



## SUCCESS STORY

### Acehnese Celebrate Peace

**Outdoor concerts unite thousands of Acehnese in celebration of peace**



Photo: Aceh Peace Concerts

Rafly, Aceh's best-known singer, entertains Acehnese enjoying newfound peace at a USAID-sponsored concert.

***Between 10,000 to 20,000 people attended each concert, celebrating peace through local entertainers, song, and dance.***

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For 30 years, residents of western Indonesia's Aceh province have been afraid to leave their houses at night. Tension between fighters from the Free Aceh Movement and Indonesian security forces was the norm. It was too dangerous for men to work in fields far from villages, so women took over many farming duties. They tended fields by day and hurried home at night. Merchants returned to villages before nightfall and stayed inside their houses with their families. Murders, abductions, torture and disappearances were common. Then, in 2004, an off-shore earthquake created a massive tsunami. Within 20 minutes, homes, schools, businesses, mosques, and villages disappeared under giant waves of water. Men and women suddenly became widows and widowers. Orphaned children were taken in by stunned neighbors. Another kind of trauma had struck Aceh.

As reconstruction efforts began, reconciliation solidified between Free Aceh Movement rebels and the Indonesian government. Miraculously, the two sides began talking about peace — the fragile initial steps taking place in the months before the tsunami. On August 15, 2005, the parties signed a Memorandum of Peace, paving the way for the province's peaceful rehabilitation. The Free Aceh Movement turned in its weapons and the government withdrew many troops.

As part of the reconciliation process, USAID has been helping produce a monthly news magazine, Aceh Magazine, with articles and photographs that celebrate the return of peace. Slogans such as "those who love peace will be loved" and "this peace must be safeguarded" appear on banners and stickers. USAID has also supported 12 peace concerts in 12 districts of Aceh. In all, more than 300,000 Acehnese have attended the concerts, celebrating peace through local entertainers, song, and dance. Sometimes, even through pouring rain, audiences refused to go home and stayed for the concert.

"During the conflict, artists had to go underground," explained Ismael, coordinator of the peace concerts. "Now the artists are disseminating the message. This is important healing for people who have been traumatized. Three hundred artistic groups have become 4000. We were surprised at the whole expansion of art after the conflict. It was there all along."