Terror stalks our volunteers

Australians are targets in Aceh, but Canberra must stay the course in the rebuilding effort, warns Tim Lindsey

A USTRALIA will soon have hundreds of defence force members and civilian volunteers in Aceh, providing emergency assistance and working to rebuild the shattered Indonesian province that bore the brunt of the Boxing Day tsunami.

Their efforts are making a critical contribution to the resurrection of the often troubled relationship between our two countries, and Indonesia has welcomed them.

But how much has really been changed by the disaster that struck Aceh? Are Australians really safe in Indonesia’s most Islamic province, which is the first to have implemented a form of sharia (Islamic law) and, until only a few weeks ago, was a no-go war zone effectively under martial law and banned to Westerners?

When the wave hit, Aceh was a war zone contested by TNI (Indonesia’s armed forces) and GAM (the Free Aceh Movement, a guerrilla organisation) and hostilities continue today in eastern Aceh, where there has been relatively little flooding. The fight is over the question of whether Aceh should remain in the Indonesian republic it helped found in the 1940s or secede, establishing itself again as an independent sultanate. It is the latest in a long history of bloody wars fought in Aceh against external rulers, including the Dutch and the Japanese. GAM has long relied on Islamic symbols to garner support for its cause, as the Acehnese see Islam as a central part of the historic identity of their land, traditionally known as “the veranda of Mecca”.

Yet the threat to Australians may not come from Acehnese Islam at all. Despite the crescent on its flag, GAM is not an Islamic organisation and is disliked by many Acehnese ulama (Islamic leaders) who see it as a rival for authority. Likewise, Acehnese Islam is extremely conservative and socially repressive but that does not mean it is sympathetic to the militant ideology of terrorist groups such as al-Qa’ida or Jemaah Islamiyah.

Indeed, as Sidney Jones of the International Crisis Group has shown, orientation to Salafism or Islamic conservatism is not necessarily an indicator of support for terrorism. This is because the Wahabi theology that motivates Islamic terrorist groups is, for most Southeast Asian Muslims, “deviationist” rather than mainstream. The wave of terrorism is therefore as much about who will control ideology within the ummah (community of believers) as it is about a war against the West.

Which means the real threat to foreigners in Aceh is more likely to come from non-Acehnese sources.

So it is of great concern that militant jihadist Islamic groups are arriving in Aceh, ostensibly to assist with relief efforts, but already issuing warnings that foreign aid is a cover for Christian missionary activity and warning against non-Muslim “meddling” in Aceh. Groups such as Laskar Mujahidin and Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia have a clear commitment to the violent theology of jihad that included the Bali, Marriott hotel and Australian embassy bombings. They are linked to the systematic bombing of churches across Indonesia and gruesome religious wars in Ambon and Maluku. MMI, for example, was founded by Abu Bakar Bashir and its executive is linked closely to JI. After Bashir’s arrest it became the umbrella for the cluster of extreme jihadist groups linked to his Ngruki Pesantren and descended from Darul Islam, the Islamic guerrilla movement that established a pseudo-state in West Java in the 1960s.

There should be no doubt that the agenda of these dangerous groups in Aceh includes trying to provoke inter-religious violence, developing local cells and, if possible, militias, and even carrying out direct acts of terrorism.

This situation is complicated further by the organisational weakness of GAM. It is not a coherent organisation but comprises a small group of professional political and military leaders at the core of a loose web of supporters ranging from guerrilla fighters to criminal gangs. The centre often lacks control over its fringes, especially when it comes to field operations.

It is very likely that militant Islamic groups will link up with gangs on the margins of GAM to conduct attacks on foreigners in Aceh, no matter how hard the core of GAM seeks to prevent this. This will then be used by the TNI to justify a renewed military crackdown, doubtless with the support from the Western allies they have sought for years. Indeed, given the reputation of the Indonesian armed forces for “black ops”, it is possible that rogue units of the Indonesian military will make sure that a terrorist attack happens, even if they have to do it themselves. Some units have been selling arms to GAM for years, so they won’t find this hard.

If violence against foreigners is therefore inevitable, what should Jakarta and Canberra do? First, Indonesia should immediately take the steps to ban extreme groups such as MMI that it should have taken after the Bali bombings, using its extensive powers under the anti-terror laws. Second, it needs to reverse its policy that the security of foreigners in Aceh will
be guaranteed by the notoriously corrupt TNI and allow Australia to provide its own security.

Unfortunately, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono heads a minority government in the powerful Indonesian legislature and this will severely constrain his capacity to move against extremist Islam. His tough talk on security may never amount to much more than that.

Australia faces its own dilemmas. John Howard’s commitment of $1 billion is good policy, both in humanitarian terms and as a historic breakthrough in relations with our most important neighbour, Southeast Asia’s giant.

But this will be in question when Australians are attacked in Aceh. The resulting crisis will require skilled management in Canberra.

Withdrawal would be damaging for the emerging goodwill towards Australia in the ASEAN countries and for the bilateral relationship. But it would be catastrophic for the Acehnese. Canberra must bring pressure to bear on Jakarta to allow it a greater role in security for its citizens in Aceh before the worst happens.

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