

Army crackdown halts Indonesian union protest

Peter Symonds
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The Indonesian army deployed at least 25,000 troops in the capital Jakarta this week as members of the Indonesian Labour Welfare Union (SBSI) planned to hold a June 24 rally and march against the Habibie regime.

In one of the heaviest displays of military strength since the demonstrations and riots which forced president Suharto's resignation last month, heavily armed soldiers from the army's strategic reserve were stationed at key points around the city, including road junctions, office blocks and shopping malls.

Army barricades were established on roads leading to the SBSI headquarters, the rallying point for the protesters. According to union officials, troops stopped at least 18 busloads of workers who attempted to join the planned march to the parliament building. Only about 200 people gathered at the union offices and the march was abandoned.

The army mobilisation exposes the democratic pretenses of the new Habibie administration which, like the previous Suharto regime, rests firmly on the Indonesian armed forces. Last week armed forces chief and defence minister General Wiranto met with Habibie and issued a statement warning that the army would take "firm action against various activities that tend towards anarchy".

Just prior to the planned SBSI protest, Major-General Sjaafrie Syamsuddin, the military commander for the Jakarta area, told the *Jakarta Post* newspaper that his troops would crack down on street protests. "Anyone who disrupts security will confront my troops. I have given them orders to warn the protesters first and then cripple them if they have to," he said.

According to a report in the *Straits Times*, the Indonesian regime is planning to pass a new law soon banning "disruptive" political rallies and

demonstrations. The law has been proposed by a team of senior military officers, led by army socio-political chief Lieutenant-General Bambang Yudhoyono, who have been meeting intensively over the last three weeks to decide how to control continuing unrest throughout Indonesia.

The *Far Eastern Economic Review* reported that in recent weeks demonstrations had taken place in at least 50 districts from Sumatra in the west to Nusa Tenggara (the lesser Sunda Islands) near Timor in the east, many of them over disputed landownership and demands for an investigation into the Suharto family's fortunes. Protests and demonstrations have continued in East Timor over demands for a referendum on secession.

A growing number of strikes have broken out in the major industrial areas of Jakarta and Surabaya, Indonesia's second largest city, over wages, conditions and rising prices. In the last week, printers, dockers and workers in the engineering and shoe industries have taken action.

The army crackdown on the SBSI protest reveals fears in ruling circles that such actions will become a focus for the widespread discontent among workers, unemployed and the poor hit hard by widespread retrenchments and soaring prices for basic items such as food and medicines.

The SBSI leadership is just as fearful of the explosive political situation. It has called for a "reconciliation dialogue" with the Habibie government and deliberately limited strikes and protests. SBSI head Muchtar Pakpahan, one of only a handful of political prisoners released from jail last month, scaled down plans for the march in Jakarta from 100,000 to 10,000. The formerly outlawed union body, now sanctioned by the regime, has an estimated membership of half a million.

In a revealing comment to a Reuters reporter, SBSI secretary-general Sunarty complained that the army blockade of the union headquarters threatened the officials' hold over members. "Now we don't know where they have gone and how can we control them and prevent unwanted things happening?" she asked.

The remark underlines the main reason for the release of Pakpahan and the support which the so-called independent union has received in the past from the US administration in particular. The SBSI is being cultivated as a safety valve to ensure that the protests of workers do not develop into a anti-capitalist political movement.

Pakpahan has limited SBSI demands to calls for the convening of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR), a legislative body thoroughly stacked with Suharto appointees and military officers, to choose a transitional government to hold power until national elections are held.

Habibie has already ruled out such an option. He plans to hold onto office until elections next year and a reconstituted MPR is convened at the end of 1999 to choose a new president and vice-president.

The magnitude of the social crisis which is fueling the unrest was revealed in a recent statement by the World Bank predicting that 50 million people would soon live below the absolute poverty level of \$US1 a day.

At least 20 million people are expected to lose their jobs. Those who have jobs still live in dire poverty. Many industrial workers are paid as little as 7,000 rupiah a day -- roughly half the World Bank's poverty line.

As many as 20 percent of Indonesia's poorer children are at serious risk of dropping out of school as a result of falling family incomes and declining government expenditure on public education.

Government public health programs such as TB control and childhood immunisations also face cutbacks. The cost of drugs, vaccines, and contraceptives -- most of which are imported or manufactured from imported materials -- have doubled or trebled since the end of last year.

International money markets have left the value of the rupiah languishing at below 15,000 to the US dollar, fuelling price rises and driving businesses to the wall. As the troops occupied Jakarta streets, Habibie was

meeting International Monetary Fund officials in a bid to finalise an agreement to lift the suspension of the IMF's bailout package.



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