

Program on Negotiation 2006 Summer Fellowship Report
Mediating Peace in Internal Conflicts: The Case of Aceh, Indonesia
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This summer, funding from PON enabled me to conduct research aimed at answering the question: What factors led to the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Government of Indonesia (GOI) and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) on August 15, 2006? During June and July, I conducted a total of 15 interviews with the negotiators for the GOI and GAM, several close observers of the process, and the mediators. Interviews were conducted in Banda Aceh and Jakarta, Indonesia; Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Stockholm, Sweden; and Helsinki, Finland. They ranged from 2-9 hours each and were audio recorded. Each interview is currently being transcribed and analyzed. I expect the final written product to take several forms: most immediately my masters thesis (a 60-100 page document analyzing the factors that led to the signing of the MoU); several short articles for humanitarian and conflict resolution journals; and a manual of lessons learned for practitioners.

While it is too soon to draw definitive conclusions about the research, some general themes that emerged from the research follow:

1. The Helsinki negotiations were orchestrated by a private businessman acting independently to bring both sides together and identify the appropriate mediator.

It is possible that private individuals may have an advantage in gaining the trust of individual parties as they are not viewed in the same light as diplomats who have

- a clear agenda. Additionally, the absence of bureaucracy makes them flexible enough to respond to a dynamic environment in ways that diplomats cannot.
2. The mediator must be able to garner the support of institutions with the financial and human resources to monitor the implementation of any agreement that may be reached. An NGO mediator without the backing of a government or a regional body may be able to negotiate an agreement, but will not be able to implement it.
 3. It cannot be said that the tsunami caused the peace agreement, as preparations for negotiations were underway long before the tsunami occurred. However, it seems clear that the influx of humanitarian aid following the tsunami largely changed the calculus of both parties. For GAM, it seemed unthinkable to perpetuate the violence and continue to impose further suffering on the Acehnese people. They recognized that aid workers would only remain in the province if the security environment improved. Humanitarian aid was also a major part of the calculus for the GOI, as many foreign governments put pressure on Indonesia to reach an agreement, threatening that aid funds would not be released otherwise. This suggests that humanitarian aid can be used as an active bargaining tool in negotiations.

Perhaps the most important part of this research for me personally is that it allowed me to explore whether I enjoy doing academic research and writing and whether I want to pursue a PhD program. Conducting research this summer helped me to understand the

pros and cons of academic research. I found that I really enjoyed conducting the interviews and honing my interview skills. I loved the opportunity to get inside the minds of people whose public personas I have long observed. I valued the opportunity to engage in the politics in Indonesia and to develop relationships with influential people on both sides of the conflict. For four years, I did humanitarian work in Indonesia's war torn provinces that required me to stay abreast of political developments, but steer clear of politics. This summer, I was able to engage in the politics of the conflict in Aceh in a meaningful way that has helped enhance my understanding of how to operate effectively in Indonesia, as well as to form key relationships with people with whom I otherwise might not have come into contact.

However, I found research to be a fairly solitary exercise in that I was working alone. Whatever motivation I woke up with in the morning was what got me through the day. At times, I definitely missed the group interaction that comes with managing a relief organization and working toward a common goal on a tangible project, whose physical results you can see progressing daily. I also felt a bit of an ethical dilemma. In the past, my role in Aceh has been to facilitate the provision of assistance, to tangibly give back to the people from whom I was constantly learning and growing. While in my mind, I know that this research will ultimately produce a product that is valuable to the Acehnese, I often felt like I was not giving back to the communities from whom I was taking during my research. Sitting in a coffee shop with a close Acehnese friend who recently discontinued his work with a human rights organization to pursue research and writing, we could not help but ask ourselves whether we were really contributing to improving the lives of the people around us.

My ultimate conclusion is that I do believe this research will be valuable not only as a historical record for the Acehnese, but as lessons learned that may help influence the conduct of other negotiations/mediations around the world. I have decided to apply to PhD programs and would like to pursue a career at the cross section of conflict resolution and post-conflict development, in which research and writing is deeply grounded in practice. I believe that this will allow me to give back in a way that satisfies both my intellectual as well as humanitarian curiosities.