

Nine civilians killed by Indonesian troops in Aceh

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Indonesian security forces fired into crowds of protesters in the northern Sumatran province of Aceh on Sunday, killing nine civilians and wounding many more. The troops moved to crush an outpouring of discontent against the regime in Jakarta, which saw an angry crowd of 3,000 burn down a police station and government buildings in the industrial town of Lhokseumawe, 1,000 miles northwest of the Indonesian capital.

A local hospital reported that all of the civilian victims died from gunshot wounds. Eyewitnesses reported that the security forces fired directly into the crowd.

The military repression was the culmination of several days of confrontations between security forces and dissidents in Aceh, a province on the northern tip of Sumatra with a long history of struggle for independence, first against Dutch colonial rule, and then against the Indonesian central government. On December 30 seven off-duty soldiers were killed in the eastern Acehnese town of Lhok Nibung. President B.J. Habibie blamed the deaths on the Free Aceh separatist movement and dispatched hundreds of reinforcement troops to Aceh from Medan, the capital of North Sumatra.

On Saturday, January 2 security forces in Lhokseumawe carried out a police sweep in an attempt to capture Free Aceh leader Ahmad Kandang. The separatist leader escaped, but 132 people were arrested in the crackdown. The eruption of mass protest that ended in the slaughter of nine civilians followed on Sunday. On Monday armed forces commander General Wiranto ordered additional troops to Aceh.

Formally, Aceh is a semi-autonomous province of Indonesia. But it 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 repression reached its height in 1989-92, in response to guerrilla actions mounted by Free Aceh.

In the months since the fall of Suharto, human rights groups and residents of Aceh have accused the military of carrying out rape, torture and summary executions over many years. In August mass graves were unearthed in the province, pointing to the murder of thousands of people by the regime in Jakarta since the late 1980s. Suharto's successor Habibie issued an apology for the past suffering of the people and promised to withdraw his military forces from Aceh, a pledge which was never carried out.

Aceh was the scene of the most bloody confrontation between protesters and the military, but clashes occurred in many other parts of the country as well over the past week. In Surabaya on Saturday 90 people were arrested after a crowd of 800 set fire to a police station, police cars and motorbikes. The crowd also torched three shops in the upper-class residential complex of Citra Raya. The riot erupted after a man died in police custody. Surabaya, located 400 miles east of Jakarta, is the second largest city in Indonesia, with a population of 3 million.

On Sunday riots broke out in Sukabumi, about 50 miles south of Surabaya. Hundreds of youth gathered in the central square and destroyed ornamental flowerbeds and shops in the area. In Bandung, the capital of West Java province, riot police were called in to stop rioters who smashed the windows of five banks and hurled rocks through shop windows and at passing motorists. Also in West Java, two factories were attacked by villagers angered by the environmental damage caused by the plants.

In Medan, thousands stormed a red-light district to

demand its closure, and police fired rubber bullets Monday at protesting farmers who had occupied a state-run plantation. On the island of Sulawesi, the town of Poso was hit by days of unrest, culminating in riots Monday involving some 8,000 people.

In Jakarta a bomb explosion wrecked the ground floor of a vacant shop and damaged several nearby buildings.

The *Jakarta Post* said in an editorial, "Indonesia is witnessing an appalling increase in violence, cruelty and anger. Why has this situation become so explosive? The painful reality is that the majority of our people are suffering from economic hardships. Their pain is beyond words."

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