

Women and the war in Aceh

These women want to silence all the guns, whether Indonesian or Acehnese

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Aceh is rich in natural resources. Large corporations moved into North Aceh following the discovery of natural gas. Related industries spread through the Greater Aceh region (Aceh Besar). Outsiders dominated these huge corporations. Their displays of wealth alienated the Acehnese, who were largely excluded from the economic gains of industrialisation.

Even in North Aceh, referred to in jest as the petro-dollar region, 70% of villages remained officially in the 'backward' category (desa tertinggal). According to some sources, Aceh's natural resources supplied Jakarta's coffers with Rp 33 trillion each year, of which only one percent was returned to the province. Locals who live around these companies are just spectators who watch the prosperity inside from their poverty outside. This has gone on for decades.

This was the context in which the armed struggle for Acehnese independence, GAM (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, Aceh Freedom Movement) was established under the leadership of Hasan di Tiro. In 1990 the Suharto government launched its Operation Red Net (Operasi Jaring Merah) to root out what the New Order chose to call a Movement to Disturb Peace and Order, or GPK. The operation continued for eight years, but failed to resolve the Aceh problem. Instead, innocent civilians faced state-sponsored brutality. Anyone who refused to support the Indonesian military effort was labelled GPK.

Thousands of women were widowed, their husbands murdered or kidnapped. Children were orphaned. Some women faced sexual violence from soldiers, in part as a deliberate instrument of terror against their communities. The women became pariahs in their own communities, which did not want to associate with anyone dangerously tainted by GPK suspicions. These single women, with children to support, could no longer go out safely to work in the fields.

In late 1998, after the fall of Suharto, and with many human rights abuses well documented, the commander of the armed forces General Wiranto revoked Aceh's status as 'special military operations area' (DOM).

Data from the Coalition of Human Rights NGOs had documented 7,727 cases of human rights abuse between 1990-98. But the situation did not improve when DOM status was revoked. From January 1999 to February 2000 the coalition documented nine cases of 'massacre' in which 132 civilians were killed and 472 wounded, 304 arbitrary detentions, 318 extra-judicial executions, and 138 disappearances.

Refugees

From February 1999, the Indonesian army started deliberately displacing inhabitants from some parts of Aceh. From June to August 1999 there were 250,000 to 300,000 internally displaced persons in Aceh. No human rights investigation has been conducted so far on this tragedy. Then the numbers of refugees fell, with only a few hundred remaining displaced by May 2000.

However, in the following two months, despite the relative reduction in armed conflict, the numbers of displaced rose rapidly again into the thousands. In one camp there were 4,110 refugees, including 712 infants, 818 children less than five years, 52 pregnant women and 112 women who were still nursing infants.

The following is a summary of their reasons for seeking refuge:

- Frequent searches for GAM members carried out by the Indonesian army in villages. These searches were inevitably brutal, involving beatings, forcible removal of individuals from their home, and destruction or forcible removal of property.
- Continued armed contacts between GAM and the army in rural areas, threatening the security of villagers.
- In some villages, the Indonesian armed forces and other unidentified groups burnt homes.
- Kidnappings carried out by both the military and civilian militia, the latter suspected of being supporters of GAM.
- Certain groups prohibited the refugees from returning to their village, even though the refugees themselves considered the situation safe.

Some wealthier villagers such as business people found themselves openly harassed by alleged armed GAM members demanding money. One witness said a man had his house burnt down after refusing to contribute. However, such cases were relatively few and these people could usually afford to make a permanent move and start business elsewhere. Also, it is not entirely clear whether such attackers were always GAM members, or Indonesian soldiers or even ordinary criminals taking advantage of the chaotic law and order situation in Aceh.

The camps did not always provide the safety the refugees sought. On 13 October 1999, in the Abu Beureuh Mosque camp in Pidie, the army, allegedly in search of GAM activists, fired several rounds. The shooting scattered 10,000 refugees in fear of their lives. Several women were sexually assaulted. On 29 December, 150 refugees in the Seulimun Mosque camp were poisoned and had to be hospitalised.

Living conditions in many camps remain appalling. Many have only plastic sheets as shelter. Malnutrition is rampant among pregnant women and children. Dozens of babies have been born in the camps, with little or no medical facility. Sickness due to lack of clean water and exhaustion is commonplace.

Even in the camps no gender equity has been established. The women's 'double burden' continues to operate! Like the men, they face the brutality of the state. But they also continue to be repressed by patriarchal social practices. In Acehese norms, the woman's place is at home. While many women work in the fields and in the markets, they are always seen as only 'helping their husbands'. It was therefore normal for the women to assume food preparation as their function in the camps. However, that was regarded as a public activity, so men took over the work. This deprived women of the one function that legitimised their existence as social beings.

Men make all decisions in the camps. Women, many of them war widows with no access to any particular male, are deprived of information and other facilities.

Children have been severely traumatised by their experience of the war and by being displaced. Hundreds of schools have been burnt. According to one report the war has disrupted schooling for more than 11,000 Acehese children.

When a group of women activists provided paper and pen to children in a refugee camp, their drawings visualised the violence they had experienced. There were pictures of marching Indonesian soldiers, of battle between GAM and the Indonesian army, of weapons, dead bodies and mutilated corpses.

The armed struggle between the Indonesian army and the Aceh Freedom Movement has been disastrous for the civilian population. There are villages where only women and children remain. Some of these women are working for other people in return for a few kilos of rice. Others are feeding their family on boiled trunks of banana trees.

Women for peace

The armed conflict in Aceh must be brought to an end - by whatever means. And women must be included in that peace process. This is not only because women constitute 53% of Aceh's population. It is because women have suffered grievously throughout this conflict. As citizens, they have suffered at the hands of the state, having been raped and abused by the Indonesian army. Culturally, they have been repressed by patriarchy and through the wrong interpretations of Islamic law (such as the forcible imposition of dress codes). Even at home, they have faced domestic violence, being beaten and raped by their husbands. Women must be included in any decision making process. Data from the provincial government shows there are no fewer than 460,000 female heads of households, of whom 377,000 are widows.

Women are organising for peace. They are praying, marching in the streets, distributing flowers and the message 'stop violence against women'. Women have held discussions with President Gus Dur and even with the army. They have also proposed to the commander of the Aceh Freedom Movement army that a special zone of peace for women should be set up. They have taken their campaign to the United Nations.

With the cease-fire arranged in May this year, there are new hopes for peace. But there is no peace yet in Aceh. Violence continues, from both the Indonesian army and GAM. New sweeps as the army searches for GAM members are starting a fresh movement of refugees in East Aceh. Women want all weapons to cease fire, whether they belong to the Indonesian army or to the soldiers of GAM. We hope that the current agreement between the combatants for a humanitarian cessation of hostilities is not just rhetoric for the Indonesian army and Aceh Freedom Movement.

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