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Land mafia the latest threat to Acehese

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AS THE massive aid program to Aceh accelerates, two proposals could inflict further tragedy on the displaced and grieving people of Aceh: the relocation camps for thousands of Acehese, and the coastal buffer zone to protect against future tsunamis.

The proposals may appear innocuous enough. More than 400,000 displaced Acehese need adequate shelter while their cities and villages are re-built. About 100,000 will be housed in 24 or more re-location camps, mainly around the cities of Banda Aceh and Meulaboh. Ostensibly, this is to allow orderly re-building over a period of two to five years.

A coastal buffer zone has also been proposed in official comments on Aceh's reconstruction. This zone would be in 2 parts: a 300m coastal strip to be free of all buildings, and a 1.6 km wide secondary area in which re-building will be greatly restricted. The draft master plan for Banda Aceh puts this proposal into effect, with 13,600 people expected to be dispossessed.

What is wrong with these proposals? Why have they generated such disquiet among so many Acehese? The answer lies in issues of corruption, oppression and distrust. These issues have the potential to discredit relief efforts, including Australia's own assistance program, and escalate the long-running conflict between Indonesian military forces and Aceh's independence movement.

Civil administration in Aceh is often described as the most corrupt in Indonesia. It is closely linked with the military, which entrenched its control over Aceh during the 2003-4 period of martial law. Approximately 70 per cent of the military's national budget comes from unofficial sources. Aceh is vital to military interests because it allows continued access to lucrative illegal logging, smuggling and extortion activities.

Military-backed conglomerates are now circling the huge reconstruction honeypot. These include Artha Graha, which controversially announced and then denied that it had an agreement to re-build Meulaboh. Artha Graha's presence is highly visible in Aceh. Banners reading "Artha Graha Cares" festoon the shattered streets of Banda Aceh. Another conglomerate to watch is the Bakrie Group, a diversified concern that has extensive plantation interests in Sumatra.

Closely linked with the military's rent-seeking imperative is its longstanding desire to separate the local population from Aceh's rebel forces. Even before the tsunami hit, about 30,000 Acehese had been forced into relocation camps along the East Coast. These tactics mirror the disastrous re-settlement program in East Timor that led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands from famine and disease.

International experience suggests that Aceh's "semi-permanent" re-location camps will most likely become permanent. The inhabitants will be tightly controlled, separated from their livelihoods, subjected to debilitating health and social problems. In the meantime, what will happen to their land? Who will get the benefit of the buffer zone? While most international attention has focused on the question of security, it is the question of land that is emerging as a primary flashpoint for the Acehese people.

According to Indonesian media reports, a "land mafia" has already begun to obscure boundaries in devastated areas in order to make fraudulent land claims. If the experience in other parts of Indonesia is any guide, this mafia will act closely with corrupt officials to obtain valuable land with minimal compensation, if any, to local landholders. The head of Aceh's urban planning and housing agency was quoted recently as saying, of landholders in the proposed buffer zone: "we know they don't have ownership certificates, so we will compensate accordingly."

In the 1980s and 1990s I travelled extensively along the west coast of Aceh. Aside from Meulaboh and Banda Aceh, the west coast towns and villages were heavily based around fishing and other maritime industries. While local gardens and rice- fields were also worked, almost every family had a member who engaged in small-scale fishing, shrimp farming or octopus and shellfish collection.

The region was breathtakingly beautiful. In some places the mountains plunged into the sea; in others they retreated and were ringed with almost impenetrable rainforest. The population clung to inhabitable land along the shoreline, selling fish and produce at small markets dotting the main road. They were maritime people; they needed to be close to their boats and small town markets. They relied on the coast road for passing trade.

Many of these people will be dispossessed under the proposed buffer zone. They will not be allowed to re-build within 300m of the coastline; and, while some fishermen will be able to live in the secondary 1.6km strip, markets and other forms of infrastructure such as roads will be forbidden. The coast road itself will be re-routed through the mountains.

How will land in the buffer zone be utilised? Most media reports have focused on mangrove planting, but official statements have also mentioned the presence of palm trees. In this there may be a clue. Oil palm plantations have already proliferated along the southern coast of Aceh below Meulaboh. They have a notorious appetite for land. It would be no surprise then if plantation interests were particularly supportive of the buffer proposal.

These issues go far beyond the legitimate requirements of post-tsunami reconstruction. While some temporary camps are needed, particularly for displaced urban Acehnese, those who lived in coastal towns and villages should be allowed to return and re-build their homes if they so wish. Any concerns about land rights and boundaries should be handled as they have always been, through decentralised village and district processes, not centralised mechanisms that are exposed to corruption and popular distrust.

The people most devastated by the tsunami were the poor fishermen and farmers who lived along the West Coast. Most had no assets or livelihood other than those offered by their former coastal lands. They are unlikely to receive adequate compensation for their land, let alone their livelihoods.

Would an effective early warning system not be a better way to protect against future tsunami? Would the protective benefits of coastal trees truly outweigh the injustice and anger generated by re- location? These are questions that deserve urgent attention if those who suffered most from the tsunami are not to suffer even more from opportunistic and shameful acts of dispossession.

Dr Fitzpatrick is a senior lecturer in law at the Australian National University.