

The right to return: IDPs in Aceh

by Eva-Lotta E Hedman

Political changes are underway in Aceh but only a small fraction of those displaced by the December 2004 tsunami or by earlier conflict with insurgents have returned home.

In August 2005 a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the Indonesian government and the separatist Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka - GAM). The Aceh Monitoring Mission (AMM)¹ has successfully overseen relocation of Indonesian troops and police and decommissioning of GAM weapons. GAM has publicly disbanded its military wing and is to take part in forthcoming local government elections. Human rights violations have drastically declined.

In this context, it is all the more striking that the lives of IDPs have remained, in important respects, defined by their displacement. Only a small fraction of the more than half a million people displaced by the tsunami in Aceh and Nias Island have become active participants in reconstruction. At the end of 2005, some 80% remain in some form of temporary shelter. Sanitation is often poor and the isolated location of many shelters makes it hard to access jobs and health and education services.

A recent survey of IDPs in host families suggests that such arrangements, which predominantly involve living with relatives, have become more permanent than many had hoped. More than half of those IDPs surveyed have been living with the same host communities or families since the tsunami struck.² The destruction and/or unfinished reconstruction of their house were the most commonly cited reasons for staying so long with host families.

Prior to the tsunami an estimated 120,000 IDPs were forced from their homes by counter-insurgency operations. In the context of post-tsunami Aceh, conflict-induced IDPs have remained largely invis-

ible. In the aftermath of the peace agreement and demilitarisation, however, some have taken action to return to central Aceh where militia groups – not included in the MoU – still enjoy the backing of local businessmen and both civilian and military officials. On 10 December, a collective effort was launched by some 5,000 conflict IDPs in Pidie and Bireuen.³ As transportation promised by local government officials failed to materialise, IDPs turned the planned return into a protest march before eventually boarding trucks and buses for the central highlands where they established camps along the main road.

These conflict-induced IDPs in central Aceh have suffered from food shortages and experienced intimidation and forced relocation at the hands of military and police, as well as interventions by government officials seeking to undermine their collective voice. There have also been reports of violence targeting returning IDPs and/or their property, as well as cases of fighting with local youth or (former) militia in places where local leaders have refused to provide security guarantees. Immediate concerns remain as to the overall conditions in make-shift camps, which have become more difficult to reach and monitor on account of their proliferation and relocation to villages in the central highlands. There are also concerns about the broader issue of security – or lack thereof – especially in communities where no security guarantees have been agreed with local officials.

The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement assert that authorities have a primary duty and responsibility to establish the conditions, as well as pro-



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vide the means, to allow IDPs to return voluntarily, in safety and with dignity. At a minimum, local government officials should declare commitment to upholding and strengthening the peace process, offer security guarantees and, where desired, host *peusijek* (traditional ceremony of welcome or forgiveness) to foster reconciliation. Safe return and reintegration cannot be achieved without a greater measure of transparency and participation.

As elections approach, AMM and other concerned groups are working to provide space for the Government of Indonesia, GAM and communities to debate their views of the MoU. However, the entire peace process could be derailed by a proposal to redraw administrative boundaries in Aceh which is being debated in the national legislature. Conflict IDPs who wish to return to their communities in the central highlands of Aceh view this development with great anxiety. Government officials pushing for this division of the province may not only be jeopardising the peace process but may also be in violation of the Guiding Principles.

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For more information, see the World Bank's Aceh Conflict Monitoring Update www.conflictand-development.org/Home.php and a report from the International Crisis Group: www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?l=1&id=4049

1. A project of the EU, Norway, Switzerland and five countries of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN). www.aceh-mm.org
2. 'IDPs in Host Families Sample Survey Summary Report' www.humanitarianinfo.org/sumatra/reliefrecovery/livelihood/docs/doc/UNORCIDPsin-HostfamiliesSampleSurveySummaryReport-140206.pdf
3. According to the Center for Humanitarian and Social Development, a local NGO in Pidie working with IDPs, some 5,000 names were collected at the outset of the return march. Author's interview, 11 January 2006.