

Traces of Violence in the GAM & NKRI Conflict in Aceh: Portraits of Victims and Their Impact

Dirta Wardatul Ula¹, Kurnia Afdilla¹, Faiza Razika¹, Julia Amanda¹, Sarifah¹, Inka Shintya¹, Ella Suzanna^{1*}

¹Psychology Study Program, Faculty of Medicine, Universitas Malikussaleh
Jl. Cot Tengku Nie, Reuleut, Muara Batu, North Aceh 24355 – Indonesia
Email: ella.suzanna@mhs.unimal.ac.id

*Correspondence

Abstract:

The prolonged and complex conflict in Aceh has left significant impacts on the community, particularly on the victims who endured violence and fear. This study aims to explore the psychological effects experienced by the victims of the GAM (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka) and Indonesian government conflict, and to understand how these effects persist to this day. Utilizing a qualitative narrative approach with a biographical type, this research involves an interview with a victim who directly experienced violence during the conflict. The findings reveal that psychological trauma, such as fear of gunfire, explosions, and objects associated with the conflict, remains deeply ingrained in the victim's memory. Even the sound of fireworks and firecrackers triggers anxiety, and daily activities, such as frying fish, become challenging due to the popping sounds reminiscent of past violence. The implications of this research highlight the importance of addressing psychological trauma for conflict victims, as well as the need for policies focused on psychosocial recovery. Sustainable solutions must continue to be developed to support recovery and peace in Aceh and to prevent long-term effects for future generations.

Keywords: Aceh conflict, GAM, psychological effects, trauma

1. Introduction

The history of the Aceh conflict has deep roots, beginning in the pre-colonial era with tensions between religious scholars advocating for Islamic law and uleebalang nobles with a more secular stance. During Dutch colonial rule, Aceh was known as a difficult region to conquer. After Indonesia gained independence, Acehnese hopes for Islamic law to be implemented as a national foundation were unfulfilled, leading to deep disappointment (Nurpratiwi et al., 2019). This dissatisfaction continued with the Darul Islam/Tentara Islam Indonesia (DI/TII) rebellion led by Daud Beureueh in 1953, which ended in 1959 when Aceh was granted special region status with autonomy in cultural, religious, and educational affairs (Jayanti, 2005).

During the New Order era, Aceh experienced massive resource exploitation without proper attention to the welfare of local communities, which led to the establishment of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) in 1976, demanding full independence from Indonesia. The conflict between the Indonesian government and GAM arose due to disparities between expectations and reality in various sectors, particularly in development. These inequalities led to poverty, low education levels, and insecurity for the Acehnese people (Jayanti, 2005).

GAM initially operated clandestinely, unprepared to confront the central government directly. Its existence first surfaced when large corporations in Aceh received letters from GAM demanding tax payments to the organization. When these demands were unmet, GAM's activities became detectable to the government, leading to intensified crackdowns (Jayanti, 2005). The conflict persisted for years, marked by military operations and failed peace negotiations. Eventually, a peace agreement was mediated by the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) and signed in 2005 in Helsinki, ending armed conflict and granting Aceh special autonomy (Nurpratiwi et al., 2019). With this autonomy, Aceh could implement Islamic law and manage certain local governance aspects independently. Post-conflict efforts focused on infrastructure development and community welfare, reducing public discontent toward the central government (Nurpratiwi et al., 2019).

This prolonged conflict significantly impacted various aspects of Acehnese society, including social, economic, and political stability. It also affected education, health, culture, and psychology. The psychological effects on conflict victims include social stigma, trauma, emotional distress, developmental issues in children and adolescents, and social disintegration (Nurpratiwi et al., 2019). This study aims to analyze the psychological impact of the Aceh conflict on victims, hoping to provide a deeper understanding of the long-term consequences of armed conflict on mental well-being.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative narrative approach with a biographical type. In qualitative research, analysis focuses on answering "how" and "what" questions, referring to the interaction process between various factors and analysis units to provide a comprehensive depiction of the studied phenomenon. The subject of this study is an individual who directly experienced the Aceh conflict. Data collection techniques included

in-depth interviews, documentation, and data triangulation to ensure information validity. The data analysis process consisted of four stages: data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. These stages aim to gain an in-depth understanding of the psychological effects experienced by conflict victims and holistically portray their experiences.

3. Results

This study seeks to understand the psychological impact on Aceh conflict victims. Through in-depth interviews, the victim described traumatic experiences during the conflict. Key themes emerging from this research include: Experiencing and Witnessing Violence. The victim first felt the impact of the conflict while attending high school. The school's proximity to a military camp exposed the victim to frequent gunfire and reports of killings and assaults, instilling deep fear from adolescence. Feelings of Insecurity and Direct Threats. During college, the conflict intensified. The victim often heard gunfire from unclear sources, and on one occasion, a stray bullet struck a neighborhood swing. In another instance, the victim had to hide under a mattress with a sibling upon reports of a bomb attack in nearby rice fields.

Extreme Fear in Emergency Situations. One of the most memorable incidents occurred while the victim was selling at a market. Suddenly, chaos erupted due to a gunfight between soldiers and GAM members. The victim was paralyzed by panic, unable to move until someone pulled them to safety. During the chaos, a soldier pointed a gun at the victim and threatened to shoot, ultimately firing into the air instead. Long-Term Trauma and Lingering Fear. Even after the conflict ended, the victim remained fearful of any sounds resembling gunfire or explosions. Fireworks, firecrackers, or even the popping sound of oil when frying fish triggered severe anxiety, causing trembling and sweating. The persistence of trauma affected the victim's daily life.

These findings indicate that the armed conflict in Aceh caused not only loss of life and physical destruction but also severe psychological scars. The prolonged trauma response demonstrates that conflict's impact does not end with the cessation of violence but continues to affect victims' mental well-being long after.

4. Discussion

This study highlights the long-term psychological effects of the Aceh conflict, a subject rarely addressed in previous research. Unlike studies focusing on social and political aspects, this research reveals how traumatic experiences continue to shape victims' lives. The findings align with Nurpratiwi (2021), who suggested that conflict-related trauma has enduring effects on psychological well-being. However, this study provides more detailed insights into how extreme fear persists. The implications emphasize the need for long-term psychological interventions for Aceh conflict victims. Nevertheless, this study is limited by a small sample size, necessitating further research with broader coverage to deepen understanding of the conflict's psychological impact.

5. Conclusion

This study explores the psychological effects experienced by Aceh conflict victims. In-depth interviews reveal that the conflict left lasting trauma still felt today. Experiences of witnessing violence, constant insecurity, and direct exposure to danger created deep-seated fear, triggering extreme psychological reactions in daily life. Even after the conflict ended, victims continued to experience anxiety triggered by loud noises, such as fireworks or frying sounds. These findings confirm that trauma from armed conflict not only affects individuals during wartime but also has long-term consequences on mental health. This study underscores the necessity of sustained psychological support for conflict victims, particularly through trauma therapy and mental rehabilitation programs. Understanding these deep psychological impacts can help develop more effective recovery solutions to improve victims' well-being in the future.

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