

Indonesian military cracks down in Ambon, Batam and Aceh

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5 August 1999

Fresh outbreaks of fighting on the Indonesian islands of Ambon and Batam as well as the activities of the separatist movement in Aceh have been met by the increasingly aggressive use of force by the Indonesian regime and the armed forces.

In response to fierce clashes last week between Muslim and Christian groups in Ambon City in the eastern Maluku Province, the military deployed 800 marines, with another battalion on standby, and issued shoot-on-sight orders to its troops. Maluku Military Commander Brigadier General Max Tamaella said the security forces would “act firmly” against rioters, including those attempting to set buildings and vehicles alight.

The latest violence in Ambon City was reportedly triggered by the torching of several Muslim homes in the town of Poka over the previous weekend. By July 28, fighting had spread to five different parts of the town as groups armed with machetes, spears, bows and arrows, and even crude bombs clashed with one another. Incidents were also reported in villages just outside the city.

The clashes have resulted in another 30,000 refugees in Ambon City on top of the 40,000 displaced persons already in the capital and another 35,000 on Tual Island. Governor Saleh Latuconsina warned that the fighting would affect basic supplies of rice, other foodstuffs and medicines. “We do not know until when we can maintain an adequate food supply,” he said. About 3,000 people have fled to the South Sulawesi.

According to police, 31 people died in the riots and 116 were severely injured, including two security personnel. Another 60 sustained minor injuries. The death toll could rise as other bodies are discovered. Already a number of bodies with slash wounds have already been found dumped in various parts of the city.

People have questioned 35 people about their involvement in the rioting.

Maluku police chief Colonel Bugis Saman reported that 350 homes had been burned down last week but local journalists estimate that the figure was at least 600. Bugis also said that 106 shops, mostly belonging to ethnic Chinese, had been incinerated, in addition to the more than 100 burned since January. On August 2, an elementary school in the Poka low-income residential area was set on fire—the fourth to be torched in the city since the beginning of the year.

The conflict between the dominant Christian community and Muslim groups, particularly immigrants from Sulawesi, has its roots in rivalries over civil service jobs, political posts and business activities and has been greatly exacerbated by the country's economic and financial breakdown. The religious-based fighting in Maluku Province has claimed the lives of more than 300 people since January.

Both sides have traded accusations of bias and tensions remain high. The Roman Catholic dioceses in Ambon last week issued a “motion of no confidence” in Indonesian President B.J. Habibie, claiming that security personnel had supported Muslim mobs.

Maluku is one area in which the Indonesian military (TNI) has re-established territorial military commands or Kodams, which previously formed a key base of support for the Suharto regime. The military commands operated as a virtual parallel government with extensive intelligence activities and considerable powers. “In the past, territorial commands played a central role and provided the military with various springboards to control local politics,” Marzuki Darusman, National Commission on Human Rights chairman, commented recently.

TNI Commander and Defence Minister General Wiranto has defended the re-establishment of military commands in order to “maintain the country's defence, security and unity”. He said that the new commands set up in troubled areas such as Maluku and in Aceh, in northern Sumatra, were “exceptions” because a military presence was “clearly needed”. But the setting up of military commands underscores the fact that the Indonesian regime still rests heavily on the armed forces and relies on the security forces to forcibly suppress social unrest and separatist movements for which it has no other solution. New commands have been established in Maluku, Sumatra including Aceh, Nusa Tenggara and Kalimantan.

In Batam, the chief security officer Major General Eric Watulo also issued shoot-on-site orders following ethnic clashes last week, which resulted in the deaths of at least 18 people. The military dispatched some 2,000 troops from the army and navy to buttress local security forces.

The population of Batam, an island close to Singapore, is predominantly migrant factory workers who settled there after the area was developed as an industrial zone in the 1970s. The island also has a lucrative tourist industry based on visitors from nearby Singapore. The clashes reportedly broke out when members of the Batak community, originally from North Sumatra, attacked a district inhabited mainly by people from the eastern island of Flores.

National and local authorities attempted to play down the conflict, which was apparently over the control of local bus operations. But more than 40 people were seriously injured, 600 have fled their homes and 40 houses were torched as well as cars and motorcycles. Shops, schools and businesses were closed by the fighting.

In Aceh, the military is preparing to launch a full-scale offensive against the separatist Free Aceh movement. “The (rebel) group will be terminated soon through the Sadar Rencong Operation II which will involve 7,000 members of the security forces,” Aceh police chief Colonel Bachrumsyah told the press on Monday. He said 2,000 troops had just arrived and had to be put in place before the plan was put into action. Bachrumsyah said the operation would target 200 “armed civilians” and their hideouts.

The disproportionate use of force to crush

comparatively few armed Free Aceh militants is an indication of the widespread hostility to the military in areas of the province. Since May more than 200 people have been killed, including soldiers, and hundreds of buildings have been burnt down. Many of those shot by the military have had no direct connection to the separatist movement and their deaths, intended to intimidate the local population, have fueled anti-government sentiment.

A widespread strike was called throughout the area for yesterday and today to protest against the military violence. The strike organisers called on Tuesday for employees in essential services to remain at their posts but have called on other workers and shopkeepers to join the stoppages. Armed police and troops have been going from door-to-door warning shopkeepers and stall holders against supporting the strike.



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