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Indonesian Government Hopes Aceh Rebels Will Lay Down Arms

October 30, 2009 08:12 AM

An Indonesian official says it hopes separatist rebels in the tsunami-devastated region of Aceh will lay down their arms and join reconstruction efforts.

Alwi Shihab, Indonesia's coordinating minister for welfare, said Monday that although there have been several encounters between the separatist Free Aceh Movement and the Indonesian military since the December 26 disaster, he has hopes for peace.

Mr. Shihab says religious scholars and "independent leaders" are talking with the rebel group, known as GAM, which has been fighting for independence for the province since 1976. GAM declared a cease-fire after the earthquake and tsunami.

"There is a behind-the-scene communication. Not officially, but so many religious scholars are in contact with GAM and trying to convince them this is a momentum that Aceh should be restored, should be peaceful and prosperous," said Mr. Shihab. "The whole world is behind Aceh and this is a momentum to reconcile and to leave arms."

Aceh, situated on the northern tip of Sumatra island, suffered enormous damage in the disaster. More than 150,000 people living in a dozen Indian Ocean countries died, with Aceh accounting for two-thirds of the deaths.

Hundreds of foreign relief workers are in Aceh as part of an unprecedented international relief operation. But there are concerns for their safety because of the separatist conflict.

Mr. Shihab says President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono wants both sides to stop fighting and concentrate on helping the tens of thousands of tsunami refugees. "I think the appeal of the president includes two sides," he said. "They should be more thoughtful and mindful to the fate of and prosperity of the people of Aceh."

As aid efforts gather momentum, a U.S. Navy helicopter crash-landed in a rice field near Banda Aceh's airport Monday, with 10 crew members aboard. Most of them suffered moderate injuries. The Navy suspended flights for a few hours after the crash, which is under investigation.

And more aftershocks from the December 26 quake were felt in Banda Aceh early Monday morning - a magnitude 6.2 tremor sent bleary-eyed residents rushing into the streets shortly before dawn.

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The United Nations says the long-standing conflict between separatist rebels and the Indonesian military is not hampering its aid efforts in the tsunami devastated region of Aceh, but acknowledges precautions are in place after gunfire broke out near its headquarters in the capital of Banda Aceh. Automatic gunfire broke out early Sunday near the U.N. tsunami relief headquarters in Banda Aceh, injuring no one, but causing alarm to nearby residents. The U.N...



By **Nancy-Amelia Collins**

Wed, 10/28/2009 - 03:15

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Indonesia Government Prepares for Talks with Aceh Rebels

An Indonesian government delegation is in Finland preparing for talks with the exiled leadership of the Aceh-separatist movement known as GAM. The two sides are looking for a solution to the 28-year conflict in Aceh, and the talks have been given extra impetus by the need to cooperate to rebuild the region that was devastated by last month's disastrous earthquake and tsunami. Few observers expect the road to peace to be smooth. Hopes are high that the meeting Friday in...

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World Bank Chief Says it May Take Weeks for Tsunami Reconstruction Assessment

World Bank President James Wolfensohn says it will take several weeks to assess the reconstruction needs stemming from the December 26 tsunami in southern Asia. Mr. Wolfensohn spoke to reporters Wednesday following his return from an inspection visit to the hardest hit countries. Mr. Wolfensohn says the needs assessment process is under way and that some preliminary results will be known within a few weeks. While the United Nations is in charge of the immediate relief...