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Social fault lines remain as Aceh rebuilds

By Joe Cochrane and Taufan Hidayat in Jakarta

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To a first-time visitor it may seem difficult to believe that, five years ago, a tsunami pounded Aceh, the Indonesian province hit hardest by the disaster.

"Aceh today is very different. There are many new buildings, new houses, new infrastructure facilities, such as ports and roads, and many new cars and motorcycles," says Idal Bahri, an economic adviser to Irwandi Yusuf, the governor of the province.

Socially it has been transformed as well. The deaths of some 170,000 people catalysed a settlement of the 29-year separatist insurgency by the Free Aceh Movement, known by its Indonesian acronym GAM, as the rebels and the army lost thousands of soldiers and family members.

A party formed by former rebels swept subsequent gubernatorial and legislative elections. However, by one estimate, only 30 per cent of GAM fighters have found new jobs. There are fears a new armed group could emerge and jeopardise the peace process. Poverty remains a serious issue, with 30 per cent of rural households and nearly 15 per cent of urban residents living below the poverty line, according to an assessment by the World Bank.

Foreign donors, who so far have given \$6.8bn (£4.2bn, €4.7bn) for the reconstruction effort, remain aware that conditions in Aceh are fragile. Safriza Sofyan, a deputy head of a reconstruction fund overseen by the World Bank, says the fund will be pumping at least \$400m more into Aceh through 2012.

Political figures and analysts say the next few years will be crucial for Aceh, with assistance from Jakarta and the international community, to increase agricultural production and encourage the growth of small and medium enterprises.

"Those sectors need bank loans to make them able to grow, where in the long run it could reduce the economic gap and boost development in all remote areas in Aceh," says Amir Helmi, a deputy chairman of the province's legislative council.

Another issue is sharia, or Islamic law, which was allowed for Aceh under the peace agreement.

An overzealous religious police force has drawn scorn for arresting women for not wearing headscarves, raiding aid agency compounds looking for foreign workers drinking alcohol, and publicly flogging people for gambling, drinking and pre-marital sex.

In October the outgoing legislative council passed a law stipulating that adultery be punished by stoning, although the governor sent it back for revisions.

However, while Aceh is one of the most devoutly Muslim regions of Indonesia, it is not clear the zealotry has broad support.

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