

# Indonesian military about to launch a major offensive in Aceh

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13 May 2003

The Indonesian military (TNI) is poised to launch an all-out offensive against the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) after the rebels yesterday ignored a government deadline to formally abandon their demand for independence and begin handing in weapons.

Indonesia's chief security minister Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono told the press: "Up to now, what has been stated by GAM, officially or unofficially did not answer what the Indonesian government wanted. In the next several days, President [Megawati Sukarnoputri] will take the official decision in a Presidential decree marking the start of integrated [military] operations."

The peace deal signed last December between Jakarta and GAM to end 27 years of fighting is now in tatters. The agreement stipulated that the military was to withdraw to barracks and the police elite mobile brigade (Brimob) to return to everyday policing. GAM had to renounce its demands for independence and accept special autonomy for the province instead. Its weapons were to be placed under the supervision of the Henry Dunant Centre—the agreement's Geneva-based facilitator.

Neither side has started to demilitarise—a process that was due to begin in February. A series of attacks on international monitors in March and April compelled them to withdraw to the provincial capital. Attempts began in early April to convene a meeting of the government and GAM representatives to salvage the ceasefire, but stalled.

When GAM delegates asked for a two-day delay, after a meeting was finally set for April 25 in Geneva, Jakarta rejected the call. On April 28, after an emergency cabinet meeting, the Indonesian government issued its ultimatum and set the two-week deadline that expired yesterday.

In a particularly provocative move, police last Friday arrested four senior GAM officials who were part of the Joint Security Committee (JSC) set up to monitor the ceasefire agreement. The police alleged that the four were

suspects in a series of bombings. While the GAM officials were released on Sunday, the arrests further complicated last-ditch international attempts to defuse the situation.

The TNI has been preparing for a huge offensive for weeks, if not months. A report issued by the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) on Friday declared: "The Indonesian military is not using the phrase 'shock and awe,' but the stream of reports on the number of troops, tanks, and weapons being prepared for Aceh is designed to have the same effect."

The police mobile brigade has already gone back to combat mode and 4,000 troop reinforcements have been sent to the war-torn province, including 2,000 officers from the joint military-police rapid reaction strike force (PPRC). Another 6,350 Army, navy and air force troops are expected to arrive today, to reinforce the 35,000 troops and police already stationed in northern Sumatra.

In another sign of what is to come, TNI chief General Endriartono Sutarto has replaced Aceh Military Commander Major General Djali Yusuf, an Acehnese, with his chief of staff, Brigadier General Endang Suwarya. According to the *Jakarta Post*, Yusuf was considered "too weak" to confront GAM and was replaced by a tougher commander. The ICG report cited Yusuf as boasting that GAM would be broken within six months.

The GAM leadership has issued a call for all its fighters to return to their bases and has threatened to target oil and gas facilities in Aceh if hostilities recommence.

Acehnese civilians have started fleeing their homes and villages fearing imminent war. Social Affairs Minister Bachtiar Chamsyah said on Friday that the government expected between 100,000 and 200,000 Acehnese could be displaced by any fighting. About 50 international peace monitors, mainly from the Philippines and Thailand, left Aceh yesterday.

Prior to last December's ceasefire agreement, sections

of the TNI leadership had been pressing Megawati to give the green light for the type of operation which is now imminent. The military see the huge offensive in Aceh as a means of clawing back some of the power and influence which it lost following the downfall of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998.

The generals backed Megawati in the protracted impeachment process that culminated in the removal of Abdurrahman Wahid as president in 2001. One of the central issues for the military was Megawati's opposition to Wahid's attempts to appease local elites in Aceh and also Papua by offering concessions and a greater share of resource revenues. But, while Megawati took a tougher stance against GAM, she was also under international pressure to negotiate an end to the conflict.

For the military, the offensive in Aceh is an opportunity to bolster its commercial operations, both legal and illegal, in the resource-rich province. The TNI earns revenue by providing security guards to the US-owned Exxon Mobil which operates the Arun gasfield in Aceh. The military has also been widely accused of involvement in arms running, people smuggling, drugs, illegal logging and extortion rackets.

Any protracted operation in Aceh will also strengthen the military's case for retaining elements of its much-criticised territorial function. Under the Suharto dictatorship, the army maintained an iron grip on every aspect of life through the appointment of officers to administrative posts at the provincial, regency and village level. Now many of these posts are elected, thus weakening the military's political power.

In Aceh, an estimated 10,000 people, including many civilians, were killed as the military, under Suharto, used the most ruthless methods to attempt to stamp out GAM and its supporters. The offensive about to be launched, one of the largest military operations in Indonesia's history, will be every bit as brutal.



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