

# CRS Report for Congress

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## Indonesian Separatist Movement in Aceh

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### Summary

Indonesia's President, Abdurrahman Wahid, faces a major separatist insurgency in the province of Aceh in northern Sumatra. Wahid has proposed autonomy for Aceh, but insurgents demand independence. Negotiations for a cease-fire continue. Wahid has been unable to control the Indonesian military, whose aggressive actions in Aceh are producing reports of growing human rights abuses and alienation of the populace. The Clinton Administration has offered advice to Wahid, including advice to seek a political settlement; but it has been hesitant to deal with the military's actions.

The Indonesian government of President Abdurrahman Wahid, elected in October 1999, faces separatist movements in several parts of the Indonesian archipelago. The emergence and/or growth of these movements have been influenced by 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. Aceh exported \$1.3 billion worth of natural gas in 1998.<sup>1</sup>

### The Separatist Movement

The leading separatist organization is Aceh Merdeka (Free Aceh), which came into existence in the 1970s and issued a declaration of independence in 1976. Aceh Merdeka, with the initials GAM, is waging an insurgency with a military force estimated between 800 and 2,000. The GAM is able to conduct guerrilla-style attacks in about half of the province. It appears to have achieved substantial public support, as evidenced by pro-independence demonstrations in late November 1999, which drew over 500,000 people. It appears to have a political organization throughout Aceh. It reportedly is able to collect taxes throughout Aceh. In January 2000, the commander of Indonesian police units in

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<sup>1</sup> Cohen, Margaret. Alarms in Aceh. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, November 18, 1999. p.17-18.

Aceh acknowledged that community leaders, religious leaders, and local government officials were not supporting Indonesian security forces against the GAM.<sup>2</sup>

Outside knowledge of the leadership, makeup, and ideology, of the GAM is limited. The GAM professes the aim of establishing Aceh as an Islamic kingdom. It reportedly has received material assistance from Iran, Libya, and sympathizers in Southeast Asia. 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. and says he would seek U.S. support.<sup>3</sup> Abdullah Syafei commands GAM guerrillas in Aceh. GAM cadre located in Malaysia seem to be another important component of the GAM that sometimes express independent political positions.

Several other Acehese groups have separatist leanings, but some of these appear to differ with the insurgency strategy of the GAM and oppose a GAM monopoly in negotiating with the Indonesian government. Muslim religious leaders are influential. Student groups have become increasingly important as pro-independence sentiment has emerged into the open since 1998. A conference of civic and political Acehese leaders from throughout Aceh met on November 14, 2000, and adopted a declaration that demanded a return of sovereignty to the Acehese people and for mediation by the United Nations and foreign governments.<sup>4</sup>

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 15<sup>th</sup> century until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It maintained diplomatic and consular relations with several states, including Great Britain. It exchanged diplomatic notes with the United States.<sup>5</sup> 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 Acehese 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.

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<sup>2</sup> International Conflict Group. *Aceh: Escalating Tension*. Brussels, December 7, 2000. P. 2-3. Reid, Anthony. Which Way Aceh? *Far Eastern Economic Review*, March 16, 2000. p.36. Aceh Local Gov't at a Loss Over Conflict. *Suara Karija (Jakarta)*, January 13, 2000. p.3.

<sup>3</sup> Lintner, Bertil. Giving No Quarter. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, July 29, 1999. p.18-19.

<sup>4</sup> International Crisis Group. *Aceh: Escalating Tensions*, Brussels, December 2000. P. 6.

<sup>5</sup> 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.

(3) Extensive human rights abuses by the Indonesian military has been documented. Successive Indonesian governments relied on military repression in dealing with dissidence in Aceh. Military abuses of civilians reportedly became common in the 1970s and 1980s. This peaked during the revolt in the late 1980s. In congressional testimony in 1992, Sidney Jones, Executive Director of Asia Watch, detailed killings, disappearances, and torture committed by the Indonesian military in Aceh.<sup>6</sup> Mass graves were uncovered in 1998 by Indonesia's National Commission on Human Rights. Another Indonesian military crackdown occurred after May 1989, resulting in the killing of several hundred people (some reportedly massacred by the military), widespread destruction, and over 100,000 people fleeing their homes.<sup>7</sup>

(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.<sup>8</sup> This prompted dissident Acehnese to claim that Aceh was the object of Javanese colonialism, which had replaced Dutch colonialism.

### **Wahid's Policies and Attempts to Achieve a Cease-Fire**

The Wahid administration is a coalition 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. President Wahid has rejected independence for Aceh, but he has acknowledged that the Acehnese have legitimate grievances. Before and shortly after taking office, he proposed granting Aceh "status as a special region" with a priority to Islamic law, a referendum to determine Acehnese sentiment, a redistribution of wealth from Aceh's natural resources with Aceh receiving 75% rather than 10%, and a cease-fire.<sup>9</sup> Wahid has spoken of extensive financial aid to Aceh, the money to come from Middle Eastern countries.

Escalating violence in early 2000 led Wahid to seek talks with the GAM. The talks produced a "Humanitarian Pause" signed May 12, 2000. Effective for three months, it was extended in September until January 15, 2001. It established two committees: one to coordinate humanitarian programs in Aceh and the second to secure an end to violence. In November 2000, the Wahid Administration submitted draft legislation to the Indonesian parliament for "special autonomy" for Aceh based on a proposal by Aceh's provincial parliament. However, Wahid and other officials announced in December 2000 that the government would not extend the Humanitarian Pause beyond January 15, 2001. Officials stated that the government no longer would negotiate solely with the GAM but would talk to many elements of the Acehnese population. However, negotiations with the GAM

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations. *Crisis in East Timor and U.S. Policy Toward Indonesia*. Hearings. 102<sup>nd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session. Washington, U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1992. p.30-36.

<sup>7</sup> Richburg, Keith. Indonesia's Other War. *Washington Post*, August 16, 1999. p.A9. Indonesian Army Massacred Unarmed Civilians. Agence France Presse report, November 2, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> *The Far East and Australasia 1999*. Europa Publications Ltd., 1999. p.422.

<sup>9</sup> Gus Dur Proposes Islamic Law in Aceh. *Indonesian Observer* (internet version), August 2, 1999. Gus Dur is the name President Wahid is commonly referred to in Indonesia.

produced on January 10, 2001, a "Provision of Understanding," effective for one month as of January 16, 2001, intended to end violence.

Two related factors damaged the effectiveness of the Humanitarian Pause and raise doubts about prospects for the Provision of Understanding. The first is the failure of Indonesian-GAM negotiations to settle the issue of Aceh's political future. GAM leaders continue to demand independence.<sup>10</sup> The Government's unilateral plan for Aceh autonomy legislation reflects the impasse.

The second factor is Wahid's failure to gain control over the Indonesian military (TNI) in Aceh. Upon taking office, he ordered all regular combat forces to withdraw from Aceh. The order was never fully carried out. In January 2000, he successfully resisted pressure from military leaders to declare martial law in Aceh.<sup>11</sup> Wahid directed military leaders in April 2000 to remove the police commander in Aceh and investigate accusations that he had ordered the widespread burning of houses and villages. In November 1999, the Independent Commission on Violent Acts in Aceh found that high ranking military officers were complicit in atrocities and other human rights abuses; it recommended five trials. The first trial began in April 2000 of 24 military personnel accused of massacring 62 people. The military personnel were convicted and received 8.5 to 10 year sentences, but no commanding officers were among the 24. No other trials have been held.

Despite Wahid's actions, police and military units began more aggressive military operations, codenamed Rencong III, that by March 2000 produced reports of mounting human rights abuses. One such incident occurred in March when army units swept through villages near the site of a meeting between a representative of President Wahid and the GAM military commander in Aceh.<sup>12</sup>

The Humanitarian Pause only had a temporary impact on the TNI's conduct. By October 2000, reports appeared that military personnel, sometimes disguised as police, had resumed sweeps through villages, burning and killing villagers. The sweeps sometimes were in response to GAM attacks on military or police posts or ambushes of military vehicles on the road. However, there appears to be a pattern of TNI retaliation against civilians. The TNI also was believed responsible for the jailing and murder of several Acehese civic and religious leaders in late 2000. A group of Danish-sponsored aid workers were slain apparently by Indonesian soldiers, and human rights workers accused the TNI of torturing three people working for Oxfam International. In November 2000, the TNI killed at least 41 people in an attempt to prevent the holding of another pro-referendum rally in Aceh's capital. About 400 killings occurred between the signing of the Humanitarian Pause and the end of 2000. TNI leaders reportedly oppose the Humanitarian Pause, continue to argue for martial law, and plan increased military

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<sup>10</sup> Rebels Warn Mobil Oil Management to Leave Aceh at Once for Safety Reasons. *The Indonesian Observer* (internet version), January 4, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Indonesian Infighting Fragments Government. Stratfor Report, January 8, 2000. Richburg, Keith. Indonesia's New Leader Improvises as He Goes. *Washington Post*, January 1, 2000. p.A28.

<sup>12</sup> Friel, Terry. Rights Groups Oppose Aceh Crackdown. *Washington Times*, April 21, 2000. p.A16. Indonesian Human Rights Minister Verifies Beatings in Aceh. *Kompas* (Jakarta, internet version), March 21, 2000.

operations after January 15, 2001.<sup>13</sup> This raises the possibility of a major human rights crisis in Aceh, perhaps similar to the 1991 and 1999 human rights crises in East Timor,<sup>14</sup> if President Wahid cannot change the behavior of the military and produce a comprehensive political settlement acceptable to the Acehnese.

## U.S. Policy on Aceh

There has been an increase in U.S. attention to the Aceh issue since President Wahid took office in October 1999. Successive U.S. administrations and Congresses traditionally had ignored the Aceh conflict, concentrating on East Timor. In a November 1999 interview with the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Stanley Roth stated that the conduct of the Indonesian military—“Aceh in particular”—is now a defining issue in U.S.-Indonesian relations.<sup>15</sup> The State Department issued a statement on Aceh on April 26, 2000 (see below).

U.S. policy toward Aceh has been within the context of the Clinton Administration’s stated goal of supporting the Wahid government and “a successful democratic transition in Indonesia” following 30 years of authoritarian rule under Suharto. The Administration designated Indonesia as one of the world’s four priority emerging democracies.<sup>16</sup> It voiced support for Indonesia’s territorial integrity and urged the GAM to negotiate a settlement within a united Indonesia. U.S. Ambassador Robert Gelbard described the GAM’s demand for independence as “very unrealistic because these demands have never been supported by the International community.”<sup>17</sup> The Administration adopted the role of an adviser to the Indonesian government on Aceh. This was carried out through the State Department, the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta, and through the auspices of the U.S. Institute for Peace. The advice reportedly focused on examples of conflict resolution used by other governments, urging the Indonesian government to seek a political rather than a military solution, and suggesting that President Wahid appoint a special policy coordinator on Aceh.<sup>18</sup> U.S. Ambassador Robert Gelbard reportedly promised U.S. economic aid to develop infrastructure in Aceh.<sup>19</sup> In HR 5526 (106<sup>th</sup> Congress), foreign operations appropriations for 2001, Congress earmarked \$5 million for economic aid to Aceh.

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<sup>13</sup> Dhume, Sadanand. Show of Force. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, December 28, 2000–January 4, 2001. P. 24. Chandrasekaran, Rajiv. Aid Workers Targeted in Aceh Strife. *Washington Post*, December 13, 2000. P. A36. International Crisis Group, *Aceh: Escalating Tension*, p. 5-8.

<sup>14</sup> The Indonesian military’s massacre of demonstrators in Dili, East Timor, in November 1991, and the violence instigated by the Indonesian military following the East Timor referendum of August 31, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> The Lessons of East Timor. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, November 25, 1999. p.20.

<sup>16</sup> Statement of Assistant Secretary of State Stanley Roth before the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, February 16, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> *Banda Aceh Serambi Indonesia* (internet version), June 16, 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Statement by Assistant Secretary of State Stanley Roth to the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, February 16, 2000. Aceh Special Team Leader Selected. *Jakarta Post* (internet version), March 3, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Antara New Agency report, February 3, 2000.

U.S. officials have not commented publicly on the failure of Indonesian-GAM negotiations.. They also appear uncertain over policy towards the mounting human rights abuses of the Indonesian military. At a news conference in Jakarta on March 3, Under Secretary of State Thomas Pickering stated U.S. support for a political solution. He gave ambiguous answers to questions regarding the Indonesia's military's more aggressive actions in Aceh, reports of new human rights abuses, and whether he had raised these issues with Indonesian officials.<sup>20</sup> In a press conference of April 3, 2000, Admiral Dennis Blair, the Commander-in-Chief of U.S. forces in the Pacific, concentrated on East Timor issues in describing obstacles to the restoration of U.S.-Indonesian military cooperation. He mentioned Aceh only in reply to a question, but he asserted that the Indonesian military in Aceh needed "to follow rules of engagement" and that there should be "accountability for their actions."<sup>21</sup> The State Department's April 26 statement on Aceh condemned violence "by all parties," but it criticized specifically only the GAM, especially for its attacks on U.S. companies (Mobil Oil). Ambassador Gelbard criticized openly the lack of reform of the TNI and the TNI's conduct in relation to East Timor. This made him the target of accusations from Wahid Administration officials and politicians that he is meddling in Indonesia's internal affairs.

The murder of an American human rights worker in Aceh (his body was discovered on September 7, 2000) led to the introduction of a resolution, H.Res. 580 (106<sup>th</sup> Congress), in the House of Representatives calling on the U.S. State Department and the Indonesian government to investigate thoroughly the murder and "to devote official attention. . .to broader investigations into the numerous other cases of killings and disappearance in Aceh."

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<sup>20</sup> Pickering initially stated that "we did not express or should express, a point of view with respect to particular tactics or use of force," but he said later that military tactics in Aceh "is something, obviously, we're concerned about, and spoke to the government about. . . ." See U.S. Department of State. Under Secretary Thomas Pickering On-the-Record Press Conference, March 3, 2000.

<sup>21</sup> Press Briefing by U.S. CINCPAC Admiral Dennis C. Blair, April 3, 2000.