

Some Background on Banda Aceh

Banda Aceh is the provincial capital and largest city in the province of Aceh, Indonesia, located on the island of Sumatra. The Aceh province has the highest proportion of Muslims in the country with regional levels of Sharia law.

Aceh is where Islam was first established in Southeast Asia. In the early seventeenth century the Sultanate of Aceh was the most wealthy, powerful and cultivated state in the Malacca Straits region. Aceh has a history of political independence and fierce resistance to control by outsiders. Aceh has substantial natural resources including oil and natural gas – some estimated put Aceh gas reserves as being the largest in the world.

Aceh is a diverse region occupied by several ethnic and language groups. The major ethnic groups are the Acehnese (who are distributed throughout Aceh), Gayo (in central and eastern part), Alas (in southeastern), Tamiang (in Aceh Tamiang Regency), Aneuk Jamee (descendant from Minangkabau, concentrated in southern and southwestern), Kluet (in South Aceh Regency), and Simeulue (on Simeulue Island). There is also a significant population of Chinese, who are influential in the business and financial communities. Among the present day Acehnese can be found some individuals of Arab, Turkish, and Indian descent. Before the tsunami, the region of Meureuhom Daya (Lamno) used to have an unusually high number of people with fair complexions, blue eyes and blond hair, which local traditions attributed to Turkish or Portuguese ancestry.

The Acehnese language is widely spoken within the Acehnese population. This is a member of the Aceh-Chamic group of languages, whose other representatives are mostly found in Vietnam and Cambodia, and is also closely related to the Malay group of languages. Acehnese also has many words borrowed from Malay and Arabic and traditionally was written using Arabic script. Acehnese is also used as local language in Langkat and Asahan (North Sumatra), and Kedah (Malaysia), and once dominated Penang. Alas and Kluet are closely related languages within the Batak group. The Jamee language originated from Minangkabau language in West Sumatra, with just a few variations and differences.

During the 1970s, under agreement with the Indonesian central government, American oil and gas companies began exploitation of Aceh natural resources. Alleged unequal distribution of profit between central government and native people of Aceh induced Hasan di Tiro, former ambassador of Darul Islam, to call for Independent Aceh. He proclaimed Aceh Independence in 1976.

The movement had a small number of followers initially, and Hasan di Tiro himself had to live in exile in Sweden. Meanwhile, the province followed Suharto's policy of economic development and industrialization. During late 80s several security incidents prompted the Indonesian central government to take repressive measures and to send troops to Aceh. Human rights abuse was rampant for the next decade, resulting in many grievances on the part of the Acehnese toward the Indonesian central government.

During late 90s, chaos in Java and an ineffective central government gave an advantage to Free Aceh Movement and resulted in the second phase of the rebellion, this time with large support from the Acehnese people. This support was demonstrated during the 2000 plebiscite (referendum/vote on a

ballot question) in Banda Aceh which was attended by nearly half million people (of four million population of the province). Indonesian central government responded in 2001 by broadening Aceh's autonomy by giving its government the right to apply sharia law more broadly and the right to receive direct foreign investment. This was again accompanied by repressive measures, however and in 2003 an offensive began and a state of emergency was proclaimed in the Province. The war was still going on when the Tsunami Disaster of 2004 struck the province.

Aceh was the closest point of land to the epicenter of the massive 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake that destroyed much of the western coast of the region, including part of the capital of Banda Aceh. Approximately 170,000 Indonesians were killed or went missing in the disaster, and approximately 500,000 were left homeless.