

Shadia Marhaban heads the Acehnesse Woman's League (LINA) and has long been active in the troubled province's efforts to gain independence from Indonesia. Now that relations between Aceh and

# Shadia Marhaban: Giving Life to Aceh

HUMAN RIGHTS 1

Interview by Francesca Lancini

Jakarta have stabilized, she and her group are hard at work helping women get stable footing after years of war

**A**ceh, the extreme northern province of Indonesia, has a history as troubled as any in the largely destitute Asian subcontinent. Over four decades it has suffered through dictatorship, civil war and the 2004 Christmas tsunami. More recently, it has enjoyed a gradual return to normalcy. Human rights activist Shadia Marhaban, mother of three, divorced three times, has endured her own share of turbulence.

A student activist during the Suharto dictatorship, she later became a leading representative of SIRA (the Aceh Referendum Information Center) and is now chairman of the Acehnesse Women's League (LINA), the largest women's organization in an almost entirely Muslim region.

Her life is her political mission. "It is never easy for a woman managing activism and personal affection," she says, "but I'm not the only Indonesian to have fought for civil rights. Contrary to what many may think, there are many of us."

She has been a journalist, interpreter, and since 1999 a roving ambassador promoting rights in Aceh. In many respects Marhaban's life reads like a thriller. She spoke to Francesca Lanciani.

**Where is your family from and where did you grow up?**

My family is originally of Aceh, but I grew up in Jakarta. In the 1950s and 1960s my father was a politician and newspaper editor. But his paper was too critical of the government. Its offices were closed and he was forced to devote himself to something different. He became a businessman and earned the income necessary to sustain the family. I even spent a portion of my childhood in Cairo, where I learned about different cultures and people: Americans, Arabs, Europeans, people from all over the world. It was there that I learned the values of tolerance and mutual understanding.

**What do you remember about the war between the Indonesia government army and rebel separatists of the Free Aceh Movement? It went on nonstop between 1976 and 2005.**

When I was pregnant with my first child in 1991 I saw several military operations in Aceh directed against the separatists. The situation was extremely difficult. Every time I went to the market, someone spoke of seeing bodies abandoned in the river or the like. I was afraid. I was in Aceh for a year and stayed there until 1993 before returning to Jakarta with my first husband. In Banda Aceh itself the situation was rather quiet, almost normal. But we heard rumors that in



\_Activist Shadia Marhaban.

rural areas (only 20 kilometers from us) people were being killed and abducted. I had been politically active during my university years, but at that time I had to raise a child and couldn't join any movement.

**When did you return to politics?**

In 1995, under Suharto. It was a dark time. We had to meet secretly to discuss what was happening under the dictatorship, of slaughters in Aceh, and how best to let the rest of the world know what was going on. Had we been discovered we would certainly have been arrested and killed. Then, in 1998, the regime fell and reforms began. The judiciary, legislature and executive were all overhauled. My group SIRA (Aceh Referendum Information Center) started to gain steady membership. We were able to organize student meetings. In 1999, we were finally able to organize a demonstration in Banda Aceh. Some 1.5 million people gathered to demand a referendum on the region, which was still at war.

**How did you get the idea?**

We saw what happened in East Timor, where August 30, 1999 an independence

referendum was held and 78.5 backed it. But Indonesian military intervened, unleashing a wave of violence that was brought to bear only by the intervention of international peacekeepers.

We thought the time was right for Aceh to choose between two options: Independence or its full re-absorption into greater Indonesia. I'm still convinced that had the referendum been held we would have won independence. But the central government began torturing, kidnapping, imprisoning and even killing activists, including the heads of SIRA. They were concerned that the rebellion wasn't being generated just by jungle guerrillas but by young people in civil society. These were mostly students I had been assigned to coordinate. In 2000, the Indonesian government and the army tightened its control over Aceh and barred foreign journalists. The province was completely isolated.

**SIRA began growing at about that time?**

Yes. We held conferences throughout the world and opened consulates in several countries with the help of the U.S. Congress and international humanitarian organizations that supported our struggle for liberation. We only had a few people to manage the consulates, but the creation of this network provoked a huge ripple effect.



The Indonesian government wasn't happy, because it was as if they were suddenly faced with an alternative representation of its state. Yet we were nothing more than an inexpensive lobby. It's remarkable that we became so strong.

**In 2003 you sought refuge from the United States, from your second husband. Is that correct?**

Martial law had been imposed in Aceh and I wanted to stay, but I was concerned about the lives of my children. One day police entered my house and sequestered everything. I had no choice but to flee, which I did in May. By then there were some 35,000 Indonesian troops in Aceh, since the Indonesian government had taken a cue from the "Shock and Awe" campaign in Iraq. They were bombing and killing indiscriminately. It didn't matter whether it was civilians or animals. I could have been arrested at any times.

**Then came tsunami and its aftermath, which led to peace discussions. What was your role during the Helsinki negotiations of 2005?**

I was the only woman at the peace negotiations. I had a supporting role among the four Aceh representatives. I thought I'd never be able to go home again, but I did return in early 2006. It was an incredible moment. Things had changed quickly. Despite the destruction caused by the tsunami, people smiled, took their children to school, and went fishing. They returned as best they could to normal life.

\_Thousands of Aceh Party supporters attended a mass rally in April ahead of elections in Banda Aceh.

**But there were still signs of war.**

Most certainly, particularly with regard to the psyche of population. That's among the reasons that the Aceh Women's League (LINA), which I run, directs its focus to women. This is a patriarchal society in which women receive less attention. We try to compensate by helping war veterans to find jobs and rebuild a future. We also have to deal with those who have no education and can't find any way to fit in. So we work on that also. Another one of our missions is to involve women in the regional political process and in post-war reconstruction. To achieve peace we must teach people what peace is, and we're starting by working with women. This is not a feminist group but an organization where women can work with men. Being divided assures us of going nowhere.

**As a woman, you've had an important role in the political life of your country. But what do you think of Sharia (Islamic law), which is in effect in Aceh?**

[Former] President Abdurrahman Wahid introduced Sharia law in 2001 as part of conditions granting the region its autonomy. But most of the women are in fact still fairly open-minded. They can attend the university and drive. They're limited only in terms of how they manage their personal relationship in public. The police monitor them to ensure

they behave “properly,” in accordance with the law. But the people of Aceh are really not that concerned about Sharia. Not now. Their priority is to maintain the peace. I am proud that so far the peace is holding. When you compare our situation to that of other Asian countries that are still at war domestically, including Sri Lanka, Mindanao, Southern Thailand and Kashmir.

**One politician said that parliamentary elections held last April were just the beginning of the peace process. Do you agree?**

No. I believe instead that the elections represented a continuation of the peace process. I admit that I’m concerned about growing problems between national parties and local parties, particularly those that still support the war. In Aceh there are six political parties, three of which are significant and strong. One of them tends to complicate the situation because it seeks to divide the province into two areas, a very unpopular proposal. The real question is whether our local parties will be able to make a difference for the people of Aceh who seek better health services, education, improvements in economic conditions and the implementation of human rights. We’re always concerned that something could go wrong so we’re always working hard. The new administration has to prove to the people that’s it’s capable of ensuring that they lead a normal life.

**To achieve peace, the Free Aceh Movement had to give up its push for the independence of the region. But you’re still involved in the independence question as a member of SIRA, which is a separatist party.**

The sentiment in favor of independence grew in my heart and in the hearts of the Aceh people. It’s still there. But we should not act only with the heart, but with our heads. For the moment the priority should be to improve the lives of our people and improve education. The current government has committed about 30 percent of its budget to education. We send students to Malaysia, Germany and other countries to graduate and to pick up specialized skills they can then bring home and apply. During the war we lost too much time that we’re now absolutely compelled to make up. We must act primarily in support of women, because they have the highest illiteracy rate. I honestly don’t know if the future holds independence. Let’s just say that a door in that direction is still open.

**Why is SIRA is considered to have betrayed GAM, which the political wing of the Free Aceh Movement?**

Both represented grass roots of the separatist movement, but from two different points of view. SIRA represented the younger generation, while GAM represented older people. This is simply a power struggle, but I think that after the



**Italy in Indonesia**

Shadia Marhaban’s Aceh Women League (LINA) is working with the Italian section of the Swiss-based “*Terres Des Hommes*” International Federation in helping some 2,000 women dispossessed by the Aceh conflict regain their social and economic status.

“During the war many women fought and had the same status as men. With the return of peace, however, many of these women have had to readjust to roles within the traditional patriarchal Muslim family. We give training in small business start-ups; we try to give women greater autonomy and a belief in their own leadership skills,” says Bruno Blacks, who heads Indonesia projects for TDH Italy.

The project was launched in November last year following data that emerged from a census of the eight districts within the Indonesian province. For more information see [www.tdhitaly.org](http://www.tdhitaly.org)



Corbis\_K.uwayama

[July presidential] elections the relationship between the two factions will be normalized.

\_Ruins of Banda Aceh, which was devastated by the December 2004 tsunami.

**During the war the military government committed serious human rights violations, including killings, kidnappings, tortures, and rapes. Has the Truth and Reconciliation Board that was created to look into these abuses produced any concrete results?**

The local commission no longer exists. We're now awaiting the creation of a National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation. Peace means justice, and I would hope that such a commission would include ordinary people, not just academics and government officials. Only by including people who saw situation directly can we get to the truth about the murders, disappearances and the other crimes.

**What is politics for you?**

Change things on a daily basis. I'm not interested in fame, but I am interested in making people feel better about themselves, especially the most vulnerable people: children, women, peasants.

**Do you have a political model?**

I'm not inspired by anybody in particular. I do believe in a Social Democratic movement

that fights for equal rights for all citizens.

**The war in Aceh was based on the province's resources. To what extent is the Helsinki deal based on Jakarta's interests in exploiting oil and natural gas, which the peninsula is rich in?**

The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed in Helsinki states that seven percent of revenues earned from these resources goes to the local government in Aceh and 30 percent to the central government in Jakarta. What needs to be more fully examined is just how these percentages are calculated. It's one of the negotiation points being studied carefully. I'd like to think all those involved are doing their best to reach a fair conclusion. I must necessarily be optimistic. The peace process cannot be completed if you continue to insist on past frictions.

**What do you see in the province's future?**

Every day I wake up and I wonder what I can do for Aceh. Every day that's what comes first and foremost.