

Looting and land seizures in Indonesia

Mike Head
30 July 1998

Impoverished Indonesian workers and small farmers are looting shops, warehouses and plantations, and seizing landed estates despite warnings that they will be shot by the military. Such defiance is a measure of both the desperate plight of millions of people and widening contempt for the regime now headed by President B.J. Habibie.

Even on government estimates, half the population of more than 200 million will be unable to afford food and other basic needs by the end of the year, and a quarter of the 90 million-strong workforce will be jobless within 12 months. Fuelled by the collapse of the rupiah, inflation is set to reach 100 percent, with prices for foodstuffs, fuel and medicines soaring.

Aid agencies are warning of malnutrition among the young and at least 20 percent of children have dropped out of school because their parents cannot afford to keep them there. In Jakarta, thousands of people daily risk disease and injury, dodging bulldozers to scour a rubbish dump for scraps of food, paper and containers.

Over the past 15 years, young people flooded into the cities to find jobs in or around the cheap labour factories set up by multinationals and their regional associates. Now many are living in squalid slums with no hope of work. Others are returning hungry to crowded rural villages, where vacant arable land no longer exists.

From reports emerging from different parts of the country in recent weeks, thousands in both the cities and the countryside are resorting to looting and property seizures to provide for their families. Large groups of people have raided palm oil, cocoa and coffee plantations, as well as rice and shrimp farms, to steal valuable cash crops. In one incident, near Tangerang, an industrial centre just west of Jakarta, thousands of villagers pillaged a shrimp pond, taunting and throwing mud at policemen, who fired warning shots.

In some cases, plantation owners have blamed criminal gangs rather than hungry villagers for nighttime raids on their crops. But, either way, such looting was rare under Suharto's dictatorship and reflects a breakup of the

political, economic and social order maintained through repression for decades.

Elsewhere, farmers and labourers have occupied land taken from them during the 32-year rule of General Suharto. In one case, several hundred peasants took over a section of Suharto's 750-hectare cattle ranch near Bogor, 100 kilometres south of Jakarta. They have begun to plant maize. In the same area, villagers seized a golf course and turned part of it into a market garden for vegetables.

According to one report, the farmers who moved into Suharto's Tri-S Tapos ranch were initially beaten back by security guards and then had their seedlings ripped out by ranch workers. However, they persisted with the help of students and activists and are determined to stay.

A spokesman, Juhari, the coordinator of Indonesian Farmers Solidarity, said the villagers had their land illegally confiscated by Suharto just before the 1972 harvest. Without consultation or compensation, Suharto sent in bulldozers. The farmers had themselves seized the land after the fall of the Dutch colonial administration but felt time and hard work had made it theirs.

This rural turmoil comes on top of repeated looting and arson attacks on shops, factories and property in the cities, often those owned by Suharto associates and ethnic Chinese businesses. In Surabaya, Indonesia's second largest city, hundreds of Chinese merchants fled the country by boat last week after their shops and warehouses were looted and burned.

On the weekend of July 18-19, Habibie opened a market in central Jakarta selling cheap cooking oil, one of the government's attempts to provide subsidised rice, sugar and oil to contain the unrest. Within an hour, crowds looted the entire supply.

Following that incident, Habibie's defence minister, armed forces chief General Wiranto, warned of a crackdown, declaring that the property of others had to be respected, even by the hungry. 'It's true we are living in the midst of an economic crisis, but this does not mean we may loot,' he said in comments carried by the official Antara news agency and television stations on July 19. 'I

need to warn all people looting cannot be tolerated even if it is done to save oneself from starvation.'

Asked about the seizure of Suharto's ranch, Wiranto, who guaranteed the ex-president's safety when Suharto resigned on May 21, replied that Suharto held legal title to the land.

On the same day, prominent businessman Sofyan Wanandi warned of a new risk to foreign and Indonesian-Chinese investment from the wave of robberies. 'Without law and order, there is no business certainty here. The government has to be resolute that this looting has to end,' he said. Wanandi heads the Gemala Group, one of the country's largest conglomerates.

Two days later, Indonesia's police chief, Lieutenant General Roesmanhadi, issued an even tougher threat of violence against looters, authorising his officers to carry live ammunition and to use it. 'My men have been told they may shoot so long as it is done according to the procedure and with the knowledge of their commander,' he said. The procedure would entail the firing of three warning shots first.

Roesmanhadi called a media conference after alleged comments by Food and Horticulture Minister Ahad Muflih Saefuddin that food looters could be tolerated if they took no more than 5 percent of any stocks. Saefuddin later denied the statement, declaring: 'Looting, even if it is 0.001 percent, cannot be tolerated. And it is an enemy of the nation, the people, the army and all ministries.'

Sections of the military regime are alleged to have facilitated or fomented attacks on Chinese-owned businesses in the looting and torching that preceded Suharto's fall. The evidence points to efforts to divert the pent-up anger and desperation of ordinary people against ethnic Chinese, and away from the regime and the private profit system itself. Chinese-Indonesian entrepreneurs own two-thirds of the country's 300 biggest companies and 80 percent of the corporate assets, often in partnerships with Suharto family members. Yet the vast majority of the ethnic Chinese are small shopkeepers, petty traders and workers.

Habibie has personally whipped up anti-Chinese sentiment, declaring in interviews that the country does not need the wealthy business owners who have fled the country, taking up to \$100 billion with them. His government includes representatives of so-called native Indonesian or *pribumi* business owners who are looking to displace their departed rivals.

In the meantime, political parties have proliferated, largely expressing the interests of various layers within

ruling circles that are seeking to create new mechanisms to contain the social and political meltdown. Among other developments, the regime's own Golkar party held a conference to try to distance itself from the Suharto clan; Islamic leader Amien Rais announced the formation of a Nation's Mandate Party; several Chinese business-backed parties emerged; and former Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) leader Megawati Sukarnoputri held a rally in Jakarta.

Between 10,000 and 25,000 people converged on Megawati's home to mark the second anniversary of her ouster from the PDI leadership by the regime. Authorities banned a proposed rally at a sports stadium and mobilised 19,000 extra troops and police in nearby streets. Megawati criticised the Habibie government's ban, declaring: 'I have been a very good citizen, I have followed the law.' The daughter of former president Sukarno, she is restaking her claim to the PDI leadership in order to create a viable capitalist alternative to the discredited Golkar formation.

See Also:

World Bank warns of disaster in Indonesia

[22 July 1998]

Officials discuss global economic crisis

Not a 'new economic paradigm' but old disorders

[14 July 1998]

As poverty and unemployment grow

Indonesian regime fires on workers and protesters

[11 July 1998]



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact