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Peace deal helps to rebuild Aceh, but pains remain
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Two years have passed since the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding was signed on Aug. 15, 2005. Several significant developments have taken place in Aceh since, including a successful and widely respected democratic election and the swearing in of a democratically elected government.

The Aceh government law, passed by the House of Representatives last year, has also helped the peace process in the province. It gave the government of Aceh significant powers. With the exception of banking, defense, security and foreign relations decisions, all other areas are the responsibility of the elected Aceh government, currently led by Governor Irwandi Yusuf. The central government will also allocate 5 percent of its total general allocation funds to the province.

This will increase the amount of funds Aceh receives from Rp 3 trillion to Rp 8 trillion and will enable the government to pour more money into the education, health and community empowerment sectors, benefiting especially the victims of conflict.

However, there is a chance governor Irwandi has forgotten he was elected to lead all Acehnese people, even if they supported other candidates in the election.

The KPA (Aceh transitional committee), a body formed by the Aceh government, is facing public criticism for its aggressive lobbying to win tenders for development projects. Now even for small projects, such as building a sewerage system in Banda Aceh for example, contractors have to have KPA or Free Aceh Movement (GAM) connections to win tenders. The committee is also allegedly involved in the illegal logging trade.

Irwandi has worked hard to combat illegal logging activities in the province. He employs 1,000 forestry rangers, most of whom are supporters of the KPA and GAM. Only time will tell whether or not the anti-illegal logging force will be able to combat the crime or will instead monopolize illegal logging activities itself.

But what is evident two years after the MOU was signed is that the economic cake is being contested by supporters of Governor Irwandi and Vice Governor Nazar.

Supporters assemble every day outside the governor's office, perhaps seeking rewards for their support. It is an amazingly different governor's office from that of a normal governor's office. It is becoming a governor's office for the people. However, the government needs to adjust its system of receiving guests because it could affect the performance of the office.

Another significant development two years since the MOU was signed is that there have been no more military clashes between the TNI and GAM ex-combatants.

However, a significant rise in the number of crimes committed has become evident. As Aceh becomes more lucrative, criminals from Medan in North Sumatra and Palembang in South Sumatra have started to operate in the province.

Concerns also remain regarding the poor performance of the Aceh Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Agency (BRA). Acehnese people are still also waiting for the establishment of a human rights court and a commission for truth and reconciliation to trace human rights abuses in the past.

According to the "Aceh Conflict Monitoring Update" published in March 2007 by the World Bank, the delivery of reintegration funds caused some tensions between the KPA and anti-separatist groups. The BRA needs to launch massive campaigns, especially targeting ex-combatants, so people know what benefits are they entitled to and how to obtain them.

The BRA has already allocated US\$150 million to assist targeted groups. So far it has disbursed Rp 25 million to each of 3000 GAM combatants, Rp 10 million to each of 6200 GAM non-combatants, Rp 10 million to each of 2035 political prisoners, Rp 5 million to each of 3024 GAM members who surrendered before the MOU was signed and Rp 10 million to 6500 members of anti-separatist groups. It has also disbursed funds to 5726 conflict-affected villages, ranging from Rp 60 million - 170 million.

The parties to the conflict have shown their commitment to building mutual confidence and trust. This aim has been largely achieved during the last two years. However, a solution for lasting peace and prosperity is still far in the distance.

The writer is a specialist on issues concerning Aceh and is the community relations manager for Yayasan Hutan Tropis Borneo. The opinions expressed in this article are his own.