

# ACEH

# THE LONGEST WAR

On December 26, 2004 the South East Asian tsunami slammed into the historic seaport of Banda Aceh, capital of the province of Aceh within Indonesia, killing over 250,000 people out of a local population of 4 million, and rendering a further 500,000 homeless. Amid the carnage, one silver lining to this particular cloud was that it focused the minds both of local separatists, who for decades had been fighting for an independent state, and the Indonesian government. On August 15, 2005 a peace treaty, mediated by former Finnish president and UN negotiator Martti Ahtisaari, concluded over a century of conflict between the fiercely independent Acehnese and their Dutch and Indonesian adversaries. The world's longest war was over - for the present.

by **Stuart Notholt**

*Historically, Aceh was the gateway for Islam into the South East Asian region*

**A**ceh is a land of some 22,000 square miles at the north of the island of Sumatra. Guarding the Malacca Straits between Sumatra and Malaya, it has always had a strategic role as a gateway for regional trade. Aceh was the route through which Islam entered South East Asia, and as early as 850 a successful Islamic kingdom was established that went on to seed other Muslim states throughout the region. By the 19th century Aceh, having seen off several attempts at annexation by the Portuguese, was a locally influential power, with a modern army, diplomatic relations with Western powers (including the United States) and a major stake in the international spice trade, particularly black pepper, producing more than half the world supply. However, other powers were now encroaching on the region. The Dutch and the British, initially rivals, cut a deal in 1824 whereby the British abandoned any claims to Sumatra, and the Dutch accepted India and Singapore as being within the British sphere of influence. Acehnese independence was recognized by both the

Netherlands and Britain, but in 1871 the treaty was amended to allow for Dutch control over the whole island of Sumatra.

In 1873, after debating in Parliament the legality of attacking a sovereign state, the Netherlands formally declared war on Aceh and invaded, claiming Acehnese piracy as the immediate casus belli. The initial assault was a disaster. As *The New York Times* reported: "The attack was repulsed with great slaughter. The Dutch general was killed, and his army put to disastrous flight. It appears, indeed, to have been literally decimated." The Dutch plowed on, but their South East Asian imbroglio, like that of another superpower a century later, became a protracted nightmare. It was, in fact, the longest and most expensive war the Dutch ever fought, costing them more than 10,000 lives. Not less than thirty years later, the Acehnese Sultan Muhammed Daud Syah finally surrendered, but he and his supporters later took to guerrilla warfare in the dense Acehnese hinterland. Effectively, Dutch control rarely extended beyond Banda Aceh,

their occupation constantly punctuated by ambushes and assassinations. Significantly, Aceh was never legally incorporated into the Dutch East Indies.

This continued to be the situation until March 1942, when the whole region was overrun by the Japanese. As in other parts of the archipelago, East Indian leaders, seduced by Tokyo's talk of an 'East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere', initially co-operated. However, the Acehnese, together with nationalists in other regions, soon appreciated that they had merely swapped European colonialism for an even worse Asian variant, and resumed guerrilla warfare. Just two days after the 1945 Japanese surrender to the Allies, Indonesia declared itself independent. Dutch sovereignty over the East Indies was nominally restored, but, in the face of general resistance, this was only patchily implemented, and the Dutch made no effort to re-occupy Aceh.

### Indonesia

Many Acehnese militants actively supported

*Indonesia's military has traditionally been geared towards an conventional external threat assessment*



the Indonesian national movement, but relations rapidly soured amid Acehese claims of betrayal. In mid-December 1949, just prior to formal Dutch withdrawal, the Indonesian Emergency Government announced the establishment of a separate Aceh province, but when, on December 27, the Dutch East Indies officially ceased to exist, the new Federal Republic of Indonesia merged Aceh with other districts to form a North Sumatran province. This was itself dissolved when Indonesia became a unitary state in 1951. Simmering unrest erupted in 1953, when Acehese militants aligned themselves with the Darul Islam ('House of Islam') movement fighting to establish an Islamic Indonesian state, and in September Aceh's independence from Indonesia was proclaimed.

The Darul Islam uprising was finally suppressed in the late 1950s, and in 1959 Aceh was granted 'special territory' ('daerah istimewa') status, allowing it a high degree of autonomy in religious and cultural matters. This concession did not extinguish nationalist demands, however. On December 4 1976 a new armed movement, the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM, or Free Aceh Movement) came into being to fight for Acehese sovereignty, the separatists hoisting for the occasion the thousand-year old Aceh flag and making a renewed declaration of independence. Neither military action nor repression succeeded in crushing the movement – although its leaders were driven into exile – and in 1989 the declining security situation promoted the declaration of a 'Military Operational Area' – Daerah

**“The attack was repulsed with great slaughter. The Dutch general was killed, and his army put to disastrous flight. It appears, indeed, to have been literally decimated.”**

Operasi Militer – over Aceh. The Indonesian military, the Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI) launched a major counter-insurgency sweep under the codename 'Red Net' but this and subsequent campaigns failed to permanently suppress the uprising. With the general South East Asian economic crisis of 1997, the long-standing militarist regime of President Suharto collapsed and a significant retrenchment of TNI activities was necessitated. The most dramatic outcome was Indonesian retreat from East Timor, which voted for independence, under international supervision, in August 1999. Within weeks of this referendum, a new civil mass movement, the Sentral Informasi Referendum Aceh came into being to demand a similar poll for Aceh and held a series of massive demonstrations, involving up to half a million people.

Although the Daerah Operasi Militer was suspended in 1998 amid some conciliatory noises from the government, it became clear that Jakarta still essentially saw the solution to the insurgency in military rather than political terms. Conflict in Aceh once more reverted to a grim pattern of repressions and arrests, interspersed with counter-insurgency drives that were often punctuated with episodes of extreme violence towards civilians. The GAM, for its part,

fought back with assassinations of local government officials and their replacement with GAM appointees, who levied 'war taxes' from local communities. Peace talks in 2003 collapsed and the cycle of violence continued until the tsunami intervened.

Regular national forces that have had their origins in guerrilla movements have often proven surprisingly inept at dealing with subsequent internal unrest. There are perhaps a number of reasons why this should be so. The first is that in the formation of a conventional national army, many of the skills and tactics of the guerrilla may be abandoned or forgotten. Many Soviet client states, for example, invested in heavy armor and adopted Warsaw Pact doctrines that, while they may have had application in a potential European head-to-head with NATO, were not necessarily relevant locally. Strategically, the military planning in a state forged through a national liberation struggle may be orientated exclusively towards the threat from 'imperialists' or other external enemies. Similarly, ideology may make the state psychologically unprepared to deal with opposition. As 'liberators', they may be unwilling to concede that elements of the population have genuine grievances against the new order. We saw this, for example, in Mozambique, where the FRELIMO regime was unable to understand the resilience of the RENAMO insurgency in terms other than of imported Rhodesian or South African aggression. Last and not least there is geography: the same topography, ethnography, and other features that facilitated the original 'war of liberation' may similarly benefit successor movements.

The Indonesian military, which grew out

*The devastation caused by the 2004 tsunami focused minds of reconstruction rather than conflict*



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of the rebel insurgencies of the 1940s, suffers from all of these defects. The TNI has, for much of its history, claimed an overt political role: under its *dwifungsi* ('dual function') doctrine, it had, in addition to the normal military duties of defending the territorial integrity of the state, the task of guiding Indonesia politically and economically. This led to long periods of military or semi-military rule, and the conflation of military and political aims rendered difficult any effective analysis or internal criticism.

**Nationalism?**

The contradiction in the militant Indonesian defence of its territorial integrity is that Indonesia, as a separate historical or ethnic entity, has only very shallow roots. An Indonesian nationalist slogan has it that the sun rises at Merauke and sets in Sabang, the latter being an island off the coast of Aceh, while Merauke is located in West Papua near the border with Papua New Guinea. Loss of either of these two peripheral provinces would, like the actual loss of East Timor, be a severe blow to Indonesia's national self-view. Aceh, furthermore, has a symbolic significance to many Indonesian Muslims, serving as an important memorial to the power and prestige of Islamic states before the arrival of Christian colonial powers. Before the days of air travel, steamships carried pilgrims from Aceh, otherwise known as 'Serambi Mekkah' - the gateway to Mecca - on their way to hajj in Saudi Arabia, and even today Aceh is known as "the front porch of Mecca". More prosaically, Aceh is Indonesia's main producer of natural gas and one of its most profitable regions for foreign investment.

Unsurprisingly, the perspective of Acehese nationalists is somewhat different. They are fond of pointing out, with some justification, that their country has a thousand year history, in sharp contrast to modern upstarts like Indonesia. As Tengku Hasan Di Tiro, head

of GAM, noted archly in 1976, "There never was such a people, much less a nation, in our part of the world by that name (Indonesia). No such people existed in the Malay archipelago by definition of ethnology, philology, cultural anthropology, sociology or by any other scientific findings. 'Indonesia' is a Javanese republic with a Greek pseudo-name."

A further issue is that the Indonesian military has traditionally been geared towards an external threat assessment. TNI planning assumed that a more powerful aggressor would be capable of securing a beach-head on one or more Indonesian islands, but, once drawn into the hinterland, could be successfully interdicted and ultimately worn down by popular militias. All states, not unreasonably, have defense against foreign invasion high on their military agendas, and with a history of occupation by the Dutch and the Japanese, Indonesia is no exception. However, there has long been no credible scenario under which Indonesia could come under serious external assault. In contrast, threats posted by domestic ethnic insurgencies, and by Islamic terrorists, are very real. As was noted in a previous article Stuart Notholt, *Indonesia's Military Faces the Future*, AMR, March 2007, Jakarta has struggled with re-orientating its military and security apparatus towards the new dangers.

As the world's largest Muslim nation by

population (around 85% of the population of 233 million profess Islam), Indonesia is of crucial interest to Islamists, whose strategic aspiration is the 'restoration' of the Caliphate - the unitary Islamic polity embracing all Muslims. Indonesia was never part of the actual historical Caliphates. However, modern Islamists interpret the Caliphate as including all countries once under Muslim rule (by which definition thereby including Portugal, Spain and India) as well as all modern states in which Muslims are in a majority. Many Islamists view even this wildly ambitious programme as merely the first step in the creation of a global Islamic state, or *umma*. As early as the 1990s, and increasingly so after his expulsion from Sudan in 1996, Osama Bin Laden regarded South East Asia as a vital theatre for his developing Al Qaeda network, and intelligence reports indicated a significant level of organizational and capacity-building investment in the region. In 1999, Bin Laden issued a fatwa (holy war) against Australia in response to Canberra's involvement in facilitating East Timorese independence, and agitation amongst Indonesian Muslims saw the creation of a variety of politicized militia purporting to 'protect' Muslim populations, particularly in outlying regions where they

*A vibrant local culture: a food market in Banda Aceh.*



are in collision with other communities.

### Islam

As in other countries, Al Qaeda operated through a number of groups closely aligned with the main national Al Qaeda organization, Jemaah Islamiyah. Factions included the Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI; Indonesian Mujahideen Council), and paramilitary groups such as Laskar Mujahideen and Laskar Jundallah. In addition, there were a number of groups not directly affiliated to Al Qaeda, such as the Islamic Defenders Front and the international Islamist organization Hizb ut-Tahrir. Links were established with Malaysian extremists and with the Abu Sayyaf Group and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines. Connections with the latter, which is fighting for greater autonomy for the Muslim population of Mindanao, in the southern Philippines, proved particularly valuable to the Indonesian jihadists, providing them with relatively accessible training facilities as well as the possibility of direct combat experience.

Most of these groups had overlapping leaderships. Members of Jemaah Islamiyah's shura, or ruling council, such as Abu Jibril and Agus Dwikarna, as well as the group's spiritual leader, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, were also leaders of the MMI, Laskar Mujahideen, and Laskar Jundallah. The last two organizations were specifically created to harness and ferment religious ethnic conflict in the Malukus and Central Sulawesi. Ostensibly Muslim 'self defence' groups, they were in fact responsible for much of the violence in those regions in the 1999-2001 period, which left several thousands dead. Jibril was arrested in Malaysia in 2001 and deported to Indonesia; thereafter Laskar Jundallah and Laskar Mujahideen faded somewhat from the scene (at least under their original names) although some observers implicated the latter in renewed ethnic violence in the Malukus in 2004.

In addition, an international Muslim relief

*The Acehnese coastline*

### Similarly, ideology may make the state psychologically unprepared to deal with opposition.

organization, the Medical Emergency Relief Charity (MER-C), established several offices in Indonesia. MER-C was founded with Saudi financial backing in 1999, theoretically to provide humanitarian relief to areas of afflicted by ethnic strife. It also operates in Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan, and has been criticized by some as adopting a highly sectarian interpretation of religious conflict in its areas of work.

### The Global War on Terror

Following the 9/11 attacks on the USA, Indonesia itself came under direct Islamist attack, most dramatically at the Bali bombings. Understandably, the Indonesian authorities lost little time in associating themselves with the US-led 'war on terror' and in characterizing its opponents as terrorists.

A public relations campaign was stepped up against the GAM and other movements, such as the Free Papua Movement, which is fighting for an inde-

pendent West Papua.

Practical benefits to the Jakarta government included renewed US links with the TNI, which had been limited since the violence surrounding East Timorese independence. In 2002, the Bush administration committed \$50 million to supporting the TNI and an additional \$15 million for the police. Restrictions on the provision of lethal arms remained in place, but Washington nevertheless argued that engaging with the Indonesian security forces was the only way to promote democratic and human

rights reforms.

Diplomatic success in aligning Jakarta's overall counter-insurgency issues

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with the 'war on terror' was more limited. In 2002, Washington designated Jemaah Islamiyah a terrorist organization, and pressurized Jakarta into taking a harder line against it and other Islamists, but declined to

Qaeda by several decades. Its aim was also comparatively modest – an independent Aceh. The creation of new, separate states, even Islamic ones, is counter to Al Qaeda's ambition of unifying all Muslims into one global Caliphate and it is noteworthy that Al Qaeda support for Islamic secessionist movements worldwide has been tactical rather than wholehearted. More fundamentally, Aceh's Islam is indeed, as detractors observe, conservative and puritanical, but many Acehnese are adherents to the Shia confession rather than the Sunni-ism embraced by most Islamists.

Indeed, some indication of the potential antipathy between the GAM and the Islamists emerged after the tsunami, when Muslim groups from elsewhere in Indonesia were quick to offer 'humanitarian' assistance. Against a background of a sluggish response

undoubtedly undertaken, particularly by Laskar Mujahideen, it is unlikely, given these groups' affiliations and political agendas, that their motivation was entirely altruistic. Indeed, even within a generous interpretation of humanitarian aid, their contribution was mostly narrow and sectarian. The MMI identified its primary role as being to provide 'spiritual guidance' to survivors and to participate in the reconstruction of damaged mosques. Others saw their mandate as ensuring that Western aid workers and soldiers did not breach Islamic law.

At the most benign level, being seen to intervene speedily and effectively, at a time when the official response was laggardly, would present Islamist groups as the true supporters and defenders of local Muslim communities. The GAM, in contrast, evidently saw the arrival of 'foreign' groups as a deliberate attempt to usurp their influence and authority, and was among the loudest in their criticism both of the newcomers and of the government, which they accused of colluding with the jihadists. The GAM's complaints do have some credibility. Some of the IDF's aid workers were flown into Aceh on military transports, and other logistical support appears to be provided by the authorities. It is entirely possible that the military saw involving the Islamists as an opportunity both to cover their own inadequacies in disaster relief and to undermine the GAM, freeing up resources for military operations against the separatists. GAM protests went unanswered, and it was only after international aid bodies raised concerns over the propriety of some of the Islamic groups operating on the ground that some of the more obviously partisan participants were removed from the field.

The scale of the natural disaster shocked both the GAM and the Indonesian government into actions aimed at resolving their differences. Commentators observed that the tsunami, perversely, acted as a positive 'circuit breaker', providing both parties with a face-saving opportunity to secure a peaceful outcome to what otherwise would remain a bloody stalemate. Negotiations, in fact, proceeded remarkable swiftly, with concessions on both sides. Acehnese autonomy and custodianship of economic assets was reiterated, while the central question of independence was left in abeyance. Gubernatorial elections in 2006 saw the election of Irwandi Yusuf, a former GAM separatist who had previously been jailed. For the time being at least, long-term reconstruction is taking precedence over armed conflict. ■



*The Indonesian military is generally far more skilled and than it's regional counterparts (PHOTO: US Navy)*

list the GAM as a foreign terrorist group. Similarly, whether the West Papuan separatists are 'terrorists' of course depends on one's perspective, but Islamists they are clearly not – indeed, with many Papuans being Christian or followers of indigenous religions, West Papuan nationalism has brought them into conflict with local Muslim factions. Tarring Acehnese agitation with a broader 'Islamic terror' brush also proved problematic. The GAM was in most regards a 'conventional' secessionist insurgent movement, with a pedigree that predates Al

by the Indonesian authorities, the MMI was first off the mark, dispatching over 70 volunteers on January 4, followed shortly by over 150 reinforcements. Laskar Mujahideen also re-surfaced, sending 250 volunteers. The MER-C and the Islamic Defenders Front also rushed in sizeable contingents. With the possible exception of MER-C, none of these groups was exactly renowned for their expertise in the field of disaster relief. The IDF, for example, was previously better known for smashing up bars in Jakarta's red light district.

Although some genuine relief work was