

Racial killings in Borneo: a symptom of deep-seated social tensions

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Gangs of indigenous Dayaks have butchered hundreds of people over the last week in the Indonesian province of Central Kalimantan in a racially-motivated killing spree aimed at driving settlers from the island of Madura out of the Borneo region.

The violence erupted in Sampit on February 18 when a mob attacked a transmigrant settlement at Pelalangan on the outskirts of the river town. Five Madurese were killed, provoking retaliation the following day, which in turn rapidly escalated into systematic attacks on settlers in Sampit and surrounding villages.

Local officials have confirmed that 270 have died but Indonesia's official news agency Antara, based on its own sources, has put the toll at around 400. A Dayak leader Christopel Hutte was cited in an Associated Press report as saying that his men had killed more than 1,000 Madurese and would continue until all of the settlers had been driven from the province.

Such has been the ferocity of the attacks by Dayak thugs armed with machetes, guns and homemade weapons that few people survived. At present, the number of injured is put at only a few dozen. In some cases the heads of the victims were severed and either carted off as trophies or paraded around the streets on sticks. Thousands of houses belonging to the transmigrants have been burnt down.

Reports indicate that between 15,000 and 30,000 people have fled for their lives and are living in makeshift conditions near army camps and police stations. Two Indonesian navy ships picked up an estimated 4,000 refugees on February 25 after local ferry operators cancelled services. A number of settlers are also hiding out in the jungle.

According to a TV report, four refugees including two children have already died of sickness and hunger and supplies of food and water for the refugees were running out fast. Yesterday, more than a week after the killings broke out, the first relief aid—14 tonnes of food, medicine

and blankets—was flown into the province. Coordinating security and political affairs minister Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who was on hand to meet the single Hercules transport plane, announced that more supplies would arrive by ship.

Last weekend the violence spread to the provincial capital of Palangkaraya, 220km east of Sampit. Gangs of armed Dayaks roamed the streets, establishing roadblocks and looting the homes and shops of Madurese before setting them on fire. Many of the settlers had already fled.

For days the police and the military took no action to defend the Madurese. “They have not been seen patrolling the streets,” a local official told the press. “They have not been ordered to disarm those carrying spears, chopping knives and other traditional sharp instruments.”

A distraught refugee Suriya Fauzi told reporters: “My two children are dead. They cut their heads off. They slaughtered my husband and dragged his body through the streets. The police and army did nothing. They let this happen.” Additional police and troops have since been sent to the area, including four companies of soldiers from neighbouring East Kalimantan province and riot police.

President Abdurrahman Wahid has been criticised for failing to cut short his trip to the Middle East in order to deal with the situation in Kalimantan. Wahid is already in a tenuous position following his censure in the DPR, the lower house of parliament, on February 1 over his alleged involvement in two corruption scandals—setting in motion a process that could lead to his impeachment.

His political opponents have now seized upon the bloodletting in Borneo. Both the DPR chairman Akbar Tandjung, and upper house chairman Amien Rais called on the government to enforce a state of civil emergency in Central Kalimantan. Tandjung who heads Golkar, the ruling party of the Suharto era, said Wahid should be giving firm orders to the military to prevent arson and violence. Soetardjo Soerjogoeritno, a member of

Megawati's Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle, called for troops and police to be issued with orders to “shoot-on-sight”.

Wahid responded to the criticisms with a statement from Egypt calling for special forces troops to be dispatched to the area. Since then 650 troops from the army's elite Strategic Command (Kostrad) have been flown into Kalimantan for deployment in Palangkaraya and the coastal city of Pangkalanbun. As in the case of the ethnic fighting in the Malukus, the military commanders are using the violence in Kalimantan to strengthen their own position through the establishment of Military Command Regions (Kodams)—a system of military administration that reaches down to the village level.

Indonesia's transmigration program

The police have now arrested more than 80 people, including several men accused of “masterminding” the initial attack on Madurese settlers on February 18. National Police Chief General Suroyo Bimantoro alleged that two local officials, bitter over the loss of their jobs, paid 20 million rupiah (\$US2,000) to provoke the riot that began the violence. Whatever the immediate trigger for the racial violence, the scope and rapidity with which it spread indicates there are more fundamental underlying reasons for the sharp ethnic tensions.

The Madurese first arrived in Kalimantan in the 1920s and 1930s, but the majority of settlers came under the Indonesian government program of transmigration that involved dispersing millions of the urban and rural poor from the heavily populated islands of Java, Bali and Madura to the outer islands. The program, which provided little assistance to the settlers and largely ignored the needs of the indigenous people, created tensions not only in Kalimantan but also in West Papua, the Malukus and other areas.

Transmigration began in the 1950s but was accelerated after Suharto seized power in the 1965-66 military coup as a means of dissipating the frustrations produced by endemic poverty and lack of land in Indonesia's main population centers. More than nine million people, or 8 percent of Indonesia's population, were shifted under the program over four decades. Central Kalimantan, with a population of just 1.5 million, is the only one of four Kalimantan provinces where Dayaks are still a majority.

Dayak leaders blame the supposed insensitivity of the Madurese to local customs and culture for the strife. M. Usop, presidium head of the Central Kalimantan Region and Dayak Community Consultation League, told the *Jakarta Post*: “If the migrants cannot adjust to local

values, then it is better that they voluntarily leave.” While cultural differences exist—the Dayaks are mainly Christians and animists, whereas the Madurese are Muslims—the real reasons for the breakup of traditional Dayak society lie in government policy and the operation of the profit system.

Under the guise of “dragging the Dayaks out of the Stone Age,” Suharto put an end to the shifting “slash-and-burn” cultivation that had been the base of traditional Dayak society. Large tracts of Kalimantan were opened up to exploitation by plantation and logging companies, many of whose owners, like timber magnate Bob Hasan, had close connections to the Suharto family. Dayaks were increasingly forced to live on the edge of the towns and came into conflict with the Madurese settlers, who were often as poor as themselves, over government jobs and small businesses.

In the wake of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, local ethnic leaders fanned hostilities as a means of diverting attention from their own inability to provide solutions to the mounting social crisis. Like the transmigrants from Sulawesi in the Malukus and ethnic Chinese in Java and other parts of Indonesia, the Madurese in Kalimantan were made scapegoats for the lack of jobs and rising levels of poverty.

In 1997, and again in 1999, several hundred people, according to official accounts, died in attacks by Dayaks on Madurese settlers in the neighbouring province of West Kalimantan. A number of observers put the actual death toll in each case in the thousands rather than hundreds. Two years after the 1999 pogrom in West Kalimantan there are still between 53,000 and 67,000 refugees in camps and other accommodation in the provincial capital of Pontianak and other areas.

Neither Wahid nor any of the other Indonesian leaders are capable of addressing, let alone resolving, the underlying social problems. As a result, like the Suharto dictatorship, the government is relying on the security forces and increasingly repressive measures to impose its rule and, in areas like Kalimantan and the Malukus, stave off a complete social breakdown.



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