

Tsunami encourages peace in Aceh: One year after the disaster

by [Chris Herlinger](#) in the [January 10, 2006](#) issue

The residents of Banda Aceh, Indonesia, suffered a disaster one year ago that may have killed as many as 170,000 in their province alone. But some have noted that the violence of nature appears to have stemmed a 30-year civil conflict that had made the area one of the most militarized places on earth.

While no one talks about a “benefit” of the year-ago tsunami, residents say that if anything good came from the disaster triggered by a massive earthquake, it was a kind of peace that has, by nearly all accounts, taken root in the region.

“For the love of Aceh, people were willing to put down their guns,” Muhammad Redhammarta, 23, a field worker with the Indonesian relief and development organization Mamamia, said as he accompanied a group of relief workers on a tour of several villages in the province.

Asked to rate the long-term chances for peace on a scale of one to ten (with ten expressing the most optimistic), Redhammarta replied: “An eight.”

For three decades, Aceh—the northernmost province on Sumatra and the westernmost point in Indonesia—had experienced conflict between the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM, in Indonesian).

The rebels, citing what they said was long-standing neglect by the central government, called for Aceh’s independence. The government, afraid of losing a strategically important and resource-rich area, responded with military force.

The result was 29 years of sustained low-intensity war in which 15,000 were killed and human rights abuses were common. Tens of thousands also became displaced when the tsunami hit, although many said the experience of displacement was already well-known in Aceh.

The scale of the December 2004 event forced a fundamental change among both the rebels and the government, leading both to lay down their arms and focus their energy on Aceh's reconstruction.

A cease-fire agreement in August was greeted by both parties and by observers with caution as there had been other breaks in the fighting which did not last. A report released prior to the signing by the International Crisis Group (ICG), which monitors global conflicts, said that no one "should underestimate the difficulties of bringing an end to a 30-year-old conflict. Deep reservoirs of fear and distrust remain."

However, in villages such as Data Makmur, just outside Banda Aceh, Amir Udin, a farmer, said the peace agreement has had a discernible effect on day-to-day life. "Life is much different now," he said in an interview. "Before we felt confined to the land; now we feel we can travel and move around."

Even the ICG has noted the change. In a report released December 13 titled "Aceh: So Far, So Good," the organization said the tsunami "reordered the [Aceh] political landscape."

It noted: "The Aceh peace process is working beyond all expectations. There are still serious challenges ahead, of course—most importantly the reintegration of GAM fighters back into society," said Gareth Evans, president of the crisis group. "But what has been achieved so far is a real credit to the government and GAM."