

Megawati apologises but Indonesian army repression continues in Aceh

Peter Symonds
29 August 2001

One of the clearest indications of the direction of the new Indonesian administration of President Megawati Sukarnoputri is the ongoing military repression underway in the north Sumatran province of Aceh. An estimated 30,000 heavily armed soldiers and police, including elite special forces units, are continuing an offensive against the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM).

In her first speech to the nation as Indonesian President on August 16, Megawati Sukarnoputri was at pains to stress her commitment to democratic rights and to civilian control over the security forces. In particular, she offered “deep apologies to our brothers [in Aceh and West Papua] who have long suffered as a result of inappropriate national policies”.

At the same time, however, Megawati insisted that neither province would be permitted to follow East Timor’s example and break away from Indonesia. She urged people in Aceh and West Papua to give up their rebellions and “help build a new Indonesia”. The only way that successive regimes in Jakarta have been able to prevent the rise of separatist sentiment, however, is with the jackboot of the military.

On the same day that Megawati made her speech, 48 bodies were unearthed in a mass grave in the village of Llong in western Aceh. According to an army spokesman, the badly decomposed bodies have not been identified nor has a cause of death been ascertained. A GAM spokesman denied accusations by the military that GAM was responsible. “The bodies were civilians abducted and executed by the Indonesian military,” he told *Reuters*.

An estimated 6,000 people have died in the conflict over the last decade including around 1,000 since the armed forces (TNI) escalated its offensive against the separatists in April. The hollow character of

Megawati’s “apology” and her proposals for negotiations and limited regional autonomy, are highlighted by the fact that she and sections of the military top brass were highly critical of former president Abdurrahman Wahid’s so-called soft approach to separatism.

Under pressure from his military and civilian critics, Wahid signed a presidential instruction in April stating that attempts at dialogue with “the armed separatists” had failed and “a more comprehensive approach” was necessary. Megawati was appointed to preside over a new body composed of 15 cabinet members, military and army commanders, the head of the national intelligence agency, the governor of Aceh and other local officials to implement a new security offensive—the “Operation for the Restoration of Security and Upholding the Law”.

The operation was directed by the national mobile police brigade (Brimob) commander Yusuf Manggabarani, along with Brigadier General Zamroni, a former deputy commander in the notorious army special forces (Kopassus). Zamroni was in charge of more than 700 Kopassus troops who had received special anti-guerrilla training in West Java.

According to a report released this month by the US-based Human Rights Watch, “The new troops embarked on a systematic effort to target suspected GAM strongholds and headquarters, with many claims by local organisations of civilians killed in the process... Between the first week of June and mid-July, some 150 people had been confirmed dead by the Indonesian Red Cross, and 800 homes had been burned to the ground. When one of Indonesia’s most respected human rights organisations, KontraS, tried to conduct a fact-finding mission in Central [Aceh] from July 7-19 its members were stopped by Indonesian security forces

and two of them detained and tortured.”

Human Rights Watch detailed other evidence of extensive military repression in Aceh since the beginning of the year.

* Referring to the prevalence of extra-judicial killings, the report stated: “By mid-2001, so many killings were taking place in Aceh of people suspected of belonging to GAM that it was difficult to keep an accurate tally. In some of the highest profile killings, such as the March 29, 2001 murders of Tgk. Kamal, a religious leader from South Aceh, Suprin Sulaiman, a human rights lawyer, and Amiruddin, their driver, Indonesian security forces were widely assumed to be responsible on the basis of circumstantial evidence, but in numerous other cases, there was direct eyewitness testimony pointing to government troops.”

* The organisation cited a case of the collective punishment at the hands of the military in February. GAM forces entered the town of Idi Rayeuk, burned down the local police barracks and jail, and bombed the police station. “When Indonesian forces arrived, however, a major battle ensued, in the course of which an estimated 17 civilians were killed. The joint force of Indonesian military and police, using armoured personnel carriers and three helicopters then proceeded to burn the centre of the town to the ground, and also torched six surrounding villages. As of early June, the town was still in ruins, and no economy activity had resumed. Thousands of people were displaced, with estimates ranging from 6,000 to over 9,000.”

* The report also pointed out that basic democratic rights were routinely violated. “In May 2001, Indonesian police were moving to restrict legitimate exercise of the rights of freedom of expression, assembly and association, targetting not only Acehese political activists in Aceh but also Acehese based in Jakarta. Increasingly, they made use of the so-called ‘spreading hatred’ clauses of the Indonesian criminal code, a favourite tool of Suharto-era police against government critics, that criminalise speech or publications that are deemed to incite or disseminate hatred or hostility against the government.”

Local Acehese leaders reacted to Megawati’s apology last week with scepticism and outright opposition. University lecturer Husaini Ibrahim commented: “The Acehese do not trust the government any more because they have continually

been cheated.” GAM spokesman Amri Abdul Wahab told the *Jakarta Post*: “The killing of Acehese has continued until now, even as I’m talking to you, two days after Megawati apologised for the last time.” He pointed out that former TNI chief General Wiranto had also apologised in 1998 and withdrew regular army troops from the province, “only to send them back in different clothes”.

For its part, GAM offers no progressive alternative for Acehese people. Formed in 1976, the guerrilla outfit appealed to sections of the local business and Islamic ruling elites by calling for the imposition of Islamic sharia law and denouncing Jakarta for taking the lion’s share of revenue from the province’s large gas and oil reserves. Severe military repression under the Suharto dictatorship only strengthened the local support for GAM. The reactionary character of its separatist program is shown most clearly by its terror attacks on non-Acehese, particularly transmigrants from Java, which have forced tens of thousands to flee.

Megawati is due to visit Aceh for a “dialogue” following her tour of South East Asian countries. She has already signed a special autonomy law giving the provincial government more power over the judicial and education system, including the selective implementation of the sharia law. The proposal will also substantially increase proportion of oil and gas revenues flowing to the province.

But as well as offering a few carrots, the new administration is determined to wield the stick against any opposition in Aceh. Megawati warned yesterday that the government would take “tough action” if GAM did not renounce its demand for a separate Aceh. One of her supporters in the military top brass, Lieutenant General Ryamizard Ryacudu, chief of the army strategic reserve (Kostad), was even blunter in comments last Friday, saying: “In any country in the world, a rebel movement would be annihilated.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact