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In Signing Accord, Indonesia and Rebels Hope for Peace
By EVELYN RUSLI

JAKARTA, Indonesia, Aug. 14 - The Indonesian government and rebels from the province of Aceh are set to end their decades-long conflict with the signing of a peace treaty on Monday in Helsinki, Finland, cementing a deal that came together in the aftermath of the tsunami that devastated the region in December.

The agreement is based on the rapid disarmament of rebels, the scaling back of Indonesia's military and police presence and greater self-government for the province, which is rich in oil and natural gas reserves.

Government officials and the separatist Free Aceh Movement say they are confident that the peace deal can succeed, but they also acknowledge serious obstacles ahead. An Indonesian delegation headed by the minister of justice and human rights, Hamid Alawuddin, traveled to Helsinki over the weekend for the signing ceremony.

The head of the international monitoring mission, Pieter Feith, who arrived in Aceh on Sunday, warned both sides that the skirmishes of the past few months must stop.

"I would like to urge both parties to show maximum restraint, to desist from acts of violence, the use of force and cease all offensive operations," Mr. Feith said.

At the center of the agreement is a phased withdrawal of about 30,000 Indonesian military and police forces, leaving about 14,000 soldiers.

The defense minister, Juwono Sudarsono, said that Indonesian forces were to leave the province in the next six months and that the roughly 3,000 rebels would be disarmed over the same time. According to the timetable, the rebels will lay down at least 20 percent of their weapons, and the military will move out 20 percent of their troops every two months, Mr. Sudarsono said in an interview.

"I imagine there will be a few glitches during the important one-month period between Aug. 15 and Sept. 15 when the phased withdrawal of Indonesian troops from outside of Aceh province starts," he said. "My personal estimate is that the transition through Dec. 15 will be more than 80 percent on time."

The conflict, which began 1976 at the height of General Suharto's dictatorship, was mainly a fight over Aceh's energy resources.

Human rights groups say rogue elements of the military and rebel forces perpetuated the violence in recent years in an effort to hold on to profitable schemes like illegal logging and extortion.

In the end, it was the psychological and economic devastation of the tsunami in December that encouraged both sides to return to the negotiating table.

"After years of allegations and counter-allegations, the tsunami made us realize that we needed to finally sit down and come together to rebuild Aceh," said Bakhtiar Abdullah, a spokesman for Free Aceh Movement and part of the negotiating team. "There was also pressure from the international community; we know people are watching closely."

The conflict, which has killed up to 15,000 people in 30 years, was also hindering reconstruction, and the flood of international aid helped push negotiators to make concessions.

At a series of peace talks in Helsinki sponsored by the former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, the rebels gave up their claim for independence from Indonesia, and the government yielded ground on the question of allowing Aceh some political autonomy.

The agreement also reiterated a commitment made in 1999 to allow Aceh to retain 70 percent of all revenues from oil, gas and other resources. Separatists have complained that because of corruption, little of the money stayed in Aceh.

On the eve of the signing, the mood in Aceh, was "nervous but hopeful," said Saiful Mahdi, a director of the Aceh Research Institute and a public policy professor at Syiah Kuala University in Aceh.

Confidence in the peace process was bolstered this week by early signs of a military pullback, with soldiers at some remote posts starting to pack up and head toward larger towns, to facilitate the move.

Some of the 300 members of the monitoring team from the European Union and the Association of South East Asian Nations have already arrived, a welcome sign for many Acehnese who believe that the heavy presence of international forces will tilt the outcome toward peace this time, Mr. Mahdi said.

The monitors will oversee disarmament at 12 centers, where rebels are supposed to turn in their arms and receive help for reintegrating into society. Each combatant who turns in weapons will receive about five acres of land and supplies to become a farmer or fisherman in the province. Under the terms of the accord, rebels and political prisoners will be granted amnesty by the end of August. The first to be released will be rebel prisoners who helped with reconstruction efforts after the tsunami and willingly returned to custody, Mr. Sudarsono said.

As a result of the talks, the Acehnese also won the right to form local political parties, which are banned under Indonesian law, giving them a measure of self-rule they never had before. Those parties will be able to compete in provincial elections within 18 months, according to the agreement.

Despite the growing optimism, some Acehnese seemed hesitant and even doubtful about what was ahead.

Since the peace plan was hammered out last month in Helsinki, sporadic fighting has continued. It still remains unclear whether President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono can press the troops in Aceh to follow the government's orders.

And even though the number of troops will decrease, many Acehnese are worried that the military will keep intelligence units or find other avenues to maintain a strong grip on the region, Mr. Mahdi said.

In the past, intelligence units helped identify and suppress separatist sympathizers with torture, imprisonment and murder, according to human rights groups.

"The presence of the military also seems more noticeable now," Mr. Mahdi said. "After the tsunami, they expanded the number of districts from 8 to 21. Each new station will need new police and military officers. There may be less of them, but they are closer to the people."

Mr. Sudarsono said: "This time around there will be no intelligence units. It might have happened before, but we've learned from the past. We are committed to trust-building."