Peace dividend: Post-tsunami hope in Indonesia

by Paul Jeffrey in the September 4, 2007 issue

As the sun rises over Kuala Bubon, Wadi begins mending his fishing nets. Soon he is accompanied by the sound of hammering that echoes across the lagoon where dozens of brightly painted new boats are moored. Two and a half years after the tsunami ravaged this village on the southwest coast of Indonesia's remote Aceh province, life has begun again and peace has flourished. "It has taken a while, but after so many long years of war and suffering, the wait was worth it," says Wadi, who like many Indonesians uses only one name. "We have peace, and that means we can rebuild our village and be around afterward to enjoy it."

Perched on the northern tip of Sumatra, Aceh was once the poster child for intractable conflict, and at first the 2004 tsunami piled calamity upon misery. Yet today a successful partnership between international relief organizations and grassroots democratic initiatives has lifted Aceh from tragedy and set it on a promising course, turning the tsunami into a unique opportunity to end the war and rebuild at the same time.

For three decades, the separatist movement spearheaded by the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) was locked in a military struggle with the central government in Jakarta, which, after East Timor's independence in 2002, was determined not to lose any more of its far-flung string of islands—especially not the resource-rich Aceh region. Fifteen thousand people died in the fighting. And then the tsunami hit the day after Christmas in 2004, leaving 167,000 dead or missing and huge swaths of the province in rubble.

But the waves also smashed down the walls of a prison in Banda Aceh where separatist leader Irwandi Yusuf was incarcerated. Irwandi and a handful of other prisoners waded free from the wreckage and began a political transformation that led to an internationally brokered peace agreement in 2005. The rebels acknowledged Indonesian sovereignty in exchange for political participation and

some measure of autonomy. Elections, finally held in December, were the first major test of the tentative peace process. The surprise victor in the governor's race was Irwandi, who has a master's degree in veterinary medicine from Oregon State University.

Besides Irwandi, former GAM fighters won several local positions as well. But new elections for parliamentary positions have been put off until 2009—meaning that the purse strings on government projects will continue to be held tightly by politicians in Jakarta, a factor which may frustrate Irwandi and his comrades. Yet after all the political and geological trauma of recent decades, no one seems interested in rushing again into war.

The massive international response to the tsunami, and all the money that flowed into Aceh, which was ground zero of the disaster, have clearly encouraged the peace process. And vice versa.

"The only way Aceh is going to advance is if it's reconstructed, but that can happen only if there's peace. If peace unravels, then there goes reconstruction, there goes the future of Aceh," said Scott Campbell, the Aceh director for Catholic Relief Services, the international development and relief agency of the U.S. Catholic community.

Responding to the emergency in Aceh has not been easy for relief agencies. The need was massive, and so was the amount of money made available by donors. Despite the conditions on much of the government-provided emergency aid—that it be spent within two to three years—the scope of the disaster made it difficult to respond quickly. It took months to begin serious reconstruction of the region's housing.

"It's difficult to understand the sheer size of the tasks we faced. And to have hundreds of agencies simultaneously trying to build on a little piece of land automatically generated resource issues. You simply couldn't get enough wood and cement and labor to accommodate all of this at once. In other emergencies, it usually takes from five to 10 years or more to really talk about rebuilding. Rebuilding after the Kobe earthquake in Japan took 10 years, and that was in a fully developed country with a functioning infrastructure," Campbell said.

"Sometimes we go too fast, and need to slow down to do it right. There's a lot of triangulation, verification and confirmation necessary to know that what you're

building is correct. If you're building on someone else's land, or if you're not building for the right people, you can actually be building tension, building conflict that will continue in those communities for the long term. We're trying to build peace in the aftermath of a long conflict, not add to tensions," he said.

The other challenge was the culture of corruption. Indonesia was the most corrupt country in Asia in 2006, according to an annual survey by the Hong Kong–based Political and Economic Risk Consultancy. (The Philippines took over first place in the 2007 survey, putting Indonesia in a second-place tie with Thailand.) Even the most transparent and accountable relief agencies faced new challenges daily.

In one of the more conservative regions of the world's most populous Muslim country, Aceh was a tempting target for conservative Christian groups wanting to proselytize under the cover of bringing disaster relief. Some in Jakarta complained of misconduct in Aceh, but Jongkers Tampubolon, rector of the Lutheran Church–related Nommensen University in Medan, said Christian groups in the province behaved themselves relatively well.

One reason, he suggests, is the growth of Aceh's religious police and courts—a parallel government of sorts to Irwandi's elected administration. Charged with enforcing shari'a law, the same religious cops that watch for Muslim women with uncovered heads also kept a close eye on Western aid agencies and ensured that no one was pressured to become a Christian in order to receive a house or a new fishing boat.

There are contradictions, of course. The religious police enforce a province-wide dry law, but Tampubolon said that when one Indonesian church group wanted to throw a goodbye party for some Germans who'd come to help, members of the group went looking for beer and couldn't find any until they asked at the secular police station—where they paid a deposit on a keg.

Although reconstruction and democracy building seem to be moving apace toward a brighter future in Aceh, serious challenges remain. The region has abundant natural resources, something that could guarantee economic growth if managed well, or attract renewed control from Jakarta if the balance of political forces shifts toward the national center. When Aceh Legislative Assembly chair Muntasir Hamid warned Aceh residents in March to be on the lookout for "international communists" meddling in provincial affairs, he reminded many of past efforts to provide

ideological justification for Jakarta’s economic and political domination of the region.

International relief groups have played an important role in helping the people of Aceh rebuild their homes and economy and move toward greater democracy, but the effects of the long war and the nightmare waves will linger for a long time. According to the results of a survey released in June by the International Organization for Migration, the Indonesian government and Harvard Medical School, some 85 percent of nearly 2,000 people interviewed in 105 villages in the province were still plagued by fears and deep insecurity, and some 35 percent appeared to be suffering from depression. Harvard professor Byron Good said that the memories of violence and injustice could easily provide “a potent trigger for further violence in the community.”

The chances of that happening depend in large part on the unique partnership between national and international actors that has produced both a fledgling democracy and a reborn community life in Aceh. If both groups can stay focused on peace and democracy, then Aceh’s future looks good.