



Exemption the GAM members from Jantho prison on 15 August 2005.  
A father was greeted by his daughter.  
(Mardiyah Chamim)

# Uniting a Severed State

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Exemption from the GAM members Jantho prison 15 August 2005.

*The tsunami brought not only destruction to the western coast of Aceh, the fierce waves also brought blessings to the region. The Agreement between the Republic of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) was signed in Helsinki on 15 August 2005, bringing down the isolation gate of Aceh; that was one of the tsunami's blessings. It was as if the pounding ocean waves acted like the throbbing of a giant generator which, it must be acknowledged, ushered in several important changes to the Land of Seulawah, the Land Blessed by Allah.*

**As** expected, the political elite in Jakarta held several opposing debates on the Helsinki Agreement. Some expressed gratitude, others considered the peace a reckless act, similar to the reckless driving of a bus driver aiming only to obtain his minimal daily target. Megawati Soekarnoputri, who once vowed not to allow a single drop of blood to stain the soil of Aceh, even organised a movement to reject the peace agreement.

It is certainly not in my capacity to pass judgement on the Helsinki Agreement. The subject coverage is beyond my competence, considering that at present my knowledge about the ramifications of the Aceh conflict is very limited. I only wish to pose the questions: Have those who were fighting against each other listened to the voices of the people of Aceh who have suffered so long and so immensely? Have they taken note of the frightened faces of Aceh children? Do they comprehend that the drawn-out conflict has impeded the recovery of Aceh?

Indeed, the people's suffering during three decades of armed conflict has been far more bitter than the suffering caused by the tsunami. The angry waves that swallowed and spewed out again all that was on earth was an Act of God. Nobody could fight it. The case is different with the armed conflict. "It's a man-made disaster. The pain, fear and sufferings are much more profound. They make our hearts cry," said Ampon Takim, 29, a young man living in Lamnyong, Banda Aceh. "How could it not be painful when every morning we find a dead body outside our door, not knowing who the victim is and who the killer was," he said reminiscently.

One morning I met Abu Bakar, 30, an inhabitant of Lamsenia, Leupung sub-district. For years the man had been the punching bag of the army just because his name was the same as that of a GAM leader. Abu Bakar can still remember the painful talks he had during those years of being beaten. It went like this.

Cruelty wasn't committed only by the Army. GAM also carried out similarly fearful actions.

Soldier: "What's your name?!" Click, the sound of an AK-47 weapon being cocked by the rough-faced soldier.

Abu Bakar: "Errr...Abu Bakar." He'd answered nervously, knowing full well what reaction his answer would evoke.

Soldier: "So this is Abu Bakar." *Bak, buk, bak, buk...* The rifle butt brutally striking Abu Bakar's stomach and a rain of blows pouring down on his face.

The soldier seemed pleased and satisfied at having beaten Abu Bakar, who was well-known as one of the GAM leaders around Leupung hills.

Soldier: "Where's your ID..!" Apparently he was tired of hitting.

Abu Bakar: "Here it is, Sir." An official Indonesian red and white ID card was handed to Mr. Soldier.

Soldier: "Hmm... go!" He frowned. Only after delivering the blows did the soldier realise that the man he had beaten was not the Abu Bakar they sought. Although he had struck Abu Bakar with his fist and the butt of his rifle, the soldier didn't show any sign of remorse, or offer any excuses.

Similar bitter stories like this could fill the whole book; Abu Bakar is just one small example.

"I even complained to my father, asking why he had given me the same name as that of a GAM leader," Abu Bakar said. He was even tempted to legally change his name, but hadn't had the opportunity to do so. "I don't know how or where to do so," he said.

The period of conflict was filled with dark days of horror for ordinary people. On many occasions I was told stories that were steeped with deep-seated hatred. Young men were frisked, mothers struck by rifle butts because they were suspected of hiding GAM members, even a 60-year-old woman was hanged for one night on a tree because she could not answer in the Indonesian language. "The next morning, we all brought the old woman down; our hearts weeping," recalled Abu Bakar.

Cruelty wasn't committed only by the Army. GAM also carried out similarly fearful actions. Thousands of village leaders, schoolteachers, and also laymen were abducted and forced to pay land tax of excessively high amounts. "I was held captive for two weeks by GAM up in the mountains," said David,

an entrepreneur in Ulee Lheu. “They asked for a Rp50 million ransom.” To free David, his parents and family members had to sell all their belongings and borrow money from left and right.

Fortunately, as far as I know, there are now no more beatings or blackmailing by the Army or GAM. “Now after the tsunami, soldiers don’t deliver blows indiscriminately,” said Abu Bakar. People no longer fear being submerged in the marshes for napping on night patrol. On the contrary, following the tsunami, the Army took the lead in assisting people and evacuating dead bodies. “It’s now peaceful. Hopefully, everlasting peace will reign,” he continued.

With high hopes, Abu Bakar and millions of other Aceh people have welcomed the peace agreement. At least, that was the picture I got in the days preceding the release of GAM prisoners on August 31, 2005 (I wrote part of this report in an article in *Tempo* weekly, September 6, 2005 edition). Undeniably, it was a moment of conflicting feelings, of hope and anxiety, all mixed together. It was certainly not easy to sort out our feelings and put them into black-and-white classifications.

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Both opposing parties, the Indonesian Army and the Aceh National Army (the military wing of GAM), had given their respective pledges that they would seriously implement the peace agreement. Major General Bambang Dharmono from the Indonesian Army assured that the Army was truly serious and would be consistent in implementing the peace agreement without a hitch, unlike with previous peace agreements that had so easily been circumnavigated and bypassed. “We don’t have any intention whatsoever of jeopardising the present peace,” he said.

A similar pledge also came from GAM. Hundreds of weapons have been surrendered to the Aceh Monitoring Mission (AMM), the independent body designated to supervise the implementation of the Helsinki Agreement. A fellow reporter related a story that had travelled down from the hills, saying that GAM leaders in Sweden had issued an order to all its soldiers in Aceh not to attack, not to cock their rifles, and not to make any provocative actions. The instruction was issued just minutes after the tsunami occurred, as a sign of empathy from GAM in response to the great tragedy that swept through Aceh. “We’re only to hold our positions, and this instruction may not be compromised,” said a GAM military commander who related this story to the reporter.

The instruction from Sweden was so stern that even the military wing of GAM could do nothing on the field against the activities of spies. “Even to those who were eventually proven to be spies, we could

do nothing,” said the tall and well-built GAM commander. Usually, such people would immediately be hacked to death.

Why then did several shootings still occur after the tsunami? “It was started by the Indonesian Army,” he said. “We just held our positions.” The military commander who would not reveal his name acknowledged that there had indeed been several shootings incited by non-military personnel. “But he was certainly not a member of the Aceh National Army. He was a civilian who had a personal grudge because his brother had been killed by the Indonesian Army.”

The military commander, however, could not explain the shooting of a foreign volunteer. “We’re still investigating the incident,” he just said.

The explanation of the GAM military commander couldn’t be verified. It was difficult to obtain facts from several such incidents that had happened in the field. However, the main question was, how truly honestly and seriously would either party stick to the Helsinki Agreement. How strong was their commitment to prevent any violence in Aceh? Again, nobody was able to provide a full guarantee. We can only hope that the spirit of the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding remains unblemished.

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A morning full of kindness. Wednesday, 31 August 2005. Fifty-eight men were on the point of being released. They wore clean and neat clothes, shining shoes and had smoothly combed hair—as though they were welcoming a big and festive day. “Are we neat and handsome enough, Sister?” asked Abdullah, a young man of 23 years with shoulder-length hair neatly tied into a pigtail. He excused himself and went inside to change out of his sarong into his best pair of blue jeans. “This is a big day for us,” he loudly proclaimed. Abdullah took a pose when I aimed my camera at him.

The 58 men I met that morning were prisoners from the Jantho Prison, in Greater Aceh regency. At midday that Wednesday they would all be released unconditionally. Their status as GAM rebels due to their resistance against the government had been



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revoked through an amnesty granted by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. “Now we are free to do whatever we like,” said Abdullah with a broad smile on his pimply face.

After the usual speeches by government officials, Abdullah and his friends were at long last free to step through the wide-open door. Each of them carried a knapsack containing a sarong, a pair of long trousers, a Muslim coat, prayer mat, black shiny shoes and the latest edition of *Waspada* daily. The items had been prepared by a number of volunteers from the International Organisation of Migration (IOM) who worked overtime, for days and nights, during just two weeks after the Helsinki Agreement was signed. It should be acknowledged that this organization had—without coverage by the media and without much fanfare—rendered considerable assistance to the government in preparing the release of GAM prisoners. A most important undertaking indeed, which, if it went just slightly wrong, could jeopardize the still budding peace.

Preparing the start of a new life for 1,500 GAM prisoners was a truly ramified and complicated undertaking: such as ensuring the right sizes of shoes and shirts, lest they be too big or too small and disappoint the men. Then there was the question of transportation—intercity buses, local taxis, and even aeroplanes for those who were held outside Aceh—all that should be properly arranged so the men could head homewards without any impediments. “We worked overtime for several nights, preparing this and that according to ever-changing information,” said Paul Dillon, an IOM worker with a bushy beard.

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One day, official A would, for example, state that there were so many prisoners to be released from prison X. But the next day, the number of prisoners released would increase to such and such a number. Consequently, the question of shirts, buses, and shoes would become complicated. “Truly, we could well become mentally ill,” said Dillon laughingly.

Fortunately, no IOM volunteers suffered a mental breakdown, and so on the promised day Abdullah and his friends could proudly, and wearing big smiles on their faces, step into freedom, taking with them copies of the amnesty document and the Helsinki Agreement. “Good luck, may you all fare well outside,” said Bakhtiar, deputy warden of Jantho Prison, embracing Abdullah.

One by one the ex-GAM prisoners stepped outside the gate. Husni, Alwi, Kardiman, Ismail, Mohammad bin Mohammad Thaib alias MTA, member of the GAM Information Bureau in Greater Aceh regency and activist of *Sentral Informasi Referendum Aceh* (SIRA), Fikri bin Abdulwahid, Fauzan, Abdul Rais, Abdul Nazar, Mahyudin, and many more until all 58 men eventually emerged. Hundreds of their family

members waited outside for the men to step through the gate to freedom: grandfathers, grandmothers, fathers, mothers, wives, sisters, brothers, uncles, children, nephews and girlfriends.

Tears abounded; embraces, kisses and handshakes were exchanged in all corners of the prison forecourt. A man, with a blushing face, tried to free himself from the tight embrace of his wife. “Be more discreet, people are watching,” he said, putting an arm around his wife’s shoulders.

“My child wasn’t yet born when I was arrested,” said Husni, 25, his arms firmly embracing Azra, his little daughter, just 14 months old. Then there was also Ismail, 35, who sobbed silently while embracing his son. “I’m not a GAM member. I was just the victim of slander,” he said. According to Ismail, he was forced to confess to being a GAM member because he could not bear the torture and because he feared for the safety of his wife and son.

“My child wasn’t yet born when I was arrested,” said Husni 25.

In another corner of the prison forecourt, a mother conducted the *paesejuk* traditional ceremony. Prayers were said for safety and peace of mind. “So that my husband’s business will run smoothly and profitably after his release,” said the woman while waving to and fro branches of leaves and flowers dipped in water.

After the *paesejuk* ritual, the embraces and kisses abated, then came the time for the ex-GAM-prisoners to bid farewell to each other. “Don’t forget, we must each take care of ourselves and help each other,” said Alwi, 32. “We must be careful in gauging the situation in the field.”

According to Alwi, it was indeed necessary to be prudent and remain alert because previous peace agreements had always been violated and figuratively ripped to shreds. Especially since there were still many differing opinions about the Helsinki Agreement. “We heard that Jakarta is still upset about this matter. Even the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), which once promised to bring peace to Aceh, opposes the Agreement. At least that’s what newspapers are reporting,” he said.

Having joined the Aceh National Army (TNA) in 1999, Alwi conducted guerrilla warfare in the hills of Cot Keueung, Ulee Kareng, Greater Aceh. Three years ago, Alwi was arrested and sentenced to six months in prison. After he was released, the military emergency was imposed in Aceh, and Alwi was again thrown into jail for two years and 10 months. “Actually, I wasn’t doing anything illegal at the time, I wasn’t even active in GAM and was even planning my wedding,” he said. In the end, his wedding was cancelled. “That was the second time I failed to get married. The first time was also because I was caught beforehand,” he said with a sour smile.

Just like Alwi, Abdullah also planned to observe the situation first. Upon arriving at his home village, he made up his mind that he wouldn't travel far. "We still have our superiors, so we will coordinate first with our superiors and field commanders," he said. While awaiting further developments, Abdullah planned to visit close relatives and neighbours. "I'd like to beg for forgiveness for causing trouble for others in the past."

Not infrequently, when pursued by the Indonesian Army, Abdullah and his friends hid in the houses of ordinary people. For the owners, providing a hiding place for them was an extremely risky undertaking because the Army could always raid those areas suspected of harbouring GAM members. The houses would be burned down, dozens of inhabitants knocked down during the operation to, "just catch those hill people"—the name given to GAM people—who were in hiding. "I want to apologise for all that," said Abdullah.

"Frankly speaking, it was not only to be cool. I was also influenced by the heroic tales of the village elders who fought against oppression, against those who only wanted to drain Aceh of its resources"

Abdullah joined the TNA when he was 18 years old. "Actually, I wanted to join them back when I was still in elementary school. At that time it seemed such a brave and cool thing to do, to hold a gun, whether as a member of the Indonesian Army or the Aceh National Army," he said. But, "Frankly speaking, it was not only to be cool. I was also influenced by the heroic tales of the village elders who fought against oppression, against those who only wanted to drain Aceh of its resources."

When he dropped out of grade 5 at elementary school, Abdullah tried to enter into the inner circle of GAM but was not accepted. "Those big brothers told me I was too young. They feared I would not persevere when tortured by the Indonesian Army if caught, and that I would spill all the secrets of GAM," he said. Accordingly, Abdullah was just given the task of preparing coffee, buying cigarettes and cookies or keeping a watchful eye on the village when GAM senior members held a meeting.

Only when he turned 18 was Abdullah considered mature enough to join GAM. "I was duty officer near Lhok Nga. Each duty period lasted 25 days, all the way through, non-stop," he said. After each duty period he had one month's holiday, only to face yet another period of duty in the mountains. "Well, if I had to die at the end of a rifle of an Indonesian Army soldier, so be it," he said, "It was a risk I had to take."

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A new day awaited Abdullah and hundreds of other ex-TNA people. On that day they were all going home, and that meant not only returning to their homes but also meant that they had to interact on a daily basis with neighbours and family members who might well have opposing opinions and outlooks.

Consequently, on that day everybody was required to take up the difficult task of forgiving each other. In order to be able to do so, everybody should have a magnanimous heart. “Are GAM members who killed people also being released, Sister?” asked Fahrumi, the taxi driver who drove me around. I tried to explain that the killing was politically motivated and had been pardoned with the signing of the Helsinki Agreement. However, it was difficult for Fahrumi to follow and accept the explanation. His eyes and questions were still accusing: “What about the children whose fathers were killed by GAM? Will they be willing to accept this?”

The long drawn-out conflict had concerned the people of Aceh into difficult position.

I groped for words, unable to answer. I realised that I had no right or authority whatsoever to represent the feelings of children who had lost their fathers, of wives who had lost their husbands, because of the three decades of oppressive conflict. I understood that this situation could not be viewed

in shades of black and white. My feelings and mind were in indescribable turmoil.

The conversations at coffee shops also reflected the same turbulent feelings of the Aceh people. Jamil, 30, a resident of Leupung, Greater Aceh, for example, was convinced that he could forgive his neighbours, friends and acquaintances who had been GAM members. But, “What about the families who were tortured by them?” he asked. Hundreds of village elders had been abducted, some had even been shot and burnt alive because they refused to pay the land tax imposed by GAM. In 2002, there was even the tragic incident of the president of the Syiah Kuala University, Professor Dayan Dawood, being murdered for refusing to support GAM.

Quite a number of people had been severely beaten just because they were suspected of being instigators, perhaps through slander. “A friend of mine was heavily tortured in the mountains because he was thought to be a soldier, just because he was tall and big,” said Jamil. “He vowed never to forgive those who had tortured him.” The friend had since passed away, not because he had been killed by GAM but because the tsunami had claimed his life.

The long drawn-out conflict had cornered the people of Aceh into a difficult position. Zulkifli, 40, coffee kiosk owner in Simpang Surabaya, Banda Aceh city, told how difficult it was for him to assuage the demands of both opposing parties. The difficulty arose on the commemoration of Indonesia’s Independence Day every August 17. “In the morning the hill people would descend and demand that I

close the kiosk. All right, we obeyed,” he said. But at noon, members of the Indonesian Army would arrive and demand that the kiosk be opened. So on that day we opened and closed our shop several times,” he said. If he ignored the demands, the consequences could be very dear indeed. “We could be shot” by either party.

Although the agreement had already been signed, there was still a lot of homework to be done, especially, on how to prevent unnecessary clashes. Just as Abdullah said, “I want to forgive and be forgiven.”

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It was extremely hot that day. My watch read 1:30 pm. The engines of the vehicles that were to transport ex-GAM prisoners were idling. All the vehicles had been rented and prepared by family members or friends of those who were to be released that day. No luxurious cars, just trucks, open vans, three-wheelers and dilapidated minibuses. The women began hitching up their sarongs, ready to climb aboard the trucks.

“Come on, let’s go home,” Abdullah said loudly.

“Sister, join us. Come see our village at Kedai Bing.”

I was invited to accompany not only Abdullah and was at a loss as to whom to choose. Finally I decided to join Husni and Fikri bin Abdul Wahid. They had occupied the same prison cell.

It so happened that not one family member had come to pick up Fikri. His mother Zainabun was more than 70 years old, and the journey from Sibreh to Jantho was quite far. It was not easy to find public transport in the area. Renting a car was also very expensive, at least Rp100,000. “So, let’s take him home first,” said Husni, putting an arm around Fikri’s shoulders.

The route we took that day was Jantho - Sibreh - Ulee Kareng, Banda Aceh; the whole journey was about 60 kilometres. We first went to Eu Site village, in Sibreh sub-district, Fikri’s hometown. Then we went to Pango Raya village, Ulee Kareng, Husni’s home.

During the journey, Husni’s mother, Halimah, 52, poured out her feelings. “I’m truly grateful that Husni was released,” she said. Husni was the only child of Halimah and Bustamin. “He asked for our blessings to join GAM in 1999,” she continued, “Back then I cried and implored Husni to reconsider.” But to no avail. Husni admitted he had already taken the oath and had been initiated as a member of the Aceh National Army. Since then Halimah had never failed to pray for the safety of her only child. “Don’t let him die. Two of his village friends in Ulee Kareng had been shot dead by the Indonesian Army.”



Showing respect to his mother after out of prison  
(Mardiyah Chamim)

We continued our journey. The traffic was smooth. The green hills of Jantho seemed to impart their good wishes. The wind was blowing pleasantly, alleviating the scorching sun.

But there was one problem. Fikri forgot the exact location of his village. The three cars transporting us had to travel

around and around Sibreh. Several times Fikri and Husni alighted to ask for directions from the people, how to get to Eu Site village. It was understandable; Fikri hadn't been to the house where he was born and raised for years. The 26-year-old had spent most of his life in the forests, mountains and hills. Fikri couldn't recall exactly when he joined the 26th Sago of the Aceh National Army, the GAM troop that operated in the Greater Aceh region. "It was such a long time ago," he said.

Like many other youths who joined GAM, Fikri began his career as an errand boy fetching coffee and snacks one day when GAM soldiers were holding a meeting in the village. After being a junior member for some time, Fikri was assigned to guard a post hidden deep in the mountains of Aceh. One post was usually guarded by 12 men, including a cook and a radioman. During the many years with GAM, Fikri had not once gone to his home in Eu Site. "I was afraid that if I went home, our house would be raided by the Indonesian Army. My mother was old," he said.

After travelling around for quite some time, we finally found the house of Fikri's parents. That afternoon I saw how Fikri bowed low and politely greeted his parents. With deep reverence he kissed the hands of both parents. Zainabun, his mother, advised, "Now, start leading a good life, Son."