

Ambon rioting leaves 100 dead in Indonesia

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Rioting by Christian and Muslim gangs on the Indonesian island of Ambon over the last week has left at least 100 people dead and 140 injured according to local aid groups. Thousands of riot police and troops have been deployed to the islands of Ambon, Sanana and Seram in the Maluku province of Indonesia, located about 2,300 kilometres east of Jakarta. Major General Amir Sembiring last Saturday ordered troops to shoot on sight anyone carrying weapons and refusing to surrender them.

The violence was sparked by an incident on January 19 between people from the Muslim village of Batumerah and the neighboring Christian-dominated village of Mardika. Clashes spread rapidly to other parts of the island and to nearby islands as rival gangs armed with machetes and knives roamed the streets, established roadblocks, stopped and searched vehicles and set fire to vehicles and buildings.

In Ambon city, the provincial capital of Maluku, both Christian churches and mosques were burnt down along with hundreds of houses, banks, shops, stalls, vehicles and government buildings. Around 20,000 people were forced to flee their homes and take refuge in military headquarters, houses of worship and other facilities.

On Sanana Island, about 300 kilometres northwest of Ambon, two people burned to death. A nighttime curfew was imposed after the burning down of two churches and houses owned by local Christians. The attack was an angry response to the burning of a mosque in Ambon.

Many of the victims on Ambon, a predominantly Christian island, are reportedly Muslims. In one incident, five Muslim men were hacked to death and their bodies burnt after their vehicle was stopped at a Christian roadblock. In an attack by Muslim gangs on the village of Telagakodok, as many as 40 Christians may have been killed. A number of houses and buildings were burnt down.

The official death toll, which only includes corpses brought to hospitals, has now reached 60. Many more bodies may have been dumped in the sea or rivers, or burnt. "The number of victims may possibly increase, as the apparatus are still tracking and looking for possible victims in other riot locations," the Maluku Regional Police Chief Colonel Karyono pointed out. According to the Ambon main hospital, the injuries were the result of stabbing, beating, and being trapped in burning buildings.

Behind the widespread riots in many parts of Indonesia are the tensions produced by the economic collapse in Indonesia. A recent World Bank report attempted to minimise the social impact of Indonesia's economic and financial crisis, saying poverty levels had risen from 11 percent to only 14-16 percent. But according to a statement by Social Affairs Minister Justika Baharsjah in mid-January, the number of Indonesians living in poverty is 130 million, or more than 60 percent of the total population of 206 million.

In a *Reuters* interview, Daniel Sparingga, an Airlangga University lecturer, said, "We are heading for a very bad situation. Now you don't need any political or ideological reason to make the people angry and turn destructive. The people are suffering from the economic crisis and they feel there is no light at the end of the tunnel. The violence in part reflects the people's broken hopes that the reform era will change their situation, but their demands have not been met. They [the politicians] operate in an atmosphere of hostility and distrust, jockeying for power among themselves."

On Ambon tensions have been further heightened by the murder of a number of Ambonese men by Muslim mobs in central Jakarta in mid-November. But in a number of cases, on Ambon and elsewhere, there is evidence that the social crisis is being exploited by elements of the military, religious leaders and right-wing groups to deliberately foment racial and religious

conflict.

Opposition leader Amien Rais, chairman of the Islamic National Mandate Party (PAN), claimed there were "forces" trying to cancel the national elections by provoking incidents and thus open the opportunity for the military to take over. Rais accused supporters of former president Suharto and his family of instigating the violence.

The Habibie regime has used the rioting on Ambon to form closer ties with Rais, Megawati Sukarnoputri and other opposition leaders. General Wiranto, the Defence Minister and Armed Forces (ABRI) chief, met with opposition figures in Jakarta last Monday. The following day Megawati called for an end to the fighting and backed a military investigation of the incidents.

The close ties between these so-called opposition figures and the present military-backed regime was shown most graphically by the decision of opposition leader Abdurrahman Wahid, head of the largest Islamic group Nahdatul Ulama (NU), to celebrate the end of the fasting period with Suharto and his children, Tutut, Bambang, Titiek, Tommy and Mamiiek, at the Suharto's residence. He called on Suharto to apologise for the sorrow that he has caused to the Indonesian masses.

At the same time, the military commanders are using the rioting as the pretext for building up their own forces. Training is about to begin of a 12,000-strong civilian militia in 14 military centres across Jakarta. The recruits, aged between 18 and 45, will be paid 100,000 rupiah for two weeks training and 200,000 rupiah a month thereafter--a wage higher than many Indonesian workers. The militia, armed with shields and sharpened bamboo sticks, will be used against rioters and, as occurred last November in Jakarta, student demonstrators.

The recent riots in Maluku province are not isolated incidents. At least seven other outbreaks took place in Cirebon, a city on the north coast of West Java. Two people were injured, three houses burned down and 100 people are seeking refuge at a local mosque.

In Tegal, on the north coast of Central Java, the house of the village chief was burned down. In Pemalang, about 30 kilometres from Tegal, a village hall, a healthcare centre, a mosque and an elementary school were destroyed in a clash between two villages over a rumours that a man had been tortured to death.

Four residents of Parit Setia village, in West Kalimantan about 900 kilometres north of Jakarta, were killed and one other seriously injured in a clash with a neighbouring village of Rambaian. The incident was apparently triggered by an attack on a suspected thief who was caught by Parit Setia villagers.

Another fight broke out in Tabang district of North Sulawesi, leaving at least six people injured, nine houses burned down and another 18 houses badly damaged.

In Bojonegoro, hundreds of pedicab drivers attacked a local police station in search of a policeman who allegedly beat one of their colleagues. They burned a police vehicle and besieged the police station, blocking the main highway with their pedicabs.



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