

Indonesian detainees fight mass deportations

Margaret Rees
1 April 1998

The Malaysian government, backed by Indonesia's Suharto regime, has stepped up its repression and mass deportations of workers fleeing from Indonesia, following protests and riots in its overcrowded detention camps last week.

At least eight Indonesian detainees were killed at Seminyih camp, 40 kilometres from Kuala Lumpur, after resisting deportation. The prisoners had discovered that Malaysian authorities planned a simultaneous operation to empty Seminyih and three other detention centers at 6 a.m. on March 26.

A pitched battle broke out at Seminyih when 1,000 police moved against the immigrants, even though at least 80 children were in the camp. Police met determined resistance, with authorities reporting that inmates armed themselves with iron rods, pieces of wood and stones. Scores of people were injured. At the Machap Umbo detention camp in Malacca state, police used water jets and tear gas against detained workers who fought fiercely for at least 20 minutes, throwing gas canisters back at the police.

In all, authorities used 3,500 police and other personnel to seize and deport 1,495 immigrants from four camps. The prisoners were taken to Lumut and Port Klang in more than 30 police trucks and buses and loaded onto Malaysian and Indonesian vessels.

At Lenggang detention camp in the state of Negeri Sembilan, 247 Indonesian immigrants reportedly escaped on the same day, following riots 10 days earlier when water supplies were cut off. After the mass breakout, police cordoned off roads leading to the camp, and the police air unit, the Federal Reserve Unit and the Special Strike Force combed the area. Authorities claim to have rounded up 127 escapees.

In response to these eruptions, Mahathir's government resumed mass deportations after only a one-day halt. At least 3,000 immigrant workers were deported on March 28 and 29. The government also

intensified its efforts to block the arrival of thousands of impoverished workers, mounting a full-scale military operation, known as "Ops Nyah Bersepadu," along the coastline.

Admiral Tuan Hashim was given command of twenty police boats, four naval vessels, and four airforce and police planes. He declared that refugees would now "have to pass through four barriers to enter the country—aerial surveillance, ships patrolling the deep sea, patrol boats near the coast and the police general action force and the army on land."

Officials claimed that in one week 48 refugee boats had turned back, another 8 had been seized, and 8 more had been sent back to Indonesia. Even according to official reports, many fleeing Indonesian workers and their families have already lost their lives. A Malaysian marine police commander said more than 26 Indonesians had drowned in the straits in recent weeks. Smugglers were stopping their boats short of the coast, forcing their passengers to swim ashore.

Those undertaking these desperate journeys are driven by poverty and hunger. Even the Suharto junta estimates that unemployment and underemployment have doubled to 27 million people in recent months. The state-controlled union federation predicts that the real figure will be 48 million by the end of the year.

Media claims that the Malaysian government has strong public backing for its attacks on the victims of Indonesia's collapse are belied by strident official demands that Malaysians start cooperating and stop employing Indonesian immigrants.

Deputy Home Minister Datuk Ong Ka Ting said in an interview last week that the whole country must change its "mindset" and work with the government to flush out immigrant workers. He complained that surveillance efforts were being undermined, posing a "big threat" to Malaysia. "We have to cut off demand for such workers and we need the cooperation of the

people,” he said.

To whip up support for the government, sections of the Malaysian media are accusing Indonesian and other immigrant workers of importing infectious diseases such as hepatitis B, tuberculosis and AIDS.

Now the government of Prime Minister Mohammed Mathahir is discussing plans to expel all refugees as soon as they arrive, dispensing with any legalities and basic rights. In another move, a police spokesman called for the establishment of a special court so that Indonesians could be deported more quickly.

During a stopover in Kuala Lumpur on his way to an Asia-Europe meeting in London, Suharto’s vice president, B.J. Habibie, endorsed the stepped-up deportations. He said Indonesia understood Malaysia’s actions and would share the cost. The Indonesian navy is preparing to forcibly repatriate refugees, according to the Indonesian ambassador in Malaysia, Muhammed Jacob Dasto.

Both regimes’ brutal responses indicate the type of police-state repression that will be increasingly used to enforce the social devastation unleashed by the Asian economic meltdown. It also demonstrates the lengths to which capitalist governments will go to prevent unwanted workers crossing national boundaries and linking up with their fellow workers in other countries.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact