a substantial Acehnese community in the country, particularly in Penang, for many years. Many Achenese have also been forced to cross the Straits of Malacca because of ongoing conflict. Between 1999 and 2004, newer ‘migrants’ and ‘refugees’ included members of civil society, including NGO leaders who had fled persecution in Aceh, GAM members, activists, exiles, combatants, refugees and students.

Some of these refugees, especially those that used to work in academia or NGOs, enrolled at USM. It made perfect sense to harness their energy, spirit and experience to help design a peace programme that would be implemented by them. Older generations of Acehnese living in Malaysia were active in helping out the newcomers. For example, a support group called the Aceh Society of Malaysia (IMAM) was created by Malaysians of Acehnese descent and supported by some prominent Malaysian politicians with Acehnese ties, such as the former Chief Minister of Kedah state, Tan Sri Sanusi Junid.

Secondly, because of insecurity in Aceh, it was difficult to organise peacebuilding programmes in Aceh itself, especially after the escalation of violence from 1999 and the collapse of the peace talks in 2003. Penang provided a safe haven to continue peacebuilding activities. REPUSM, and especially its coordinator, played an important role in promoting Acehnese issues in Malaysia and protecting the Acehnese in Penang. For example, articles were written in newspapers and other popular media to explain the Aceh conflict and the plight of the Acehnese refugees. These explained the importance of defining Acehnese refugees differently from other migrants, especially economic ones. Attempts were also made to gain Malaysian public support, especially humanitarian support.

Thirdly, there was need to strengthen regional and international support for peace in Aceh. A study was conducted by the APP to determine the strength of the peacebuilding support work for Aceh. It concluded that there was a need first to consolidate the positions of the various NGOs working on Aceh, and second to connect Acehnese activists and peacebuilders to the national and international peacebuilding community. This was facilitated through the SEACSN, which had extensive contacts in the region.

Fourthly, it was important to enhance the capacities of peace activists, especially in the areas of advocacy,
language, strategic planning, and theories and practices of peacebuilding and conflict transformation. This was part of a strategy to develop strategic thinking about Aceh: to envision a peaceful Aceh and ways to get there. As academic institutions, REPUSM and SEACSN were in the position to contribute to these efforts.

Lastly, there was a need to engage with GAM members and sympathisers, many of whom were based in Malaysia, and connect them with Acehnese civil society members, especially those present in Penang. The rationale behind this was: first, to evaluate the proclivity for peace among GAM members and sympathisers, especially the younger leaders, and identify their potential inclusion in future peace-related activities; second, to create solidarity among the Acehnese and consolidate their various positions in anticipation of future peace talks.

**Strategies and activities for peacebuilding**

The APP was started by accident and not by design. It would not have been possible to set up the APP without a substantial Acehnese student body at the university (especially those with activist backgrounds), and if the students had not volunteered their time, energy, expertise and enthusiasm to start and maintain the programme. This commitment eventually evolved into an effective conflict transformation and peace support programme for Aceh.

The APP works on the basis of supporting local peacebuilding actors to transform the conflict. It has always been the belief of REPUSM and SEACSN that the ‘roots of peacebuilding must always be local’. The coordinator of the APP was an Acehnese postgraduate student attached to REPUSM. He was an activist working with a coalition of human rights NGOs in Aceh. Because of the pressures of life in Aceh, he joined his wife who was studying in Malaysia and enrolled at REPUSM as a Masters student. At the APP he was supported by an informal network of Acehnese: other Acehnese students studying at USM from various backgrounds, as well as non-student activists, both in Penang and Aceh.

**Capacity building** activities for Acehnese activists have included training in advocacy, language and strategic planning through workshops and seminars organised by REPUSM, delivered by staff as well as senior members of Acehnese civil society. Participants have included Aceh-based activists – student and non-student. Exposure programmes, in which activists were sent on trips or internships to other countries in the region, were also conducted to encourage understanding of issues in other conflict areas and how they are managed, and to promote language learning.

**Advocacy** work has involved organising seminars, writing about Aceh issues in local media and other publications, organising (through SEACSN and sometimes partnering with other bodies) regional and international workshops and conferences to highlight the issues in Aceh, and connecting with like-minded international bodies. Institutions that REPUSM and SEACSN have partnered with include Forum Asia, the US Institute for Peace, the Initiatives for International Dialogue, the Support Committee for Human Rights in Aceh, and many Indonesian and Acehnese NGOs.

**Humanitarian activities** have focused on supporting Acehnese refugees in Penang, for example: organising a ‘safe house’ in Penang with support from the local Acehnese community and the UN Refugee Agency; documenting refugees; liaising with local Malaysian communities and the authorities; and providing student visas and financial support to refugee activists. Some Acehnese students at the university also helped provide basic education to refugee children.

**Engaging with GAM** involved gaining the trust of GAM members in Malaysia, especially middle-ranking leaders, through humanitarian support and frequent discussion, and linking them up with the activist groups. This engagement strategy was important to connect and consolidate the two groups. Engagement was conducted with the eventual peace process in mind: to ensure that GAM was aware of the concerns and needs of the people for whom they claimed to be fighting.

**The Aceh Institute** [www.acehinstitute.org] emerged from an Aceh Scholars’ Group workshop convened by the APP in July 2004. This workshop brought together leading Acehnese scholars and activists from various fields to pave the way for a peace movement through discussion. The workshop started with envisioning the future of Aceh and moved on to developing
strategies on how to create a peaceful, prosperous Aceh. It ended with agreement to establish the Aceh Institute. The institute was relocated to Aceh in 2005 after the signing of the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding that officially marked the end of the war. Relocation to Aceh was important for local ownership of the initiative.

**Peacebuilding challenges**

**Funding** There was no stable financial support for the activities of the APP. Most were supported by REPUSM, which in turn used resources from SEACSN. Staff members of REPUSM were paid by SEACSN, but donated extra time and energy to the Aceh programme. The people working in APP also helped other REPUSM programmes, using the opportunity to gain more experience of other conflict and peace issues in the region as well as using these platforms to advocate for peace in Aceh.

**Security** APP activities were constantly monitored by the Malaysian authorities. Police special branch officers would make frequent visits to REPUSM, especially relating to its programme activities. The coordinator of REPUSM and the APP were frequently interviewed by the authorities, mostly in the safety of the REPUSM office, but sometimes outside. The authorities also sometimes made requests to sit in during the activities. Some were granted, but most denied. REPUSM made efforts to explain the situation in Aceh and the necessity of APP peacebuilding activities, and to connect activities to Malaysian security and national interests. REPUSM’s coordinator assumed ‘guarantor’ responsibility of both the Acehnese working with the unit as well as its activities. Everybody was aware of the risks and worked hard to ensure things ran smoothly. Activities were carried out with little or no media coverage. Only when it was deemed necessary to highlight a particular issue or activity would the media be invited.

**International political will** The profile and nature of the Aceh conflict generated challenges around gaining international support for peacebuilding activities. It was neither a prominent conflict internationally, nor one that evoked international sympathy. It was a ‘self-determination’ or ‘separatist’ conflict, involving a small insurgent movement that was prepared to use violence to pursue its goals. An Islamic secession movement like GAM would never be supported internationally. As such, little international support for peacebuilding was forthcoming and so the situation had to be approached creatively.

**Acehnese disunity** Many Acehnese grew up during the Military Operations Zone period, witnessing military atrocities and the government forces’ harsh treatment of the population. They associated justice with freedom from Indonesian rule that allowed atrocities to take place, and so justice meant sympathising with GAM. However, sympathy did not necessarily extend to support. GAM directed violence against its own people as well as the Indonesian authorities, undermining its own support base and placing an ‘invisible barrier’ between itself and the Acehnese community, including activists in Aceh and Malaysia.

**Asymmetry** The parties were talking at different levels: the Indonesian government wanted to talk on the basis of unity and Indonesian national sovereignty, while GAM wanted an independent nation as the starting point.

**Bringing it all back home**

Many of those affiliated with the APP at REPUSM returned to Aceh after the 2004 tsunami and the signing of the Helsinki MoU in August 2005. Many of them are now in various leadership positions in government, NGOs, academia, business and politics. The Aceh Institute is now in Aceh, where it belongs, with the former APP coordinator as its Executive Director. REPUSM still maintains close relations with the institute and other organisations in Aceh. The institute has evolved into a well respected scholarly body in Aceh. It has conducted research on a number of topics, including peace and security, the economy, culture and religion, often collaborating with local, national and international partners. Scholars and interested individuals go to the Aceh Institute website to get information about Aceh. The Aceh Institute office in Banda Aceh also hosts a café, library and meeting areas where people gather in both formal and informal settings to discuss relevant issues. The institute is continuing to make an impact with the work that it is doing.

In conclusion, it can be said that the work done by the APP, REPUSM, and SEACSN for Aceh shows that cross-border collaboration for peace to provide support, advocacy, and capacity building for the future, plays an important role in a conflict transformation and peacebuilding process.

Kamarulzaman Askandar is the Coordinator for Research and Education for Peace at Universiti Sains Malaysia (REPUSM). He is also the Regional Coordinator for the Southeast Asian Conflict Studies Network (SEACSN). He has been active in supporting peacebuilding activities in conflict areas of Southeast Asia, and especially in Aceh, Indonesia, Mindanao, the Philippines, and Southern Thailand.