Aceh Monitoring Mission
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Perspective ACEH MONITORING MISSION

In this edition of Perspective with me, Melanie Yip,

The European Union-led Aceh Monitoring Mission, or AMM enters its final stages of a mandate to facilitate the implementation of a historic Memorandum of Understanding between the Indonesian government, and the Free Aceh Movement, or GAM.

The peace framework which was signed by both parties on 15 August 2005 puts an end to almost 30 years of violence in Aceh which left more than 12,000 dead and thousands more displaced.

Speaking at a lecture jointly organized by the Asia Europe Foundation and the Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies in Singapore, AMM’s Head of Mission Mr Pieter Feith gave an update.

PF: Freedom of movement has been restored and particularly since the end of last year, no major incidence or human rights violations have occurred any more. Political prisoners have been amended by the government, although some disputes remain on individual cases and will still need to be resolved before the end of the mission. Importantly, the process of reintegration of former GAM combatants, political prisoners and all those who have been affected by the conflict have been set and trained. And I think this process is progressing well with the support of generous entitlements, both from the government and the international community. Reconciliation took another step forward with return of the GAM leadership from exile in Sweden.

The Aceh Monitoring Mission was conducted in cooperation with five ASEAN countries - Brunei, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

PF: As always, it is essential when you start such a mission to find a proper legal base before you can start. And you need to settle issues like privileges and immunities. This work was done between the government of Indonesia, the 5 ASEAN states, and the European Union in good spirit, and it took us very little time to conclude a set of participating agreements, as well as a status of mission agreements with the government. And as a result, the mission managed to be on the ground on the very day the Memorandum of Understanding was signed in Helsinki on August 15.

And the experiences of the various ASEAN and EU monitors involved in the Aceh Monitoring Mission have proved valuable, said Mr Feith.

PF: This is a mission where ASEAN and the EU monitors work together, they learn and benefit from each others expertise and skills. Some of our monitors have been in similar situations before. And our ASEAN colleagues certainly have the advantage of having worked and lived in a multicultural environment that Aceh offers. It is also integrated in a sense that we include among our monitors, men and women with civilian and military expertise. We have military officers, police officers, civilians with a background in diplomacy, human rights and legal affairs.
This helped to ensure that the Acehnese were able to stay strong and united, and cope with the great challenges of modern times.

PF: That is international terrorism, international crime and corruption, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and violence, religious extremism. The Helsinki agreement is a broad based agreement covering a wide range of issues like decommissioning and demobilization of the rebels, their reintegration, political participation, the withdrawal of some 30,000 Indonesian security forces, respect for human rights, and dispute settlement.

The smooth progress of the reconciliation and reconstruction efforts in Aceh - added Mr Feith - was attributed in part to strong commitment by the Indonesian government.

PF: The coming of power of President Yudhoyono and his Vice President Jusuf Kalla in 2004, both men with a clear reformist agenda. They aim to reform the economy, to modernize the TNI (the armed forces of Indonesia), and to consider revolting powers to the regions away from Java where the power was centered ever since Indonesia became independent in 1945. They were also keen to settle the Aceh conflict through international persons. GAM was very hard pressed by the Indonesian security forces before the tsunami struck. Earlier attempts at establishing a ceasefire in Aceh had failed. But by the end of 2004, the GAM had decided to give up its free independence movement.

One of the initial challenges for the Aceh Monitoring Mission was to develop a proper legal framework that would facilitate the reintegration process, said Mr Feith.

PF: At its peak time, we had 240 monitors, now we have downsized to 85. But they were deployed and moved around. They had full freedom of movement all over Aceh. The monitors conducted their tasks, and they still do by patrolling and communicating with the parties and carrying out inspections, as well as investigations when required. Building on lessons learned from earlier efforts, we opted for an immediate and transparent destruction of the weapons we took from the GAM movement rather than going through a complex, lock up procedures of these weapons as was attempted in previous occasions. We will invite the people to come and see the process of getting the weapons because that is something that will help strengthen confidence, and give them the idea that security is enhanced.

That gave rise to a strong synergy among the various stakeholders.

PF: Without peace, the reconstruction post tsunami would have been more difficult and conversely, the peace process benefits from the generous efforts of the international community and the efforts of the government to rebuild Aceh after the tragedy at the end of 2004. Let me say a few words on sustainability because when the mission ends, and it will happen on 15 September, we have to ensure that the peace process will not come to a halt or even back-track.

He elaborates.

PF: First of all, there is clearly political will on both sides - on the government side and on the rebels side - to make it work. I already referred to the part taken by the President and the Vice President and the rebels. But I should also highlight that this time, contrary to earlier attempts which were led by NGOs, it is the ASEAN-EU coalition at work and in charge of the peace process. I think that provides leverage for the government and on the rebel movement. The president told me that he is aware that this peace process in Aceh is attracting a lot of top level attention and he thinks that if concluded successfully, it may set an important precedent in South East Asia. The parties need to assume ownership of the process primarily through direct contact and dialogue. And therefore, our efforts at this moment are directed at precisely doing that. We will serve the coffee but they will have to discuss the issues among themselves.

On the question of the sustainability factor, once the Aceh Monitoring Mission completes its job in September, Mr Feith had this to say.

PF: We want to avoid a dependency culture setting in as we have seen in the Balkans. But the European Union as such will stay. And through the European Union community programs, as part of the international community, further support will be given to reintegration, to capacity building, and in particular, to police training. Police training is extremely
important, as part of strengthening the civil society, and the human rights standards. In doing so, the European Union can make full use of the wide range of instruments that it has to transit from crisis management to longer term sustainable development. And again, I expect that reintegration, and post tsunami resource flow should gradually merge for the benefit of all affected elements within Acehnese society.

Mr Pieter Feith, Head of Mission for the EU-led Aceh Monitoring Mission ending Perspective this week.

I'm Melanie Yip for Radio Singapore International.

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