

Indonesia: Racial killings in Kalimantan fostered by government policy

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In response to the demands of ethnic leaders in West Kalimantan, Indonesian authorities are preparing to relocate thousands of Madurese settlers caught up in bitter racial clashes in the province. Fighting over the last month has left scores dead and many more homeless.

The latest violence on Borneo erupted on March 15 following the escalation of petty incidents between Madurese, ethnic Malays and, later, indigenous Dayak tribesmen. Groups of armed Malays and Dayaks attacked settlements established by migrants from the island of Madura near East Java, setting fire to houses and killing residents, sometimes in the most brutal fashion.

In the West Kalimantan district of Sambas, the violence took on the character of a systematic pogrom aimed at driving out the Madurese completely. According to official reports, around 200 people have been killed in recent clashes. But the figure is likely to be much higher. In the aftermath of attacks by Dayaks on Madurese in 1997, officials stated the death toll was 300, but independent reports put the figure as high as 3,000.

Reports early last week indicated that more than 20,000 Madurese refugees were in holding centres in or around the provincial capital of Pontianak, and another 7,000 still were sheltering in four camps in the Sambas district. Many refugees had little more than the clothes they were wearing when they fled the violence. Facilities in the makeshift holding centres were cramped and rudimentary.

The violence temporarily subsided after the military sent in extra troops. The Armed Forces (ABRI) has seized on racial clashes in Kalimantan and Maluku to strengthen its position through the establishment of Military Command Regions (Kodams) in these areas.

Kodams extend a system of military administration right down to the village level, and may be doubled from the present number of 10.

Malay, Dayak and ethnic Chinese leaders have been demanding that the government expel Madurese settlers from West Kalimantan province. Both Transmigration Minister Hendopriyono and West Kalimantan Governor Aspar Aswin have made statements indicating that a wholesale expulsion is being planned despite the protests of Madurese leaders that they do not want to return to Madura. Hendopriyono commented that resettlement would not necessarily be to Madura: "It can be around Kalimantan or we will find islands that are feasible for habitation."

Local Malay, Dayak and Chinese spokesmen blame "socio-cultural incompatibilities" for the violence. But a closer examination makes clear that the Madurese are being made the scapegoat for social and economic problems created by government and corporate policies over the last three decades, which have been greatly exacerbated by the economic collapse in Indonesia.

West Kalimantan has the highest population density of the four Indonesian provinces on the island of Borneo. Madurese settlers, some of whom came as early as the 1920s, account for about 8 percent of the 800,000 people in the Sambas district, and 2 percent of West Kalimantan's overall population of three million people. Many were either "voluntary" or official transmigrants--part of the government's program to relocate millions of people from the heavily populated Indonesian islands of Java, Bali and Madura to outlying areas.

The Suharto regime, backed by the World Bank to the tune of more than \$US570 million, claimed that the transmigration program was aimed at improving the living standards of poor and landless peasants. Officials

pointed to the fact that more than half of Indonesia's population of over 200 million live on Java, Bali and Madura where the average population density is 800 per square kilometre as compared to only 17 in Kalimantan.

The real purposes of transmigration have been to ease the explosive social conditions in the most overpopulated areas of Indonesia while providing a ready source of cheap labour for less developed regions such as Kalimantan and West Papua. While the bulk of so-called voluntary transmigrants are drawn from landless and impoverished families, others including beggars, vagrants and becak (trishaw) drivers have been rounded up off the streets of the major Javan cities and dispatched to transmigration sites.

In some cases, the victims of natural disasters such as those caught in the flooding in Central Java in 1993 or the earthquake on the island of Flores in 1992 have been pushed into transmigration schemes. Other transmigrants have been coerced into moving to make way for development projects such as the Kedung Ombo Dam in Central Java or industrial zones.

Although many transmigrants were provided with assistance to begin farming, their plots of land were often unsuitable to their customary methods of farming. Transmigrants have either been forced to leave their land completely or to supplement their meagre incomes by turning to part-time low-paid work and even prostitution.

An article in the May/June 1998 issue of the *World Watch* magazine explained: "These poorly planned resettlement sites, more often than not, have turned out to be sites of 'environmental calamities of biblical proportions,' writes [Bruce] Rich. Using traditional agricultural methods on 'some of the poorest soils on earth,' transmigrants have been beset by paltry crop yields, flooding, and plagues of insects, rats, and wild boars. According to Rich, 'in wetland and swamp areas 40 to 50 percent of the settlers abandoned the sites'."

The establishment of transmigration sites inevitably created tensions with local people. In Kalimantan, the indigenous Dayaks have traditionally relied on slash-and-burn agriculture, small plots of cash crops and foraging in their forests in order to survive. The establishment of timber concessions and rubber and palm oil plantations as well as transmigration projects, often with little or no compensation to indigenous

tribes, has resulted in the clearing of millions of hectares of forest. According to one estimate, more than 2.5 million indigenous people were displaced by logging and other activities in the 1970s alone.

The Madurese, the chief target for racial vilification by local politicians, form one of the poorest layers of the transmigrants in Kalimantan. In urban areas, most Madurese work as becak drivers, day labourers or stevedores. In the countryside, they are mostly small rice farmers. Some have been born and lived all their lives in Kalimantan, never even visiting Madura.

Madurese are accused of being aggressive, criminals, and untrustworthy. A local Malay parliamentarian Ismet Hifni commented: "The Madurese are an ignorant people and very hard to live with." The real responsibility for the uprooting of indigenous populations, widespread poverty and the associated social ills lies with the profit system, the Indonesian regime and entrepreneurs such as timber baron and Suharto crony Bob Hasan who have made their fortunes by plundering the natural resources of Kalimantan and other areas.



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