

Mass graves begin to reveal scale of atrocities in Indonesia

Thousands killed in Aceh

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Mass graves were unearthed last week in the Aceh region, on the northern tip of Sumatra, pointing to the murder of thousands of people by the Indonesian military regime during the late 1980s and early 1990s and also last year. In the wake of General Suharto's resignation last May, hundreds of widows and orphans have come forward with evidence of atrocities, forcing the government's own National Commission on Human Rights to intervene.

Distraught widows and torture victims looked on last Friday as four Commission investigators dug up three sets of bones from remote sites containing the remains of dozens of alleged Islamic separatists and others killed by troops.

On returning to Jakarta, Baharuddin Lopa, the Commission's secretary-general, who led the official team, said the group counted 781 'violent' deaths during military operations between 1989 and 1998. The mission also recorded at least 163 disappearances, 368 cases of torture and 102 of rape. Nine mass graves had been identified, he said, noting that the total was provisional.

Lopa estimated that, based on the finding of 12 bodies in a single pit in Bukit Seuntang, in North Aceh district, the eight graves in that area alone could yield the remains of more than 100 bodies. Other observers said the total for all the graves could be 5,000 victims.

Evidence of military torture and executions was clear. Skeletons were found with holes in their skulls, probably from bullet wounds, forensic doctors said. One, a male, was blindfolded, dressed only in underwear, with his arms bound behind his back by an army belt.

The Commission's visit followed a parliamentary delegation that heard testimony from victims last month at sessions attended by some 1,000 people, mostly widows and orphans of disappeared men. On July 29, the Achenese daily newspaper, *Serambi Indonesia*, said an official report had found evidence of 1,679 corpses and victims, with 359 cases reported on one day that week.

What has been uncovered so far is only a fraction of the

abductions and murders implemented by the military dictatorship over the past decade, with the full knowledge and support of Western governments. According to a spokesman for an Aceh non-government forum, an estimated 39,000 or more people have disappeared since 1989. As early as 1992, international human rights organisations such as Asia Watch and Amnesty reported that mass killings were taking place.

In a series of moves to placate the hostility of local people, the military regime now headed by President BJ Habibie has announced the withdrawal of 1,000 combat troops from the province by August 31 and declared it will compensate victims. The first contingent of 250 troops left the industrial city of Lhokseumawe on August 20, as a crowd of 500 people cheered, shouted abuse and shook their fists. However, regional newspapers have reported that some 6,000 to 12,000 troops will remain.

Aceh, formally a 'semi-autonomous province' of Indonesia, has been under military occupation since 1980, when it was declared a military operational zone, giving the armed forces powers to conduct house-to-house searches, roadblocks, identity checks and body searches. The most ferocious crimes were committed from 1989 to 1992 in response to guerilla resistance mounted by a separatist movement, Free Aceh.

Opposition to the Jakarta regime was fuelled by the gap between the enormous natural wealth extracted from the area and the poverty of most of the population. Following the discovery of oil and gas along the eastern seaboard, Aceh contributed 30 percent of Indonesia's oil and gas exports by the end of the 1980s. Also rich in timber and some plantation crops, Aceh accounted for 11 percent of the country's total exports. Yet a 1993 survey by the government's statistics bureau conceded that some 40 percent of Aceh's villages could still be classified as 'poor'.

By plundering the region's resources in partnership with an array of multinationals, the Suharto dictatorship proved to be

no less rapacious and oppressive than the Dutch colonial forces against whom the Acehese people fought a 40-year war of resistance from 1873, with continued eruptions of fighting until 1942. The Aceh War was the longest ever fought by the Dutch, costing the colonial forces tens of thousands of lives. Together with the eastern island of Bali, Aceh was the last area of the so-called East Indies subjugated by the Dutch.

Strategically located at the top of the Malacca Straits, Aceh has a long history of prosperity and conflict with colonial and central authority. As a trading centre, it became the first point of Islamic influence in the region during the eighth century. An Islamic kingdom was established by the year 804. In 1292, Marco Polo on his voyage from China to Persia reported the existence of six busy trading ports, including Samudera (now Lhokseumawe).

In 1511 the Portuguese seized the nearby strategic port of Malacca, pushing Asian and Arabic traders to develop the port of Aceh. It dominated trade and politics in northern Sumatra and the entire region, reaching its zenith between 1610 and 1640. Then the arrival of the Dutch and British began an arbitrary colonial carve-up of the territories now known as Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia.

Under the London Treaty of 1824, the British ceded the Dutch control over British possessions in Sumatra in return for their withdrawal of all claims on Singapore and surrender of enterprises in India. Initially, the British insisted that the Dutch could not attack Aceh, a stipulation that was withdrawn in 1871. For the next 70 years Dutch rule alternated with fresh rebellions.

Following the Japanese occupation and surrender during World War II, political and social turmoil erupted in Aceh, as it did across the archipelago. In Aceh the traditional petty landed nobles (*uleebalang*) who had served the Dutch and the Japanese were ousted by Islamic religious teachers (*ulama*). This layer channelled the unrest into hostility to Javanese economic and political domination, and sought an Islamic rather than a secular state.

In 1953 they mounted a rebellion against the Sukarno administration, which was not fully suppressed by the central government forces nor completely resolved by the creation of a separate province of Aceh in 1956. After the Suharto-led military coup of 1965, the anti-communist *ulama* were mostly integrated into the New Order regime. Their children, given educational privileges, tended to become the technocrats and bureaucrats of a petrochemical-dominated local urban economy, while the working class and rural population languished in poverty.

These conditions provided fertile ground for the emergence of the secessionist Aceh Merdeka or Free Aceh movement, which took up a short-lived armed struggle

against the Suharto regime from 1989. Over the ensuing three years, the military junta deployed 12,000 troops against some 750 guerillas. The rebellion was brutally suppressed at the cost of thousands of civilian lives.

Throughout this period, the Suharto regime restricted outside access to the area, while the capitalist powers, including the US and Australia, turned a blind eye to the reports of atrocities. Having helped instal the military dictatorship in the coup and mass killings across Indonesia in 1965-66, they continued to back Suharto as the most stable instrument for retaining a tight grip over the Indonesian masses.

In Aceh, as in East Timor and West Papua (Irian Jaya) the Suharto junta, no less than the Sukarno government, proved incapable of economically and politically unifying the archipelago. Fundamentally subservient to global capital, the Indonesian capitalist class is organically unable to carry through the democratic tasks of liberation from imperialist oppression.

Now that the Indonesian economy is disintegrating and the Suharto regime is in crisis, the Western media and governments have chosen to publicise the mass graves in Aceh to a certain extent. The Habibie regime itself has issued an apology for the past suffering. The regime, the local elite and various international powers are primarily interested in control over the oil, gas and timber wealth of Aceh.

For the working people of Aceh and the region as a whole, one conclusion that must be drawn from a bitter history is that no section of the capitalist class, whether based in Aceh, Jakarta or the global markets, can or will meet the aspirations of the masses for democratic rights, social equality and freedom from national oppression.

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