

Indonesia launches “shock and awe” military offensive in Aceh

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22 May 2003

Exactly five years after the fall of military strongman Suharto, the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) have unleashed a military offensive that recalls the worst atrocities of the dictatorship. Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri gave the green light on Monday for the TNI to carry out its own massive “shock and awe” operation aimed at destroying the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and terrorising the local population in northern Sumatra.

Like the US-led invasion of Iraq, Indonesia’s generals aim to crush GAM through overwhelming military superiority. More than 30,000 troops have been massed in the region backed by 23 naval vessels, warplanes, tanks, armoured vehicles and artillery. Another 13,000 police, including heavily-armed Brimob paramilitary units, are involved in the operation against an estimated 5,000 poorly-armed GAM guerrilla fighters.

At a briefing in Aceh’s capital of Banda Aceh on Tuesday, TNI chief General Endriatono Sutarto exhorted his officers to hunt down and wipe out the GAM rebels. “If they continue to be stubborn and raise arms, and continue to cause suffering to the people, then your sole duty is to exterminate them.” Army Chief General Ryamizard Ryacudu chillingly told the media that it should concentrate on the military’s right to maintain Indonesia’s territorial integrity rather than on “religion, human rights and democracy”.

The meaning of these statements is all too clear from the TNI’s brutal record in Aceh under the Suharto dictatorship. More than 12,000 people, many of them civilians, died during the military’s efforts from the mid-1970s to destroy GAM fighters. In the decade prior to his ousting in 1998, Suharto declared Aceh to be a Military Operations Area and poured thousands of troops into the province. Thousands of civilians were raped, tortured or summarily executed in these notorious counter-insurgency operations.

The current offensive will, if anything, be more ruthless. For the military top brass, who have promised a quick victory, it provides the opportunity to put their stamp on political affairs as the “defenders of the nation”. The operation is aimed at sending a message throughout the archipelago that the same methods will be used against other separatist groups or indeed any opposition. For Megawati, it provides the means to stir up and exploit nationalist sentiment in the run up to presidential elections due next year.

Unlike Iraq, however, the TNI is not fighting a regular army or operating in open desert. While GAM is lightly armed, it is experienced in guerrilla warfare and has demonstrated that it commands considerable local sympathy. To “exterminate” GAM requires not only hunting down and killing groups of guerrilla fighters and destroying their bases, but cutting off their support by terrorising local villages and towns. This modus operandi is already evident in the first three days of the offensive.

The operation began on Monday with a massive display of force. Three OV-10 Bronco attack aircraft used air-to-ground missiles to strafe what was described as a suspected GAM stronghold. Hundreds of paratroopers landed at an airfield near Banda Aceh and a large-scale amphibious

landing took place near the city of Lhokseumawe. The purpose of these manoeuvres was not, as spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Firdaus Kormano explained, to kill large numbers of rebels. “We just wanted to give some shock therapy to GAM, to make them mentally and psychologically afraid of what the future holds.”

“What the future holds” is most clearly indicated by the torching of nearly 200 schools over the last three days. While the military blames GAM for the arson attacks, everything points to a coordinated campaign organised by the military as part of plans to uproot the entire local population. The burnt-down schools were concentrated in the rebel strongholds of Pidie and Bireuen where such actions, if carried out by GAM, would only alienate their local support.

Australian academic Damien Kingsbury told ABC radio, based on sources inside Aceh, that not just schools were being burnt but houses and villages as well. “The history of GAM in Aceh has been they haven’t done this. If you look at the history, the form of the TNI in places like East Timor, and indeed in Aceh in the past, they have a track record of burning schools and doing things like this. There’s suddenly a huge influx of the Indonesian military into Aceh and we see this pattern being repeated.”

A first-hand report in the British-based *Guardian* newspaper quoted a witness to the torching of a primary school in the Kroeng Baro village. The woman, who was too terrified to give her name, said: “If they see my name in the paper they will kill me. Especially because I think the perpetrators were [government] soldiers from the type of camouflage uniforms they were wearing.” The article also reported that large areas of paddy fields near Bireuen had been flooded, destroying rice crops.

Such measures have only one purpose: to terrorise the local population and drive them from their homes. The military tactics are completely in line with what has been described as the “humanitarian” component of the “integrated operation”. To “protect” civilians in the war zone, the government plans to forcibly herd them into camps under military guard.

Minister of Social Affairs Bachtiar Chamsyah announced on Monday that his officials were preparing 82 temporary camps near major towns and cities for up to 200,000 people. “We are waiting for an order from the military administration should they want to comb a certain area in searches for rebels, we will move the local people from their homes.”

Mustafi Glanggang, chief of the Bireuen regency where the first relocation is planned, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the people could not refuse to leave. “It won’t happen that people won’t want to go. Their position is very weak. If the [TNI] tells them to go they will move as nobody will be able to protect them,” he said.

Army spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Yani Basuki confirmed that the plan would go ahead and that soldiers would be used to guard the camps. He refused to say whether camp residents would be free to come and go as they wished. So far supplies for a planned influx of up to 10,000 people at Bireuen are woefully inadequate: five tents, 180 boxes of instant noodles and several hundred sleeping mats.

The military has been granted sweeping powers throughout Aceh. In authorising the offensive on Monday, Megawati also issued a presidential decree placing the province under martial law, initially for six months. The decree enables the military to set up road blocks, impose curfews, control the movement of people and goods into and out of the province, arrest and detain people without charge for up to 40 days and control communications and media.

Taking another cue from the US invasion of Iraq, the TNI has announced tough measures to censor the media, including plans to “embed” journalists with military units. Aceh’s military commander Major General Endang Suwarya declared on Wednesday that Aceh was “ill” and therefore “there should not be news that confuses the people”. “We will bring a halt to the news from the spokesmen of GAM because they are turning the facts upside down,” he said. All journalists will have to be accredited with the military command.

Even the limited coverage of the military’s activities in Aceh makes clear why censorship is being imposed.

* BBC journalist Orlando de Guzman reported yesterday that at least eight men had been executed by troops in the village of Mapa Mamplam in the eastern Bireuen area. He said that he had entered the village as TNI forces were leaving and saw the bodies of four men with bullet wounds to the back of their heads. Eyewitnesses told him that eight men had been lined up and shot by the soldiers. An Indonesian foreign ministry spokesman Marty Natelegawa later dismissed the incident as “stories” aimed at discrediting Jakarta.

* Mathew Moore from the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported two cases in which TNI troops had raided houses in villages near Aceh’s second largest city Lhokseumawe. In the early hours of Tuesday morning, 20 soldiers stormed into a house in the village of Kumbang and shot 31-year-old farmer Jamarludin as he tried to escape. He was dragged to a vacant lot and further shots were heard. Frantic family members denied that Jamarludin was a GAM member. At around the same time, troops raided a house in the nearby village of Blang, shot and took away another young man, Juanda. Both houses were looted.

During his address to officers on Tuesday, TNI chief Sutarto attempted to underscore his point that civilians would be respected by dramatically declaring: “If there are soldiers who do violate [orders] and cause suffering to people in the field, then just shoot them in the head.” In response to written questions from Mathew Moore, military spokesman Colonel Basuki announced that an army sergeant had simply been detained over the looting but no action had been taken over the shootings. The two were “shot while trying to escape,” he declared. He confirmed that Juanda was in hospital and Jamarludin was dead.

Washington has provided more than just the “shock and awe” tactics for the Indonesia’s military. The Bush administration’s doctrine of “preemptive strikes” and its neo-colonial occupation of Iraq has set a precedent for other governments to resort military means to defend their interests and deal with political problems.

Dr Andrew Tan, from the Singapore’s Institute for Defence and Strategic Studies, noted in the *Christian Science Monitor* that Megawati and Philippine President Gloria Arroyo have both recently dispensed with negotiations and launched military offensives against armed separatist groups—in the Philippines, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). “This is the right time to go back to war. In the context of the war on terrorism, there are few, if any, diplomatic costs to seeking a military solution,” he said.

The TNI’s offensive, however, does not appear to be Washington’s preferred option for ending the conflict in the oil- and gas-rich province. Last week the US, with the backing of Japan and the European Union, stepped in to compel Jakarta to extend a deadline for launching the operation and to participate in last ditch talks in Japan to salvage a ceasefire arrangement reached in December.

Neither Megawati nor the military had any intention of negotiating last weekend. Government officials arrived in Tokyo with a series of new demands that amounted to an ultimatum for GAM to formally abandon its demand for a separate state, accept an offer of limited autonomy and hand over its weapons immediately. Under the ceasefire arrangement GAM was due to hand over some of its weapons to international monitors. Jakarta insisted the military take possession instead. To further inflame tensions, Indonesian police arrested five GAM negotiators, as they were about to board a flight to Japan.

Predictably the talks broke down but neither the US nor its regional ally, Australia, has offered anything more than the most oblique criticisms of Jakarta’s actions. US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher declared Washington felt that “possible avenues to a peaceful resolution were not fully explored” in Tokyo. Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer expressed his hope that both sides would “get back to the diplomatic path before too long.”

Both Washington and Canberra reiterated their commitment to maintaining “the territorial integrity of Indonesia,” effectively signalling to Jakarta that there will be no repeat of the Australian-led UN military intervention into East Timor. The complete silence of the Australian government over the atrocities now being carried out in Aceh only underscores the fact that Canberra’s expressions of outrage over the TNI-organised militia violence in East Timor were simply the pretext for an intervention aimed at securing control of the Timor Gap gas fields.

On Monday, the Indonesian military immediately moved to reassure Washington that US corporate interests—above all those of the giant ExxonMobil—would be looked after by substantially bolstering security forces around the natural gas fields and installations in Aceh. The province’s lucrative gas reserves, which were shamelessly plundered as a source of revenue under Suharto, have been at the centre of the long-running conflict.

The GAM leadership emerged in 1976 as a representative of the local Acehnese elites who resented rule from Jakarta and the siphoning off of gas revenues. GAM was able to consolidate a following among villagers who were mired in poverty under the Suharto junta and subjected to more than two decades of repression at the hands of the military.

Megawati’s decision to impose martial law and authorise the “integrated operation” in Aceh demonstrates that, like Suharto, she has no solution to the growing social and political tensions throughout Indonesia. The offensive confirms that the former Suharto critic and so-called reformer has allied herself with the most hard-line sections of the military hierarchy and serves as a warning of the measures she will use in the future against any political opposition.



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