



POLICY PAPER

Submission on the Construction of the Rumoh Geudong Memorialisation



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Reruntuhan puing sisa Rumoh Geudong diambil pada Agustus 2023 pasca acara pertemuan awal PPHAM di Pidie, Aceh sebelum dibangunnya Memorial Park oleh Pemerintah Indonesia.

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ABOUT US

Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR) is a regional human rights organisation that works to increase the capacity of local and national actors, in particular victims, victims' groups and local civil society organisations (CSOs) in the fight against entrenched impunity. This work focuses on conflict transformation, human rights documentation, education and the development of strong south-south connections across the Asia-Pacific region.

KontraS Aceh was founded in 1998 as a task force formed by several Civil Society Organizations and community leaders to monitor human rights issues. Initially, KontraS Aceh was established to address cases of missing persons (forced disappearances) that occurred during the implementation of the Military Operations Zone (DOM) in Aceh from 1989-1998. Over time, the organization has grown into an independent entity that participates in various initiatives designed to dismantle practices of violence, human rights violations, and abuse of power. KontraS Aceh also empowers conflict victims and human rights violation victims by providing an understanding of their rights and how to obtain them. KontraS Aceh has facilitated and supported communities in the process of establishing and implementing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (KKR) at the sub-national level.

Yayasan Pengembangan Aktifitas Sosial Ekonomi Masyarakat Aceh (PASKA) is a nonprofit organization focused on developing social and economic activities in Aceh and empowering victims of the Aceh conflict.

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A. Background

This document was produced by KontraS Aceh, PASKA Aceh, and AJAR in response to the government-built Rumoh Geudong memorialisation in Pidie, Aceh. The government project, named the “Memorial Living Park Rumoh Geudong,” followed the “kick-off” by President Joko Widodo of the work of the Team for Non-Judicial Resolution of Past Gross Human Rights Violations (PPHAM) in June 2023, after he had received the team’s report at the site in Pidie. In writing this document, we have prioritised listening to the victims and survivors to ensure their satisfaction with the memorialisation of Rumoh Geudong.

This document is based on their tireless advocacy for memorialisation at Rumoh Geudong. They were directly involved from 2018 in building a small monument at the site. The inauguration of this memorial – which took the victims’ needs into account – also involved the local government, the National Human Rights Commission (Komnas HAM), and the Aceh Truth and Reconciliation Commission (KKR Aceh).

This submission comprises three parts: 1) Process: the principles and requests of victims during the memorial construction; 2) Results: the forms and functions of memorialisation, as expected by victims ; 3) Sustainability: the efforts of civil society and victims to preserve the memorial, which was initiated and built by the government, to become a living space for the community and victims and survivors.

It is important to remember that memorialisation is a form of symbolic reparation and an effort to foster the collective memory of violence to ensure that atrocities are non recurred. Memorialisation must integrate education, including intergenerational and cross-cultural learning, and art as a form of innovative and popular education. Memorialisation provides a space for victims to shed light on the past, inviting the community to remember past experiences to achieve a more peaceful future.

B. The Rumoh Geudong Memorialisation Process

Meaningful participation of many parties: victims, local advocates, and historians.

President Joko Widodo's statement about the planned memorial complex drew much attention following his visit to the site of Rumoh Geudong, mainly that it would include a mosque. This decision and the policymakers responsible for the plan – namely the central government – did not involve victims in any part of the decision-making, thus triggering their disappointment. They said they did not feel involved as the main subjects or beneficiaries:

“I used to feel close to Rumah Geudong before the government took over the [site]. Now I feel distant.” – F, female Rumoh Geudong victim, August 2023.

According to victims, since 2018, they had already begun memorialisation efforts as early steps in a series of memorial initiatives related to Rumoh Geudong such as holding cultural and religious commemorative events. This memory initiative was continued by the current government. But when plans began to construct a mosque at Rumoh Geudong, victims were not involved in the planning process:

Before, we could go and pray for those who have passed away. Now, where can we go to pray? Even if we could, it is already owned by somebody else.” – R, female Rumoh Geudong victim, August 2023.

The above expression illustrates the impact of the lack of victim involvement in state memorialisation. Victims feel no attachment to the place where they were tortured and raped and where many were killed. Such a lack of attachment could lead to the fading of emotions and memories of the site and the loss of material things that can be directly remembered.

Ideally, victims and their families should be involved in the decision-making and in the planning and development process from the start. Beyond contributing ideas or suggestions, such involvement should also draw on the victims' capabilities in shaping the mutually agreed narrative and form of memorialisation. In the field, it was clear that many victims' families have necessary construction technical skills, and several victims stated that they were ready to be further involved, especially in working on the ground:

“I was sad when I saw the construction process of the Rumoh Geudong memorialisation. It’s other people doing the work. Why not the victims’ children? The children of victims face so much unemployment, they have to move away to find work” – A, female Rumoh Geudong victim, November 2023.

“The construction at the Rumoh Geudong location needs to involve the surrounding community and victims, or their children who live there.” – S, Rumoh Geudong victim, November 2023.

Both quotes show that victims’ participation should be much more than asking them what they want. As a form of symbolic reparation, memorialisation must consider the social-economic context of the victims themselves. Zero involvement of victims also prevents them from actively participating in a meaningful way to attain the benefits of memorialisation.

As every memorialisation initiative at Rumah Geudong has always involved the local authorities in the residential area (Kemukiman), victims also stated the importance of involving the local government, especially that of the Bilie Aron area. However, based on information gathered in June 2023, the Bilie Aron authorities needed to be made aware of and involved in constructing the memorial at Rumoh Geudong.

C. Recommended Results and Outcomes

The following are several designs that victims envision for the Rumoh Geudong memorialisation:

Prayer Room (Musala)

A musala is a place for various forms of Islamic worship (ibadah), and more than one can be built in one residential area (kemukiman). Unlike a mosque, it cannot be used for Friday prayers. The musala is intended as a place for victims and their families to pray collectively and zikr (verbal repetitions of various names and attributes of God). It is essential to understand that in Acehese society, the management of prayer rooms differs from that of mosques.

Several regulations regarding mosques limit activities other than worship –such as commemorations, memorialisation and other community gatherings. At the same time, the

need for memorialisation in this place of prayer is crucial, particularly for the families of those who have disappeared. They need a symbol or scripture of their missing loved ones in a place for prayer and pilgrimage.

“We disagree with [the site] becoming a mosque. We were tortured, abused and raped in that place.” Rumoh Geudong, victim, addresses a memorialisation event organised by PASKA in August 2023.

“I disagree with the [memorialisation] constructed at Rumoh Geudong because, as victims, we were not invited for consultation (musyawarah). When we come to Rumoh Geudong, we are still sad, recalling the blood that was shed and those who are no longer with us. When we return home, our hearts are still in pain, traumatised by the memories of torture. We go to Rumoh Geudong to recite Surah Yasin for those who have passed away. So should something be constructed, don't build a place for leisure because it was a place where blood was spilt, a place of torture.” --, R, Rumoh Geudong victim, addressing a memorialisation event organised by PASKA, August 2023.

Mini Museum

A mini museum would function as a historic site in Aceh where victims, their advocates, the general public, and academics can learn history. The museum can also be used as a space for annual commemorations, continuing the events that have regularly been held by victims since 2018.

The museum can host exhibits of, among other things, memorabilia, information about the decades of armed conflict between the Indonesian government and the insurgency, the names of victims who were detained and tortured at Rumoh Geudong, as well as photographs and replicas of Rumoh Geudong, and its history. Audiovisual artworks can help in intergenerational learning about conflict in Aceh. As one survivor said,

“We hope there could be a monument with stories of the past that children can read. Better yet, rebuild it with an accurate floor plan so that we can point out, ‘here was the commander's room, here was the pool [used for torture].” – Female victim of Rumoh Geudong, September 2023

Victims envision this mini museum taking the form of the original Rumoh Geudong building to reconstruct their memories. They also hope the museum can provide a meeting space for victims. Such a design, a survivor said,

“I do not agree with the former Rumoh Geudong being removed by the local government. Because it is a sign of us who were taken and tortured [at Rumoh Geudong]. Our grandchildren and future generations could see the place where Rumoh Geudong was. Now, only the staircase

is there, (but) there is no meaning if it is only the staircase. – A female victim of Rumoh Geudong, Agustus 2023.

Park

Another suggestion is to build a where visitors and pilgrims can rest when visiting the memorial sites. The park could also be used to pray or hold significant events, as the victim community has done since 2018 in the Rumoh Geudong area. Victims envision that the park would contain the names of the living and deceased victims as a piece of history.

“The names of victims who disappeared or were tortured at Rumoh Geudong need to be inscribed at the park as part of history. – S, Rumoh Geudong victim, August 2023.

D. Recommendation

Ensuring victims participation and involvement in management and public education

Following the completed construction and inauguration of the memorial site, it is vital that victims are involved in the site management. They can participate in committees, one of which should be responsible for annual commemoration events. Victims have also specifically expressed readiness to be historical tour guides for the memorial sites.

“Collective prayer events or Rumoh Geudong memorialisation is essential for us as victims. My desire as a victim’s child is that Rumoh Geudong can become a place for collective prayer like what was done with PASKA Aceh – as it is a very historical place for victims, a place to meet with other victims’ families, such as those from Sakti [nearby district]. The community must not face difficulties whenever they want to visit Rumoh Geudong” – M, Rumoh Geudong victim, Agustus 2023.

Memorialisation that directly involves victims as guides, primarily where they volunteer for the job, is more vital in preserving detailed narratives of violence from their perspective. One victim argued that as well as ensuring the passing on of accurate accounts to the next generations, narratives from the perspective of victims are vital. On their willingness to be directly involved in preserving narratives of the violent crimes, to ensure they never occur again, the victims’ offspring said the following:

“As the children of victims, we are worthy of becoming guides because we were often told the stories of what Rumoh Geudong was really like.” – H, daughter of Rumoh Geudong victim, August 2023.

“I am ready to become a guide; guides should not be people who only know the history from books, instead of from the stories of their elders.” – F, family of Rumoh Geudong victim, August 2023.

It is essential that the government ensures the involvement of the victim community in managing the memorialisation site, and that victims are given sufficient space as stakeholders with intimate ties to Rumoh Geudong.

Connecting with truth-seeking and memorialisation initiatives in other areas of Indonesia

Accountability for massive human rights violations can be achieved alongside truth-telling and memorialisation. The Rumoh Geudong memorialisation site can become an entry point towards building peace and knowledge in the community and Aceh. As well as becoming a site for peace, it can also become a reminder for the government of past human rights abuses and an endeavour (*ikhtiar*) to ensure that these violations never happen again. To do this, connections need to be made with other historical and human rights sites that have been established, such as the Human Rights Museum in Malang, East Java.

E. Closing

The statements of victims that we collected and summarised in the three points on the process, results and sustainability of the memorialisation of Rumoh Geudong were drawn from various meetings with the victims. Therefore, this document should be the basis for policymakers in planning, constructing and managing the memorialisation site at Rumoh Geudong. With these inputs, we urge policymakers to provide further space for a memorialisation that prioritises the needs and demand of victims.

