

In Their Own Words: Survival and Reconciliation in Bener Meriah, Aceh, Indonesia





TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE ASIA NETWORK

Edition

August, 2024.

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Front Cover Image

Village Mapping PAR Activity in Pilar Jaya, 25-26 July 2022

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Published by KontraS Aceh and Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR).

Acknowledgement

Our deepest gratitude is extended to the writers, facilitators, and the survivor community in Bener Meriah, whose participation in the participatory action research conducted by KontraS Aceh and AJAR has been invaluable. The stories and insights shared by them have brought this work to life. Special thanks are also given to Ati Nurbaiti for the meticulous editing provided.

This book is part of the

#PeacebuildingandTJ program, which
has been made possible through
collaboration between Asia Justice and
Rights (AJAR), KontraS Aceh, the Cross
Cultural Foundation (CrCF) in Thailand,
the Solomon Islands Trauma Healing
Association (SITHA) in the Solomon
Islands, and Assosiasaun Chega Ba Ita
(ACbit) in Timor-Leste. The support
provided by the European External
Action Service (EEAS) and the European
Union in Indonesia and Bangkok is
gratefully acknowledged.

The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of the European Union.

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Preface

ceh experienced a prolonged conflict between the proindependence armed group called the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Indonesian government for more than three decades, starting from the declaration of GAM in 1976 until the peace agreement in August 2005. During the conflict, patterns of violence occurred: arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, sexual violence, torture and murder and the loss of property. Violence became central to Acehnese's lives at that time; they lost family members, property, sources of livelihood and the opportunity to build a decent life.

Since 2022, KontraS Aceh together with Asia Justice And Rights (AJAR) have studied the root causes and impacts of violence faced by the community in Bener Meriah, one of the districts in the Gayo highlands affected by the conflict. Slightly different from other areas, the conflict in Bener Meriah had turned into a horizontal conflict between the ethnic groups of the Acehnese, Gayonese, and Javanese, between those who sympathized with GAM and people who joined militias trained by the Indonesian Military (TNI). This research used a participatory action research (PAR) method with a number of approaches in two villages, Sedie Jadi and Pilar Jaya in Bukit, Bener Meriah. More than 20 local women and men represented each village.

This research aimed to empower victims by providing space for active participation, encouraging them

to voice their experiences and seek solutions relevant to their needs. In addition, this research supports the organization of victims to fight for the restoration of their good name, assist in cross-village reconciliation. and eliminate the negative stigma attached, both to the "Jawa" locals and residents of a former "GAM base". By understanding mutual victims' personal experiences, the participants managed to bring out their long suppressed feelings, social, and physical impacts of their conflict and tensions. The methods used helped to identify community learning related to resilience in anticipating conflict. This effort also involved mapping natural resources, social and economic modalities in the village for the sustainability of the victim community, as well as documenting cases of gross human rights violations as a scientific contribution and evidence that the voices of victims are recognized and heard.

This book of photographs and testimonies from survivors is the result of several approaches in our participatory action research. Although not all statements could be published, this compilation is quite representative in explaining the dimensions of violence experienced by survivors and the impacts felt until today.

We convey our deepest gratitude to all parties who participated in the research and preparation of this simple book. All efforts are part of the contribution of civil society in supporting the work of peacebuilding and transitional justice following the conflict in Aceh.

Who We Are

KontraS Aceh was established in 1998 as a task force, formed by a number of CSOs and community leaders to monitor human rights issues. Initially, KontraS Aceh was formed to handle cases of missing persons (disappearances) that occurred during the implementation of the Military Operations Area (DOM) in Aceh in 1989-1998. It then evolved into an independent organisation, participating in a number of initiatives designed to dismantle the practices of violence, human rights violations, and the abuse of power. KontraS Aceh also strengthens conflict victims and victims of human rights violations, by providing an understanding of their rights and how to obtain these rights. KontraS Aceh has been facilitating and shepherding the community through the process of establishing and implementing the sub-national TRC.

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.

Transitional Justice Asia Network (TJAN) a regional hub of transitional justice experts which aims to facilitate learning and knowledge-building on transitional justice and accountability initiatives across Asia and the Pacific. The network was established in February 2017 consisting of member organisations across the region. TJAN works in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, South Korea, Timor-Leste and Thailand.

As members of TJAN, AJAR and KontraS Aceh have been working to build the capacity of civil society. In Indonesia, TJAN has been instrumental in sustaining support for Aceh's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) by reversing government withdrawal due to political pressure. TJAN also facilitated crucial dialogues between Aceh's TRC and Timor-Leste's Centro Nacional Chega (CNC), enabling the sharing of research on human rights violations and fostering cross-border learning. Additionally, TJAN has supported community-based reconciliation efforts in Aceh, contributing to the preservation of collective memory and the prevention of future violence.

In this study, several models of approaches were used to uncover the history of violence experienced by survivors from various angles. Among these approaches are the analysis of the history of each village in the context of natural resources, as well as its socioeconomic conditions. Additionally, other models focus on exploring the history of the violence experienced, which led to significant changes in their conditions, both before and during the conflict, and in the impacts that are still felt today.

Methodology

In short, various models in the study reveal the many challenges that arose as a result of the incomplete fulfillment of the rights of survivors of past human rights violations. Even though official peace was signed in 2005 between the GAM and the Indonesian government, feelings of anxiety and suspicion persist in the communities, both vertically towards the government and horizontally among the ethnicities. Such feelings which were inherited from earlier generations in Bener Meriah.

The research method is depicted in the following activities:

1. RIVER OF LIFE







In this "River of Life" method, participants create a holistic view of themselves as individuals. They reflect on their life experiences by drawing a river to represent their own lives since childhood, and then recite the story of their pictures to other participants in the forum.

2. TIMELINE







The "Timeline" is chosen as a method to validate the victim's right to the truth of what happened to him/her, by sketching and or outlining the events through a timeline of the conflict from their own perspective.

3.

STONE AND FLOWER







This method explores victims' perspectives in the transitional justice (TJ) process such as the victim's rights to truth, justice, healing and protection from recurrence of violations. All of these are categorized as stones (for negative perceptions), and flowers (for positive perceptions) that participants place on paper, in response to questions posed for each TJ process.

4.

BODY MAPPING







Each participant personally identifies experiences that would help them understand the physical and psychological impact of their traumatic experiences during the past conflict. These impacts were reflected in body maps, where each participant drew their own shape on a body-sized piece of paper, then marked the areas where they experienced pain. They then shared their stories to their group by pointing and describing the pain they had or still felt in the marked parts of the body shapes.

5.

VILLAGE MAP







The "Village Map" method attempts to map the physical and social environment of a village or community. This process aims to enable active participation from community members in identifying important locations, resources, problems, history and potential in their environment. In this session, participants explore a deeper understanding of the social and spatial dynamics of the village. They also describe demographic changes and important locations that they relate to events in their villages that are significant to them.

6.

Sources of Livelihood







In this method, community members identify ways in which they utilize natural resources for the well-being and sustainability of their community. This includes developing sustainable agricultural practices, environmental conservation programs, or skills training to maximize the potential of villagers. Community members compare the conditions of how such resources were acquired in the period before, during, and after the conflict to the present day

7.House of Peace







In the "House of Peace" method, each participant reflects on the conflict and its impact on them today. This method measures the sense of safety and security, militarism, accountability and efforts to empower and strengthen local actors, to determine whether participants have achieved long-term and inclusive peace. This session also increases participants' knowledge in analyzing conflict and its impact in their community.

8.

MEMORY BOX







In the "Memory Box" method, victims and survivors bring artifacts, photos, or any relics that they put in a box; items which connect them to past memories of the conflict. Usually this activity is done in a big group, but to provide more personal space to the villagers given the particular dynamics of the local conflict, this method in Bener Meriah was done individually. Participants then share their impressions of each object. As in the Bener Meriah activity, their conversations gradually reveal to them that these objects are what have helped them refuse to forget their bitter memories.

General Findings

After almost two years of conducting PAR in Bener Meriah, several findings revealed the root causes of horizontal conflict and the patterns of violence in the area.

- Entering the year 2000, in the Central Aceh region of Tanah Gayo, the conflict spread to horizontal clashes between the GAM and certain ethnic groups, especially the Javanese.
- The conflict between GAM and the TNI further fueled inherited grudges and frictions between ethnic groups. As a few elders recalled in the discussions and interviews, the local Javanese. who were considered immigrants though most were born in Aceh, experienced periodical hostility since the rebellion of the Darul Islam/Indonesian Islamic Army (DI/TII) in 1953, the witch-hunt against suspected communists in 1965, to the armed conflict between GAM and RI since 1976. People who became victims during the RI and GAM conflict usually had family members who were victims during the witch-hunt against suspected communists or the DI/TII rebellion.
- As a result, the TNI was easily able to intensively organize civilians dominated by the Javanese ethnic group to form an anti-GAM front, also known as militia. Tit-for-tat assaults between GAM troops and

militias broke out throughout
Gayo. Attacks on villages became
more frequent, inevitably leading
to waves of refugees. Ethnic-based
massacres broke out in various
places. The conflict between
armed groups dramatically
became a battlefield of bloodshed
and division between the three
dominant ethnic groups in Gayo:
the Gayo, Javanese, and Acehnese.

As in past violent conflict conditions, non-combatants suffered the most during the war between GAM and the government and among ethnic groups. Participants confirmed restrictions on movement, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, sexual violence, torture and murder and the loss of property. In Gayo, violence became central to daily lives. In an instant, many lost family members, property, sources of livelihood and the opportunity to build a decent life, as they recited in the research discussions:

- Villagers were forced to let their belongings seized without resistance rather than face retaliation by both members of TNI and GAM. Losses included foodstuff, vehicles, groceries, and merchandise. Some of the men decided "to go up the mountain" to join GAM militia, saying they could no longer stand being targeted by the TNI every time a raid took place.
- Residents were ordered to report on a daily basis to the TNI; residents whose family members were accused of being involved in GAM would expect intimidation and

- torture when self-reporting. Their homes were targeted for searches at all times. Some were even arbitrarily detained.
- A woman in Pilar Jaya was shot by soldiers because her husband was a GAM member.
 Likewise in Sedie Jadi, a woman became disabled for life because she was shot by GAM fighters who had attacked the village.
- On top of all such abuses, villagers' mobility was restricted at all times. A woman was forced to give birth without a midwife, being prohibited from leaving the village to seek medical treatment. Men had to bring their children with them when shopping, to avoid suspicion of being engaged in any antigovernment activity. The military also blocked access to goods, basic necessities and all other needs that were only available outside the village.
- In Sedie Jadi villages, where locals were mostly Javanese, the military provided protection from the GAM in exchange for "voluntary services" from residents.

- Whenever a military post was established in the village surroundings, the residents' assets were often seized. In addition many women in the village became victims of sexual violence while their families remained helpless.
- On 5 June 2001 GAM fighters attacked the Sedie Jadi village. Dozens of houses were burned down, five residents were shot dead including a small child, followed by massive evacuation. Sedie Jadi was one of many villages in Gayo that experienced similar attacks. Ethnic-based evictions were rampant at that time, and large-scale ethnic massacres took place in a number of villages.
- Family members became targets when the military failed to find civilians accused of being GAM and were in hiding, including officials and village figures who were accused of being permissive of GAM's presence in their territories. They were often the ones who unleashed repression from the TNI-police, and constantly faced torture and terror.

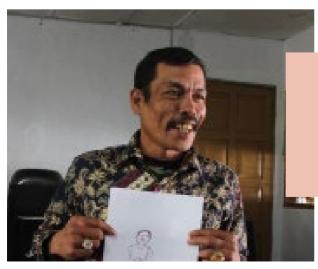


"Any big incident would always lead to victims from our village. During the DI/TII era, one village figure became a victim, then during the [communist witch-hunt], the local residents ... were killed. and again, during the GAM conflict, there were also fatalities among our residents."

Teguh Ardi

resident of Sedie Jadi





"As I was the village chief at the time, I became the target of torture by the security officers because I was accused of hiding information about GAM. I was tortured in front of the villagers, then I was told to run to be shot from a distance; the villagers screamed."

Irwanta



"At that time (at night) I was already asleep.

Apparently (when the soldiers came) there were people from the militia with them. They pointed to the house (where a GAM member lived), which was my house, and they were hunting my husband."

"I was unconscious after being shot."

Mawaddah

resident of Pilar Jaya

"I had kept that jacket for a long time, it wasas drenched with Erma's blood — my toddler was shot on the night of the attack on Sedie Jadi village. e). When we rushed her to the hospital, she died on the way

Karyanto

resident of Sedie Jadi





"Around 1999, we were forced to move to Cemparam (Mesidah district). The Javanese were being forced to leave. By then we had no money, so we prioritized finding food. We only used this one cloth to carry our children, we never changed it."

Sudarwati

"There is no justice. My two younger brothers were taken to the ((TNI) battalion, stripped of all their clothes, then tortured. They are both still alive, and have not married until now. Another of my younger sisters was taken and detained in the Takengon prison."

Ardiah

resident of Pilar Jaya





"We didn't know who was friend or foe. We were confused, the slightest mistake could end our lives. The soldiers would come in and shout at the residents. We would take the small children when we went out, it was safer [to avoid suspicion]."

Jamalul

resident of Pilar Jaya

"Every night, I prepared a bag for a few clothes of my own and my child's. My husband was on night patrol. So I always brought a blanket and a sling (to carry the child), moving from house to house, spending the night at various relatives' houses."

Sri Yani





"I surrendered myself to the soldiers at the Central Aceh command, and was detained for one night there. Throughout the time, I was questioned, and also slapped many times by the deployed troops at the post."

Saripah Aini

resident of Pilar Jaya



"My stall was often visited by OTK (unknown persons, a term often alluding to GAM in the area), they would demand my wares [for free]; sometimes I had to cook for them."

Aini

resident of Pilar Jaya

"Residents were forced out of their homes and were lined up on the street (by soldiers). In 2003, I was obliged to report several times to the local TNI post."

Rubiyah

resident of Pilar Jaya



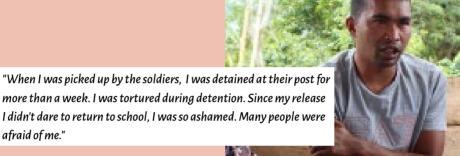
"Our houses were burned, the residents. killed. That drove us to unite to protect this village. I was responsible as the village chief at the time, to protect Kresek village from the threat of GAM. Because they had also destroyed other villages."

Suterisno

former head of Pondok Kresek, later named Sedie Jadi

Lasting Impact

The armed conflict in Bener Meriah had a very broad impact and apparently did not end immediately after formal peace in 2005. Victims, mostly civilians, were directly and continuously affected, disrupting their quality of life physically, psychologically, economically and socially.



Habibi

afraid of me."

resident of Pilar Jaya

"All the possessions I had collected since first moving to Kresek (later Sedie Jadi village) were gone, burned to ashes because the house was razed by GAM. That was very painful because the result of years of hard work vanished just like that."

Iskandar

resident of Sedie Jadi



"The house was searched by the military and militia; I escaped from the back window of the house, there I was shot, hit in the leg, and I was rushed to hospital. Until now my (leg) has not fully re<mark>covered, but I have to keep</mark> working, doing whatever I can to support my children."

Mawaddah





"I became gravely ill because I had fled to the mountains, avoiding the security authorities. Then I surrendered, and was arrested, and I became a cook at a TNI post. The trauma has not disappeared, it has stayed with me all my life."

Ali Hasan

resident of Pilar Jaya

"My wife died from trauma, having witnessed armed conflict in 2002. Until now, I still have trouble sleeping, I tremble every time I remember the soldiers and hear the sound of (military) boots."

Banta Muda

resident of Pilar Jaya





"When the village was attacked, my mother-in-law was shot, now she is disabled for life. My child (a toddler), died after being shot during the incident that night."

Yusmar



"The losses were huge when our crops were razed. The harvest that was ready to be sold was all gone — while everything was very difficult at the time, the economy was down, there was no guarantee of security, no resident dared to go to the fields."

Rubiyah

resident of Pilar Jaya

"Since long ago, I got used to going around this village every day to monitor the situation. After the attack (in 2001), I became more convinced of the need to continue to monitor security here. Until now, I still go around with my motorbike, feeling anxious every time."

Susilo

resident of Sedie Jadi





"During the conflict in 2001, when I was still in school, I saw firsthand how residents were drowned in water, interrogated while being tortured in front of the community, even children witnessed it. This has traumatized me for quite a long time."

Maulidan

VICTIMS' RESILIENCE

Following the attack of 5 June 2001, preserving its memory for the victim community in Sedie Jadi village has been a vital record of knowledge to be imparted to the next generation. Such intention drove Suterisno, the village chief at the time of the attack, to initiate the establishment of a monument and to invite the community to commemorate the tragedy every June 5. Eventually the residents created a relief named the "People's Resistance Monument" as a reminder of the incident, which claimed the lives of five villagers.



"In 2002, the June tragedy was commemorated for the first time, with a kenduri (communal meal), then prayers, and a wayang show. This was very memorable for us here. From thereon, the community pledged to hold communal prayers every year for the victims, and also for the fighting spirit of the residents who have defended themselves and their right to life."

Sukensih

resident of Sedie Jadi

"When one of us (former village chief Suterisno) became a council member in 2006, there was enough of the budget allocation to hold the commemorations (memorialization of the 5 June 2001 attack). All residents, especially the victims' families, have been very enthusiastic. Even without funding, we would all pitch in to be able to hold the commemorations in the village."

Ahmad Dasupri



"We have lived here for a long time, this village has been able to withstand attacks from many quarters. The residents are trained to be vigilant. I think this story should be passed down to our children and grandchildren, so that they share the same spirit. They should be involved in these commemorations, they should know (the past)."

Teguh Ardi

resident of Sedie Jadi



"We have our elders, — Kakek (Grandfather) Teguh, Kakek Sahidi, and several others who always give us warnings. Those who have lived longer give directions and tell us what to do. This is what I recall, that we were able to survive that night (of the attack) because of the advice of the elders."

Yudi Amri

resident of Sedie Jadi



"During the attack, the village was burned down, including my house. My husband and I only had the clothes on our backs. But we were convinced that life must go on, so we resumed work, tended the fields again; residents must continue to survive."

Marlinda

In the neighboring village of Pilar Jaya, residents have lived in near isolation given its fairly remote location. Nevertheless the story of how villagers watched out for each other whenever Pilar Jaya became the target of a military operation continues to be remembered.

"We always had to be on the alert when the military or other party came. We prepared food, or anything that we could give them, so that this village would remain safe."

Saripah Aini

resident of Pilar Jaya



"I have tried to raise my children as best as possible, but the conflict has dragged down our economic conditions, which has affected the children's education and health."

Asmamurni

"I was able to rise up on my own (since being affected by the conflict), without ever gaining justice, neither a house nor any assistance from the government, although my father and husband were among victims of violence."

Muhsanah

resident of Pilar Jaya





"When we were still living in Amor, we already heard the rumors of ethnic frictions. But even though we were mostly Acehnese and Gayo, we still looked out for the Javanese. We were not affected by the ethnic issue."

Abdul Jalil

resident of Pilar Jaya

"It took me quite a long time to recover, to be able to work on the field again. I once received trauma recovery from a non-governmental organization, it was very helpful. My previous trauma was because the field was razed, the hut was demolished; I couldn't do anything at that time."

Jamalul



Survivor's Views on Peace Today

Life in the Bener Meriah area began to show signs of normalcy almost 20 years after official peace was signed with the Helsinki MoU between GAM and the Indonesian government. In 2022, Sedie Jadi residents attempted community-based reconciliation between the victim community in their village and the GAM leaders/actors in the Sedie Jadi attack of June 2001. This moment was crucial and historic, because for the first time the two parties met each other, and openly shared their stories.

However, a sense of anxiety still shrouds the lives of Sedie Jadi and Pilar Jaya residents. To explore their views on peace, a House of Peace exercise was conducted. This method measures participants' views on six categories of peace, namely security and a sense of security, militarization, accountability, gender equality, past, present, and future conflicts, and participation and inclusion.

From the House of Peace approach, it could be concluded that the conditions in Sedie Jadi and Pilar Jaya were fairly good. However, participants applied red for the aspects of accountability and militarization meaning worsening conditions. This is because none of the perpetrators have been brought to accountability, and most victims have not received restitution.



"I never thought that reconciliation (with Fauzan Azima, former local GAM commander) could happen. During the tragedy, we were enemies. But when we decided to meet and make amends last year, I was deeply touched. We were like distant relatives who had not seen each other for a long time."

Iskandar

resident of Sedie Jadi



"After the conflict, then the tsunami disaster in Aceh, a lot of aid came in, and empowerment of all kinds. But as far as I could see, there was less social cohesiveness as people were not as close. There are many new problems, especially the economy, which has been the obstacle for Pilar Jaya to progress."

Irwanta

"After the conflict, we feared social rifts would easily return among the villagers. What worries me is that even elections for the reje (village chief) could spark rioting."

Muhsanah

resident of Pilar Jaya



"We find it hard to trust the government, because until today there has been no justice and reparation for the violence experienced by the residents. Houses were burned, lives were lost."

Yuhernawati

resident of Sedie Jadi





"We don't feel really safe. Nowadays threats of different forms could emerge. My priority is the security of my family. If any trouble should occur we don't know who to report to, the police can't be relied on, they can't protect us."

Zaitul Rahmah

resident of Pilar Jaya



"There is indeed no justice, the people rose up only w each other's help, the government does not care about the impact of this conflict."

Munir

Hopes

Reflecting on their experiences during the conflict, survivors hope that communities will remain secure and comfortable. It takes mutual trust to establish a feeling of family. Younger and older generations need to be willing to communicate with each other, so that any problems in the villages could be resolved together.

On the other hand, many participants remain doubtful amid an uncertain future. While the psychosocial situation has not fully recovered, the community is expected to be able to start a new life by rebuilding together again, utilizing village programs. In addition, the government should remain committed to comprehensive recovery of victims.

To reduce the risk of recurring conflict, survivors in each village also hope that their villages are free from stigma. Be it Sedie Jadi village which was labeled a militia base because many Javanese locals were trained by the military; or Pilar Jaya which was stigmatized as a GAM village because most residents are of Gayo and Acehnese ethnicities.



"We have no power at all, it is even difficult to go by every day, not to mention during the conflict. I hope this village remains safe; at least residents should be able to earn a living, work the fields and trade in comfort and peace."

Yusramina

resident of Pilar Jaya



"Hopefully what happened in the past will not be experienced again by our children, today and in the future."

Siti

"We feel it is important that this village remains peaceful, so that we may all live well, be at peace with ourselves, and work in the fields in peace. We would be happy if we could look after the children and ensure their safety."

Mahpuja

resident of Sedie Jadi





"The government (so far) has not carried out its capacity to support peace, even though they are capable. If it only makes promises, new conflicts could emerge. It's like the sick who are only given medicine to reduce the pain, not the medicine that cures the core of the disease."

Irwanta

resident of Pilar Jaya

"Countless people have come and gone from this village, whether students doing research, or those who want to learn farming; they meet me, and all become like my own children, my house becomes their house too. They can learn history from here."

Teguh Ardi



"More programs for the young are needed. When they are preoccupied with positive activities, they would less likely be provoked by unclear issues that could trigger negative things in their environment."

Marlinda

resident of Sedie Jadi





a GAM base, hopefully there is no such stigma anymore, so that Pilar Jaya will no longer be a target for violence. Hopefully there will be no more conflict."

Ernawati