

Who are the Acehnese?

Nearly 4 million Acehnese people live on the northern tip of Sumatra Island, Indonesia. Most live near the coast and support themselves by fishing and farming.

Conflict and Tragedy

The Acehnese are tired of trauma. A long, bitter guerrilla conflict between Indonesian nationalists and Acehnese freedom fighters ravaged the jungles and villages of Aceh between 1976 and 2004. The conflict resulted in much innocent death and suffering and left scars that will take many years to heal. During this time, the Acehnese had little exposure to the outside world. Education and development were very limited.



The tsunami of December 2004 ended Aceh's guerrilla conflict, inspiring the Acehnese to seek restored peace and more democratic rights. Yet the disaster's traumatic impact and the stag-

gering loss of life were a great blow to the province. Coastal areas were ravaged, families broken and homes destroyed.

Today, as foreign NGOs withdraw, leaving development in the hands of the Acehnese, there is a renewed sense of hope in the province. Aceh's rich natural resources are up for grabs and its people keen for stability, productive employment and strong communities. Nevertheless, it will be some time before the wounds of past conflict and tragedy heal completely.

Culture

As educational opportunities increase, many Acehnese, especially women, are keen to study and to bring about positive social changes in Aceh. Great sensitivity is needed, however, to incorporate new ideas with traditional Acehnese beliefs and culture as the Acehnese are hesitant to receive ideas at odds with their traditional way of life. While outsiders may think this inhibits Aceh's development, for the local people this is part of being Acehnese. Acehnese people

are friendly and interested in the outside world, yet keen not to let outside influences displace their culture and inherited ideals.

Beliefs

"To be Acehnese is to be Muslim." Being Muslim is an important part of Acehnese ethnic identity. The Acehnese are allowed to practice other faiths, but those who do cease to be "truly Acehnese."

Believing God caused the tsunami as punishment for disobedience, some Acehnese have



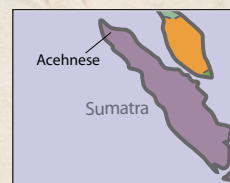
begun to practice a fearful perfectionist form of Islam. They are encouraged by religious leaders who use loudspeakers and educational billboards to urge Muslims to raise their standard of religious commitment. As requested by the people, shariah police also help to uphold the community's commitment to Islam.

Spiritual Darkness

After so many years of conflict, it is not surprising that Aceh is home to great spiritual darkness. The Acehnese regularly turn to dukuns (traditional healers) for help with spiritual and physical health problems. Dukuns are an accessible, cheap and often effective alternative to modern health care, which is not readily available in Aceh and is often too expensive for the Acehnese.

While dukuns lack the authority of religious leaders, many believe it is God who empowers "white" dukuns to heal and to free sufferers from demonic oppression. "Black" dukuns, however, work for the highest bidder and can plague their victims with horrific curses. Demon possession is a well-known occurrence and is usually combated by group Qur'an recitation, while dukuns try to coax the demon out of the host. This method does not always ensure long-term freedom and some Acehnese struggle with demons for many years.

For more information about the Acehnese, visit: www.apeopleloved.com/acehnese



Population: 3.9 million
Location: Sumatra, Indonesia
Languages: Achenese, Bahasa Indonesia

Prayer Points

Pray for Aceh to remain at peace.

Pray for healing and restoration after years of conflict and disaster that have strained family and community life.

Pray that Acehnese leaders would continue to allow Indonesian and international development workers to work in Aceh.

Pray for bridges of trust to be built between the Acehnese and people of other ethnic backgrounds living and working in Aceh. May the latter groups work hard to understand Acehnese culture and values.

Pray for freedom from the powers of darkness that bind so many people in Aceh, at many levels of society.



Pray for a Jesus movement to sweep through the Acehnese turning this "Gateway to Mecca" into Southeast Asia's "Gateway for Christ."