

Indonesian military shoots 31 people dead in Aceh

Peter Symonds
6 May 1999

Indonesian troops shot dead as many as 31 people on Monday in the province of Aceh, on the northern tip of the island of Sumatra. The soldiers fired automatic weapons into a crowd of thousands of villagers gathered near the industrial town of Kreung Geukueh to protest at the heavy-handed actions of the military over the weekend. Some people were shot in the back as they attempted to flee.

The confrontation developed after the military claimed that a soldier from a local Guided Missile Detachment had been abducted during a meeting of the Aceh Merdeka or Free Aceh movement over the weekend. Local villagers claimed that at least one person was beaten up by troops during an army sweep of the surrounding area. Several thousand unarmed people, including women and children, gathered to express their anger and were fired upon.

According to one teenage eyewitness, "The soldiers chased the crowds and fired at them from behind. They even fired inside a house where villagers who were trying to escape had run." The armed forces stated that 18 had died and 81 were injured, but officials put the figure higher. T.F. Sani, a member of a team set up by the local government to investigate military atrocities, said as many as 31 people were dead and 102 injured, including 57 who were still in hospital.

Defence Minister and Armed Forces Chief General Wiranto described the shootings as regrettable and promised an investigation, but immediately justified the army's actions as "self-defence". The local army commander Major General Rachman Gaffar made the far-fetched claim that the villagers were sympathisers of the Free Aceh organisation who had been attempting to invade the missile base. He warned that the Indonesian Armed Forces (ABRI) would "take up arms" against the separatists. Hundreds of police and

troops have been patrolling the streets of Kreung Geukueh and parts of the nearby city of Lhokseumawe.

The army killings are part of a renewed crackdown by the military aimed at intimidating the Achenese population, which has a long history of struggle against the Dutch colonialists and also against the Indonesian government. From 1980 until last year, Aceh was proclaimed a military operations zone, giving the army broad powers of search and detention. Last year mass graves uncovered in the province indicated that the military had murdered thousands of people in a bid to stamp out the Free Aceh movement.

Over the last year, the Habibie regime has attempted to refurbish its image in order to placate local people. Last August the military ostentatiously pulled out hundreds of troops from the province and revised the status of the area. In March, President Habibie visited the area and publicly pledged to punish those guilty of past atrocities. "I have instructed security personnel to immediately stop all violence and bloodshed," he told a crowd. Last month, however, three people were killed in Lhokseumawe when troops fired into a crowd of about 10,000.

The latest killings are clearly intended to intimidate separatist supporters not only in Aceh but in other areas, including the central Sumatran province of Riau and Irian Jaya (West Papua). The Habibie regime has ruled out extending the autonomy package prepared under UN auspices for East Timor to other regions of Indonesia. Only last Sunday, Wiranto, speaking to a gathering in the North Sulawesi, rejected any loosening of the Indonesian constitutional arrangements to provide for a federation and thus greater powers for provincial governments.

Agitation for more autonomy or independence has recently surfaced in Riau, which accounts for more than

60 percent of Indonesia's oil production. In late April, 5,000 students demonstrated outside the offices of the Caltex company and have begun circulating questionnaires asking residents whether they support autonomy, independence or unity with neighbouring Singapore or Malaysia. Local leaders are demanding a higher proportion of the oil revenues, only 1 or 2 percent of which is returned to Riau by the central government.

The Habibie government is determined to hold onto Riau and other resource-rich areas including Aceh, which has huge gas and oil reserves, and Irian Jaya, where the major US-controlled Freeport copper mine is located. As the latest shootings in Aceh indicate, it is prepared to use the most ruthless methods in order to do so. Significantly, Kreung Geukueh itself is adjacent to the rich Arun gas field.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact