

A military massacre in Aceh

Mike Head
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In what witnesses described as a massacre, Indonesian troops shot dead up to 60 people and wounded 10 last Friday in two villages in the western part of Aceh, the oil-rich region on the northern tip of Sumatra. It was the worst military killing this year in what has become an escalating campaign to suppress the secessionist Free Aceh movement.

Military officials claimed that the victims in the first village were Aceh Merdeka (Free Aceh) fighters killed in a surprise dawn attack on their base. But witnesses and human rights groups said troops had executed unarmed villagers.

Iskander Muda legal aid foundation director Yakub Hamzah said the villagers were asked to gather for an identity check on a field in the Beutong Ateuh area of West Aceh, about 350 kilometres west of the provincial capital, Banda Aceh. The troops then opened fire. "There was no resistance at all and apparently the shooting was planned in the first place," Hamzah told reporters. He said troops had come to the area from two directions, including about 300 from West Aceh and 17 truckloads from Central Aceh.

One witness, quoted by Reuters, said the victims were gunned down when soldiers and police ordered them out of a house as they searched for a secessionist leader. "They commanded that the men inside the house come out and open their shirts," the witness said. "The people who were outside were shot." The bodies were thrown into an abandoned well. "Before the troops left, they said: 'We will come back'," the witness said.

A local military commander, Syarifudin Tippe, told journalists that the victims were killed during fighting with soldiers and police. Yet no soldiers or police were reported injured. The authorities said they had killed a rebel leader, Tengku Bataqiah, but an Aceh Merdeka spokesman said Tengku Bataqiah was a local religious leader.

The Jakarta-based Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence said local people had reported killings in a second village. Munir, a Commission

spokesman, said the area was under tight military control, hampering efforts to contact witnesses or examine the scene. "The military are trying to hunt [rebel] leaders in the area," he said.

The killings are part of an emerging pattern. According to a statement issued by 17 non-government organisations, the Habibie regime and the Indonesian military have launched a "state of terror" in Aceh. They said that military sweeps of areas dominated by secessionist supporters had forced up to 120,000 people to flee their homes and seek shelter in camps along the northern coast. Troops were running amok through villages, stealing animals, burning houses and sometimes raping women. Displaced people were often living in poor conditions, with food and medicines in short supply. Children were dying from malnutrition and lack of medical care.

There is no doubt that General Wiranto, who is both the Indonesian armed forces chief and the Defence Minister, and President B. J. Habibie have personally ordered the military offensive. Habibie's adviser Dewi Fortuna Anwar told the *Far Eastern Economic Review* last week: "While we appreciate what the human-rights groups are saying, when it comes to a really determined separatist rebellion, there has to be a military pacification effort. They [the military] want to cut down the insurgency first, then hand over to the civilians to deliver a political solution."

As for the "political solution," Dewi was equally blunt. "Independence for Aceh is non-negotiable. It's part of Indonesia and that's that."

Wiranto told a recent parliamentary hearing that investigations of military abuses in Aceh could open the floodgates to similar grievances left over from Suharto's rule. That in turn could further undermine military morale and impede its ability to deal with future disturbances.

Indonesia's Co-ordinating Minister for Political Affairs, former armed forces chief Feisal Tanjung, last week introduced legislation empowering the Indonesian president to declare martial law. Tanjung said Aceh and Irian Jaya (West Papua) were two provinces where it was

likely to be invoked. Also last week, the government sent 600 more marines to Aceh, boosting the number of troops to about 10,000.

Last year, the Habibie administration initially sought to defuse the long-running demand for secession by making a show of withdrawing troops from the province. It also allowed human rights bodies to open some of the previously secret mass graves where up to 5,000 victims of the military's last "pacification effort"—from the early 1980s to the early 1990s—were buried. Habibie visited Aceh in March and promised that the army's abuses would be investigated and the perpetrators prosecuted. The promises went unfulfilled.

These manoeuvres only encouraged secessionist sentiment. Departing troops were jeered and stoned. Rallies featuring pro-independence banners, flags and weapons became commonplace. A student-led movement for a referendum on Aceh's political status gathered widespread support.

In late April, disturbed by this movement and a rising demand for separation in other provinces, such as East Timor, Irian Jaya and Riau (central Sumatra), the Habibie government pushed through autonomy legislation promising decentralisation of power over the next two years and giving resource-rich provinces a greater share of their revenue.

But just two weeks later, on May 3, troops fired on a crowd in the industrial city of Lhokseumawe in north-eastern Aceh, killing at least 45 people. Since then, two battalions of locally-based territorial troops, backed by 1,700 paramilitary reinforcements from Jakarta, have mounted offensive operations. These have included reprisals against ambushes, assassinations and arson attacks that have disrupted traffic between Banda Aceh and the North Sumatran capital of Medan. In one of the worst incidents, guerillas killed five soldiers and wounded 20 in a July 19 ambush on a military convoy east of Dsigli, the Pidie district capital.

The exiled Aceh Merdeka leader, Hasan di Tiro, who lives in Sweden, has claimed that his movement now has nearly 5,000 armed fighters. Acehnese historian Isa Sulaiman has estimated 2,000. Official sources in Jakarta and Thailand have said that Aceh Merdeka is receiving smuggled weapons from Cambodia. The movement is reportedly backed financially by Acehnese business owners in Thailand and Malaysia.

Expressing the interests of regional investors, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* is effectively urging the Indonesian regime to cut a deal with the Acehnese

leadership. In its latest edition, the magazine said the Indonesian government "has yet to absorb" the lesson learned by the Dutch colonial authorities, who gave up trying to suppress the Acehnese after World War II as the result of "long and bloody experience".

The Hong Kong-based magazine gave prominence to an interview with di Tiro, who dismissed Indonesia's autonomy legislation as irrelevant and said: "There'll be no solution until and unless the Javanese occupation army leaves Aceh."

Five businessmen and academics from Indonesia and a delegation from Aceh Merdeka were due to open talks in the Swedish capital, Stockholm, on July 27. One source said the mission was the initiative of Habibie in consultation with Aceh's Governor, Syamsuddin Mahmud, but Indonesian and Swedish diplomats denied any knowledge of the discussions.

The renewed conflict in Aceh over the past six months helps explain why the military has been so reluctant to allow next month's scheduled autonomy ballot in East Timor. It fears that if the UN-supervised referendum produces a vote for secession it could trigger the breakup of Indonesia.

That concern was underlined by the Indonesian newspaper *Kompas* on July 20. It quoted Abdullah Syafi'i, a Merdeka Aceh representative in the district of Pidie, as declaring that Aceh would soon have its independence. "The Republic of Indonesia will disintegrate like the Soviet Union," he was reported as saying.

Clearly, the formation of a UN-backed administration in East Timor will encourage the forces seeking to establish a separate mini-state in Aceh. Economically, the stakes are even higher in Aceh than in East Timor. Aceh contributes 30 percent of Indonesia's oil and gas exports, as well as a high level of timber and plantation crops.



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