

Indonesia Settles With Aceh Rebels

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JAKARTA, July 17 - The Indonesian government and separatists from Aceh Province agreed to a peace deal in Finland today to end a 30-year conflict that has killed some 15,000 people, government officials here said.

If it is officially approved, the pact would end one of Southeast Asia's longest-running conflicts and remove one threat to Indonesia's territorial integrity. It might also provide a formula by which Jakarta could negotiate with separatist movements elsewhere in this sprawling archipelago.

A draft agreement, which was reported to have been approved by the Indonesian president on Saturday night, appears to have resolved the question of a future political role for the rebels, considered to be the most contentious issue at the talks in Helsinki.

"It is a historic moment: We finally reached a peaceful settlement that has been longed for so many years by the people of Aceh and by the people of Indonesia," a spokesman for the Indonesian government, Sofyan Djalil, told the Reuters news agency.

The war in Aceh, a province on the northern tip of Sumatra, was primarily driven by the desire of rebels there to retain what they consider a fair share of benefits from its rich oil, mineral and forest reserves.

Exxon Mobil runs a large natural gas plant in the province. It has been a target of the rebels over the years and has been guarded by Indonesian military forces.

Just before the deal was due to be announced in Helsinki, the Indonesian state news agency, Antara, quoted President Susilo Bambang Yudoyono as saying the agreement was almost done. Most of the issues had been agreed and "only 3 percent" remained unsolved, the president said, namely, the question of whether former separatists will be allowed to be involved in politics.

The formation of a local political party for rebels was one of the last sticking points.

"Although we will not readily allow the establishment of local political parties, what is important is that they have political rights, that along with the other elements in Aceh they have opportunities to take part in the existing political process," the president said, according to the report.

The broad outlines of the draft call for the disarmament of Aceh separatists, amnesty for separatists and the eventual withdrawal of the Indonesian Army. On Friday, the Indonesian vice president, Yusuf Kalla, said demilitarization would be "automatic" if the rebels agreed to lay down their arms.

Officials have started to piece together a monitoring group, which will consist of representatives from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the European Union.

Indonesia has always opposed involving United Nations monitors. But the presence of United Nations agencies and other humanitarian groups in the wake of the tsunamis of Dec. 26, which struck Aceh particularly hard, forced both sides to consider a peace deal more seriously.

The government lifted the emergency status of the province on May 18, allowing donors to complete reconstruction more effectively. Even so, two aid workers were shot last month as they were delivering assistance.

Under the draft, the rebels would be allowed to run in local elections but not in national elections, the Indonesian officials at the talks said. This was a key demand of the separatist rebels, because it would allow them a measure of self-governance.

Some analysts say the rebels hope to gain enough power in elections to call for a referendum on Aceh's independence, a long-held demand that they relinquished in Helsinki.

In the past, there was often a disconnection between the exiled leaders, who did most of the negotiating, and the rebels' commanders in Aceh, who have taken a severe beating from the Indonesian military in the past year.

It was not clear how satisfied the commanders were about the tentative deal, but the exiled leaders insisted they had been in constant communication with them.

Throughout the conflict, separatists and military officials have traded accusations of rape, torture and murder of civilians. A fragile cease-fire was brokered in May 2003, but violence erupted and the deal quickly fell apart.

But the parties returned to the negotiating table earlier this year, after the tsunamis ravaged Aceh's coastline and left at least 130,000 people dead.

Peace talks had a better chance of succeeding this time because they were held under the auspices of a well-known international negotiator, Martti Ahtisaari, a former president of Finland. If made final, the deal will be formally signed in August.

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