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Trial and error: Learning from one's mistakes

Among the world's conflict zones, some have found peace, while others still see bloodshed. A recent conference in Singapore featured an exchange of views between experienced hands in various troubled areas.

The following is a report by The Jakarta Post's Ati Nurbaiti, who attended the talks held by the Singapore-based Asia Europe Foundation.

At one time during the communal clashes in Maluku, the only priority was an eye for an eye in a holy crusade.

Gradually, however, mundane concerns did find their voice: How long could people pay for much more costly transport, if the only safe way home from work was along winding mountain paths or across a hazardous strip of sea exposed to snipers?

How was a woman to shop for groceries, if she couldn't cross the Muslim or Christian areas? Homemakers were very worried; the absence of a normal market caused all prices to skyrocket.

Then, one day a man turned up near the traditional market in Ambon with a small mound of vegetables. The only guarantee to his safety, as the reports go, seemed to be the sign saying "Pasar Baku Bae" (market of peace making), and prior announcements that the surrounding area was a no-weapons zone.

The following days a few traders joined him — and more shoppers of the "enemy" side brushed shoulders in the market, the neutral zone where the priority was putting food on the table.

This was not one of the world's wars for independence — but it was a war zone nonetheless, once leading local communities to think they would never again be able to live side by side.

Resumption of the market proved to be a successful part of the peace efforts in Maluku, where thousands have died in the few years of civil strife since 1999.

Providing for economic needs — and economic opportunities — is one urgent step after conflicting sides can be coaxed into cease-fires.

This was one experience agreed on among peace-makers who gathered recently in Singapore to compare lessons learned.

In hindsight, one said,

much of the bloodshed in Aceh and southern Thailand could have been avoided if plans for the economic triangle of Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand had followed through.

Hampered by nationalist concerns, "These ideas should be revived and engineered with conflict resolution as a priority," said former journalist Michael Vatikiotis, now with the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.

History repeats itself

"Nationalist" sentiments appear to block peace attempts everywhere.

One explanation of such sentiments has come from Johan Galtung, among the world's pioneers in conflict resolution.

All groups of people who look alike and feel alike want to rule themselves, he says. They build a collective identity based on shared customs and beliefs, of similar experiences of being bullied about and yarn their own histories — and then call themselves nations, with the heroic risk of being jailed or killed by their rulers.

Eventually they manage to break free, and are welcomed

as new members of the world community.

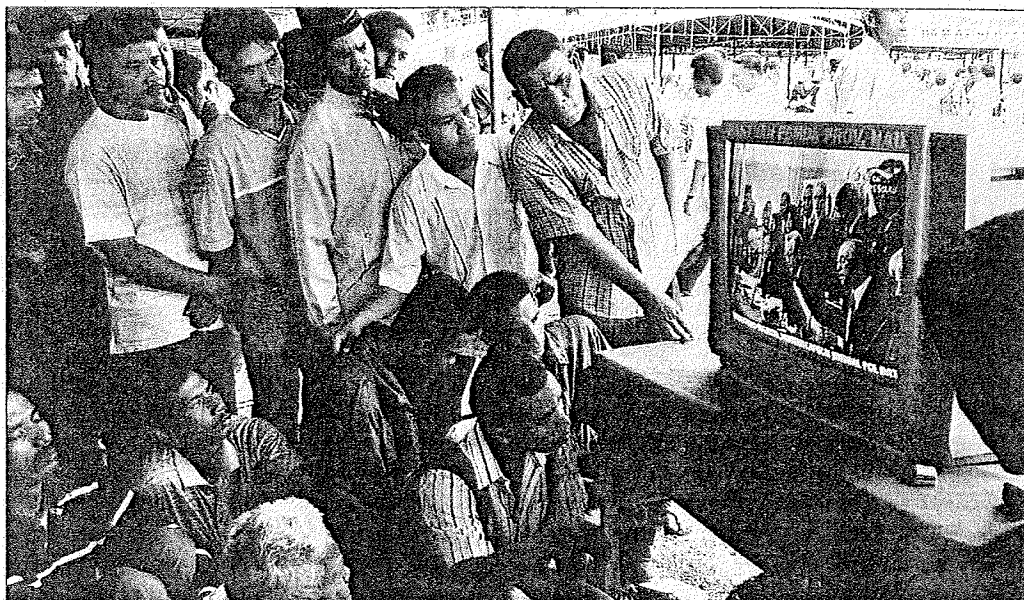
Then one day, they are taken by surprise and feel angry and betrayed, when a part of their group no longer merely grumbles, but states it wants to break free and call itself another nation — claiming to have been oppressed, cheated of promises, robbed of resources and impoverished, and



JPR/ Berto Wechatama

Army personnel in North Aceh detain a man suspected of being a GAM member during the conflict in Aceh.

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J.P.R. Berto Wedhatama

Acehnese are transfixed by a live broadcast of peace talks between an Indonesian government delegation and Free Aceh Movement (GAM) representatives in Helsinki, August 2005.

suddenly saying it's an entirely different group with a different culture and history.

As such trends are part of the nature of humankind the probability of disputes across the world is quite high.

Therefore, Galtung, a mathematician, says the realistic thing to do is learn to manage conflict — because differences just won't go away even when you've "made peace."

Locals and officials in countries that have signed peace deals or managed to gain independence know only too well that the hard part — to rebuild "normal lives" — has only just begun after the cameras have gone.

Timor Leste today is an obvious example.

Another is *bangsa* (nation) Indonesia. Having fought for independence in 1945 many citizens were resentful of the news, decades later, that people in then-East Timor, Papua and Aceh wanted to be free.

"So ignorant, so ungrateful", was the perception from outside those provinces.

An historic peace deal was made between the government and rebels in Aceh, in which the latter

dropped demands for independence in return for promises of "self-governance".

Then, even while things remain far from settled, people in the central part of Aceh said they wanted to be a separate province — saying they were neglected and in any case different from "Acehnese."

Looking at several examples in "postconflict" areas, Vatikiotis raises the main

of the international bodies and so-called experts.

People power

Too often, the "international community" undermines local capacity to govern: World Bank consultant Peter J. Middlebrook cites, among other things, "bypassing the state budget ... overly strengthening central government; and also "overly insisting on too stringent

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obstacle of "simply bad government" — "clumsy management" through rent-seeking, corruption and abuse of power by security forces.

Knowing insiders — those gathered in Singapore included old hands from Aceh, Timor Leste, Northern Ireland and the Balkans — also revealed "bad governance" on the part

safeguarding and procurement procedures that bias awards of contract to international, not national, firms."

"Sounds a lot like Aceh," one participant said — while local groups howl over every report of possible corruption in the province.

It certainly looks hard to please everyone; local concerns of recurring corruption

in Aceh seem to justify those overly stringent procedures.

Problems in "postconflict" areas are often traced to imperfect peace treaties. But as discussants concluded, an imperfect deal that can still the guns is better than none: "You're dealing with people with empty stomachs, empty pockets and empty minds," said Wiryono Sastrohandoyo, a former Indonesian negotiator for the Aceh problem and the Moro in the southern Philippines.

The lesson of Timor Leste is still glaring: The UN is seen to have left too soon, with much capacity building left wanting, though it still retains a slim office.

The fragile nation has been bracing itself for the parliamentary elections; and while well-wishers always say the past polls were largely peaceful, for many families it's tension and fear all over again.

As long as international monitors are on the ground, locals feel more or less assured that everyone will heed more or less to the rules set by the peace deals and their byproducts — agreements, laws and regulations.

In Aceh today, "The military is back to bullying people!" said the mayor of Aceh's Sabang township, Munawar Liza Zain.

At least the Indonesian Military as a whole is now more professional, says former chief of the Aceh Monitoring Mission, Pieter Feith — though he says he's not sure of continued support after 2009, when Indonesia might have a new president.

Whatever the spoilers' attempt to ruin the peace, it's the people — fed up with violence — that always drive leaders and peacemakers to work harder.

Among final tips was one from Soren Jessen-Petersen, the former UN man in Kosovo, a little part of the world still stuck in a political deadlock.

No matter how experienced experts are, he said, remember "to be humble and learn from a lot of mistakes."

"A lot of mistakes" from experienced international figures sounds a bit frightening — but such acknowledgement might be the first step to better work ahead in helping people to move on.