MEMBER PROFILE

ACHEH

Acheh-Sumatra National Liberation Front (ASNLF)

Last updated: December 2017
Status: Occupied territory
Areas: 236,803 km², consisting of 119 islands, 73 major rivers and 2 lakes
Population: 5.09 million
Capital City: Banda Aceh
Language: Acehnese

**UNPO REPRESENTATION:** Acheh-Sumatra National Liberation Front (ASNLF)
The Acheh-Sumatra National Liberation Front (ASNLF) has been a Member of UNPO since 1991.

**UNPO MEMBER PERSPECTIVE**
ASNLF believes that its partnership with UNPO will help it in its efforts to achieve independence and enable it to provide support to other UNPO Members striving to achieve similar goals. Specifically, they would like UNPO’s assistance in providing a platform through which their concerns may be presented to the international community. ASNLF also looks to UNPO’s experience to help it increase the efficiency of its legal methods and strategies with focused training programs. In sharing experience and increasing its efficiency, ASNLF will continue to work to secure the freedom of the indigenous Acehnese while avoiding violence and future armed conflict.

**OVERVIEW**

Acheh is a ‘special territory’ in Indonesia, located at the northern tip of the island of Sumatra. The approximate area of Acheh is 236,803 km² and the territory consists of 119 islands, 73 major rivers and 2 lakes. It is strategically located on the Malaccan Strait, an important trade route and portal to Southeast Asia and by the Indian Ocean to the South. Banda Aceh, the capital of Acheh, lies at the mouth of the Krueng Acheh and Krueng Daroy rivers by the Indian Ocean and is the administrative and trading center of this mountainous region.

Acheh is also abundantly rich in natural resources such as oil, gas, gold, platinum, tin and rubber, among others.

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Acheh was an internationally recognised an independent sovereign state for hundreds of years before the arrival of European powers to South-east Asia and for many centuries after. In its history, first against Portugal, then the British and Dutch in the 18th century and today against the Indonesian government in Jakarta, Acheh has continued its struggle against colonial and alien rule with varying degrees of success.

In 1824 the Anglo-Dutch treaty was signed, under which the British ceded their colonial possessions on Sumatra to the Dutch. The British claimed Acheh as part of their colonies, although they had little actual control over the sultanate. Initially under the agreement, the Dutch agreed to respect the Acehnese sultanate’s independence. In 1873, however, the Dutch invaded Acheh, with no opposition from the British.
The Dutch colonial government declared war on Aceh on 26 March 1873, but they never fully gained control of the territory and declared their attempt at subjugating Aceh a failure in 1893. Instead of conceding, excessive force was used to command full control of Aceh, which was eventually gained in 1904. Throughout Dutch rule, Aceh faced large numbers of casualties and continued guerilla warfare against the Dutch until the Dutch East Indies achieved independence following occupation by the Japanese at the end of WWII.

On 27 December 1949, under heavy international pressure, the Netherlands finally acknowledged Indonesia's independence. Upon independence, Indonesian troops were dispatched to annex Aceh, causing resentment over what many Achehese viewed as yet another foreign occupation. Since then, there have been periodic armed conflicts between the Indonesian military and local forces fighting for independence from the central government.

In 1959, the Indonesian government gave Aceh a "special territory" status, thereby giving it a greater degree of autonomy from the central government in Jakarta than most other regions of Indonesia. The regional government was empowered to construct a legal system, but it was never independent of the national government.

In 1976, Aceh re-declared its independence. Since that time, it has struggled against the Indonesian government for recognition. A struggle that saw severe crimes perpetrated by the Indonesian government and resulted in the death of tens of thousands of Achehese.

In December 1976, the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) was founded. Based on the above historical background, the Acheh people demanded the return of their once glorious independent state back to them. Aside from the human rights violations against the people of Aceh, the struggle was fuelled by the Indonesian government’s control over the province’s considerable natural resources and revenues generated by them.

During the 1990s thousands of Indonesian troops entered Aceh to stop the insurgent rebel force, resulting in more conflict and casualties. Finally, on 9 December 2002, the government of Indonesia and GAM agreed to a peace deal called Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHa). In this peace agreement, the Indonesian government said that Aceh, in addition to its “special territory” status, could now also have free elections and a partially autonomous government and would also keep 70% of the revenue generated from the province’s oil resources. It also promised to gradually withdraw government troops. In return, the rebels were asked to abandon their claims for complete independence and hand in their weapons. However, neither side held to their end of the agreement and peace negotiations broke down shortly after. The Indonesian government immediately launched
an all-out military offensive, imposing martial law on the province and sending thousands of troops to keep control of Aceh.

On 26 December 2004, a massive tsunami, triggered by an earthquake in the Indian Ocean, completely devastated the province, killing 120,000 people in Aceh alone and destroying homes, infrastructure and natural habitats. As international attention and aid poured in from the international community, renewed focus fell on the fate of Aceh.

In the immediate aftermath of the devastation, on 28 December 2004, GAM declared a ceasefire of hostilities to allow for aid to reach within the disputed area. In turn, the Indonesian government temporarily removed its security restrictions to allow for rescue efforts in the affected area.

On 15 August 2005, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) brokered by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari was signed, whereby both sides agreed to cease all hostilities immediately. GAM agreed to be disarmed and the Government pledged to withdraw all non-local military and police by the end of 2005. In this context, Aceh was meant to exercise authority within all sectors of public affairs, which will be administered in conjunction with its civil and judicial administration, except in the fields of foreign affairs, external defense, national security, monetary and fiscal matters, justice and freedom of religion, the policies of which belong to the Government of the Republic of Indonesia in conformity with the Constitution. These topics have been some of the most contentious issues in previous negotiations. On the question of the uneven distribution of income, it was settled that 70% of the income from local natural resources would remain within Aceh.

The MoU also foresaw the establishment of a Human Rights Court and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Aceh, but more than 12 years have now passed since the peace agreement was signed and the establishment of neither of those institutions has come to fruition.

A major reflection of the MoU was the 2006 regional election, where, for the first time, a regional candidate, including a member of GAM, could run for all positions - that of Governor included. Despite hopes for a new era of stability for the region following the aforementioned milestone elections, the run-up to the most recent elections in 2017 were marked by corruption, threats and intimidation.

While the peace agreement gave some increased autonomy to Aceh, ASNLFF still aims at independence, believing that the demands for self-determination have not been sufficiently addressed by the 2005 peace agreement.

**CURRENT ISSUES & POLITICAL SITUATION**

In 2016, leaders Mr Ariffadhillah and Mr Yusuf Daud have been elected to lead the ASNLFF for a four-year term that will last through 2020. The party has built three levels of political mobilisation - international, national and local. International partners of ASNLFF help promote the cause of the Acehne people and have been essential in providing funding to the Front. On a national level, the ASNLFF works with Indonesian civil society groups to pressure the government to use non-militaristic approaches to resolve the long-lasting conflict. Locally, youth and student movements have become important allies of the party that help grow support for democracy and a freedom referendum.

**Failures of the Memorandum of Understanding**

The MoU was meant to serve as a peace deal between the Indonesian government and the region of Aceh. Unfortunately, today there has been little legislation passed to reinforce the agreements made. The failure of the State to adhere to its commitments has left the provincial government with no say in many political matters. One especially critical matter
pertains to the on-going mobilisation of Indonesian military in the region of Aceh. Today, 14,700 soldiers and 9,1000 policemen and women remain in Aceh, while Provision 4.7. of the MoU promised demilitarisation.

In addition, Aceh continues to wait for the state to take back the illegal arms that were distributed in the region, but there is little reason to believe that this will occur. The State has a history of using civilians in its military operations and arming civilian groups within the Aceh region with illegal arms. For this reason, it seems unlikely that the Indonesian government will take back these arms.

Aside from the Indonesian military presence in the Aceh region, the Achehnese people are still waiting for justice for the crimes they suffered at the hands of the Indonesian armed forces during the 1990s conflict. Under the MoU, the Indonesian State was to establish a “Commission for Truth and Reconciliation” and a “Human Rights Court” to be tasked with settling human right violations. Indeed, the establishment of these tribunals was proposed in 2006 and 2013 state legislations, but has still failed to come to fruition to this day.

**Sharia Law**

In 2006 under its newly established regional parliament, the Aceh region implemented Sharia law. Unfortunately, since its implementation, the region has received international condemnation for the human right violations that have arisen.

Although Sharia law is by no means inherently a violation of human rights, the recent adaptations of strict bylaws in 2015 have raised concern.

Although not legally obvious in new bylaws, there have been examples of Sharia law being imposed on non-Muslims (a total of about 90,000 people) in the region. This, alongside claims of harassment by the Wilayatul Hisbah, a religious task force, has brought international criticism and threatens to discredit the Aceh region.

ASNLF recognises the sensitivity of Sharia law but emphasises the political component of this legislation, as each law has to be endorsed by Jakarta before implementation can take place. Sharia law is being used as a tool to discredit Aceh internationally.

When monitored one notices that new laws adopted under Sharia are almost always presented immediately preceding legislative and executive elections. Furthermore, academic research has been found to support the political utilisation of Sharia law as seen by Mr Edward Aspinall from the Department of Political and Social change at the Australian National University:

“Three groups of actors - the national government, the Ulama and the local political elite - were united by a desire to undercut popular support for GAM, Free Aceh Movement. In promoting shariah, these groups engaged in a process akin to the “outbidding” often seen in ethnic conflicts, each trying to demonstrate that they are more authentically represented Acehnese identity than did GAM.”

Although supportive of Islamic culture and religion, ASNLF does not support the human rights violations that may have taken place in light of this policy shift.
Environmental Issues

Ach'eh possesses one of Indonesia's largest reserves of oil and natural gas. Consequently, a number of multinational corporations maintain a presence in Ach'eh, aiming to extract these natural resources. Extraction practices are a continuous threat to the environment in Ach'eh, causing deforestation and land degradation. In addition, natural disasters plague the region, primarily due to its geographical location. Apart from the threat of tsunamis and earthquakes, natural hazards include periodic floods, severe droughts, volcanoes and forest fires.

Economy

Although rich in natural resources, the economy of the Ach'eh region remains poor. In 2015 the region experienced a growth of 1.65 percent, significantly lower than the national average of 5.02 percent. In addition, unemployment in the region remains drastically higher than the national 5.9 percent. Poor growth and unemployment in the region is due to exploitation of the territory and its resources by foreign transnational corporations.

Aside from exploitation of natural resources, poor supervision of state projects by the parliament has resulted in numerous infrastructure plans to either be completed below standards or abandoned altogether. The region has been allocated a “special autonomy” budget to last until 2028 to improve the poor economic standing of the region. Unfortunately, as poor management and corruption of the budget persist, there is concern that after 2028 the standing of the region will only worsen (Graf & Schroter & Edwin).

Culture

The traditional attire for women is a sarong, a colourful woven skirt, while men's traditional wear include narrow black trousers that are embroidered at the ankle and waist. The fabric of both male and female clothing is often decorated with gold and silver threads.

Women also often wear necklaces layered from the neck to the waist and have arms and fingers adorned with many bracelets and rings. The more prominent the occasion, the more decorated the sarong will be.

Homes in Ach'eh are traditionally built out of bamboo or flattened wood and are built on stilts to protect them from the region's frequent flooding.

Much of the art, music and culture of the Achehnese is influenced by Islam, which is believed to have first entered Southeast Asia through Ach'eh in the 8th century. At a certain point, Banda Ach'eh, the capital of Ach'eh, was referred to as the 'doorway to Mecca'. It was a popular stopping place for Muslim travellers, scholars and merchants.

According to tradition, the arrival of important dignitaries to villages, weddings and circumcision celebrations is met with traditional dances and music. The dances are typically performed in a group fashion with rhythmic steps and beats and accompanied by music, which is performed on traditional string, wind and percussion instruments.

Cuisine

The Achehnese are mainly agriculturalists whose diet consists of rice with meat (except for pork, which is forbidden to Muslims), fish or vegetables. The Acheh diet includes a wide
variety of traditional dishes, most of which are prepared with different spices and served in an assortment of sauces. Often after dinner the Achehnese will serve “Ranub”, a betel leaf, for chewing. Serving this leaf shows respect to the guest.