

More than 200 dead and 30,000 homeless

Tensions high on Indonesian island of Ambon

Peter Symonds
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Tensions remain high on the Indonesian island of Ambon, after two months of clashes between armed Christian and Muslim gangs that have left at least 200 dead and many more injured, and devastated large sections of Ambon City and other areas.

More than 30,000 people out of the total population of about 350,000 are homeless and living in various forms of temporary accommodation. In addition, tens of thousands of immigrants have fled to Sulawesi. At least 3,400 houses, 700 shops and 85 schools have been destroyed along with markets, commercial buildings, government offices, vehicles, churches and mosques.

A report from the World Food Program warned of major food shortages on Ambon. Food imports have dropped by 75 percent as ship owners have been fearful of docking and the distribution system on Ambon has been severely disrupted. Traders have stopped storing food in case their shops are burnt down.

Ambon City was placed under military control on March 11 after pitched battles between thousands of armed Christians and Muslims resulted in 10 deaths and scores of injuries the previous day. Indonesian Justice Minister Muladi claimed that the decision to take power out of the hands of the police did not mean a state of emergency on the island but the army quickly established roadblocks and checkpoints to strip weapons from civilians. The military has since banned gatherings of more than three people on main streets and announced searches of houses, places of worship, and refugee shelters.

In Jakarta, Defence Minister General Wiranto indicated that the Armed Forces (ABRI) were considering the reestablishment of military commands responsible for policing not only Ambon but other areas as well. Just prior to the establishment of military control, 3,000 fresh troops were flown into Ambon, including combat troops from the marines and the elite Kostrad Strategic Command.

The military has utilised the situation to strengthen its role and build up specialist units, including a new 3,300-strong anti-riot force. Announced on March 1, it is made up of army, police, navy, airforce and intelligence agency personnel. Such units will be used in the future not only against rioters but also against political protests and strikes by workers.

US-based Human Rights Watch recently released a report on Ambon, which indicated that the security forces had exacerbated the already volatile situation. "From February 14 onwards, most of the deaths took place when security forces, whose numbers by March had risen to 5,000 on an island with a population of about 350,000, began implementing shoot-on-sight orders. There is no question that an extremely grave security threat existed, and the security forces were initially accused by both sides of standing by and doing nothing as the different sides were attacking each other. When they finally did intervene, they shot lead bullets rather than attempting to use any methods of non-lethal crowd control."

Only last Tuesday, troops fired into the air to prevent Muslim gangs from marching into a Christian area of Ambon City. The crowd of a 100 or so had gathered near the main Al-Fatah mosque after a fire broke out in a number of houses in a Muslim section of the city. The mosque has been sheltering up to 3,750 Muslim refugees who have lost their homes.

The clashes are the product of the stoking up of longstanding religious and racial tensions in the midst of the economic crisis over the last year and the deterioration of living conditions throughout the archipelago. Ambon is part of the Maluku province, also known as the Spice Islands, which had a long association with the previous Dutch colonial rulers. After independence, its largely Christian ruling elites attempted to form a breakaway Republic of the South Moluccas (RMS), which was quickly crushed by Indonesian troops in 1950. Thousands of Ambonese Christians fled to the Netherlands, where an

estimated 50,000 still reside. Among Muslims, there are still bitter memories of villages razed to the ground by RMS forces.

In the 1970s, the influx of mainly Muslim immigrants from Sulawesi--ethnic Bugis, Butonese and Makassarese--accelerated quite sharply. Bugis began to settle in Ambon City, gaining a hold in trading and transportation and exercising a degree of political clout through tight-knit associations. In the 1990s, the Suharto regime began to appoint Muslims over Christians to civil service jobs as part of its campaign nationally to create a political base for itself among Islamic groups.

The island was deeply divided into a mosaic of separate villages and neighbourhoods (kampungs) based on religion and ethnicity. Sidney Jones, Asia director of Human Rights Watch, wrote in her report: "Communal relations, then, were not good even before the violence erupted, and everyone we talked to in Ambon spoke of regularly recurring fights between Muslim and Christian kampungs. The neighbourhoods seemed to live in a state of barely repressed hostility, but the frequent fights were quickly settled."

The immediate origins of the present conflict can be traced back to mid-November when, in the wake of huge anti-government demonstrations in Jakarta, religious animosities were deliberately stirred up. On November 22, a dispute in the capital between Muslims and Ambonese guards at a gambling den flared into a riot as truckloads of Muslim youth arrived in the area. At least 14 people were killed and a number of churches burnt down.

By December, tensions on Ambon itself had reached breaking point. Suspicions were such that both the Muslim and Christian communities had established "posko" (communication posts)--phone networks based at mosques and churches to alert and mobilise armed supporters. On January 19, a brawl between a Christian public transport driver and a Muslim youth erupted into full-scale fighting.

The Human Rights Watch report considered several theories that the rioting was deliberately instigated. It noted that after the violence in Jakarta in November, members from two rival Ambonese gangs returned to Ambon. Both had close connections to Suharto family members, fuelling rumours that the former president and elements of the military were instigating the violence to undermine the Habibie cabinet. Among Muslims, accusations were made that former Republic of the South Moluccas members had provoked the fighting.

Regardless of whether Suharto was directly involved, the clashes on Ambon have been utilised by right-wing Islamic organisations to whip up religious hostilities and demand that Habibie take tougher action to defend Muslims on the island. On March 7, an estimated 100,000 Muslim students and their supporters took part in a demonstration in Jakarta calling for a holy war against Christians and for the resignation of Defence Minister Wiranto. The military replaced the head of police on Ambon, following accusations that the Ambonese police were supporting the Christians in the fighting.

For decades, the Indonesian capitalist class, like the previous Dutch colonialists, has manipulated and stirred up religious and racial tensions to divide the oppressed masses and maintain their own precarious position. In the absence of a progressive socialist movement to unify working people around the struggle for their own social interests, these divisions are being exploited once again in conditions of deepening poverty and unemployment.

Over the past week, fierce clashes between local Malays, backed by native Dayaks, and immigrants from the island of Madura have erupted in West Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo) resulting in at least 80 deaths. Gangs of armed thugs have paraded the severed heads of their victims in the streets. According to a report in the *Kompas* newspaper, at least 1,000 houses have been burnt and 3,300 Madurese evacuated to the major towns of Singakawang and Pontianak. More than 1,900 troops have been sent to the area. In 1997, more than 300 people died in protracted fighting between Dayaks and Madurese immigrants.



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