

Indonesia targets civilians in its military offensive in Aceh

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Despite attempts by the Indonesian government to block information on the military's activities, it is becoming clear that the offensive by the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) in the northern-most province of Aceh against the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM) involves a deliberate campaign of mass terror against the civilian population.

The operation began on May 19 after the government of President Megawati Sukarnoputri broke off internationally brokered peace talks and authorised a "shock and awe" campaign to wipe out GAM. The all-out assault involves 30,000 TNI troops and 13,000 police supported by artillery, armour, aircraft and naval craft against an estimated 5,000 lightly armed GAM guerillas.

The most hardline elements in the military hierarchy have long advocated such an operation. Ominously TNI spokesmen have declared one of its main objects is to separate GAM activists from the province's four million population. After decades of brutal repression at the hands of Jakarta and the TNI, there is widespread sympathy among ordinary people for the separatist fighters.

TNI chief General Endriartono Sutarto admitted to the media that hundreds of thousands of Acehnese might be forced from their homes. "Our first priority is to separate GAM from the people, because we don't want people to get hurt. If we have to move them to win this war, we will, but that's a last resort."

The government has set up 82 camps to house up to 200,000 people under military guard but provided very little food or shelter for those it intends to intern. Media reports indicate that well over 20,000 people have already been forced to flee their homes in an operation that the country's defence minister predicts will last six months.

Such "counter-insurgency" campaigns, including those of the French in Algeria and the British in Malaya in the 1950s, and the Americans in Vietnam in the 1960s, have invariably been associated with atrocities against the

civilian population, as it is forced to seek "refuge" in designated areas.

From the information available it appears that the TNI is directly targeting civilians as the centerpiece of its operational plan.

* According to the provincial education authorities, more than 400 schools have been torched.

* Residents in the village of Cot Rabo insist that seven young men, including two 12-year-old boys, killed by the TNI on May 21 were farmers and that no weapons were found among the bodies. Operation spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Yani Basuki has announced that the army's investigation concluded that the seven were all GAM rebels or spies. In a sinister twist, Basuki accused GAM of adopting a new tactic in which unarmed sympathisers and spies were being inserted in the frontline to make it appear they were civilians, and in this way bolster international sympathy for GAM when the TNI killed them.

* The *San Francisco Chronicle* reported on May 30 that 30 soldiers had entered a mosque in the village of Alue Iet the previous week, stabbing and bashing a male civil servant called Masuni and shooting dead his friend Hussein. In the nearby village of Awegetah, resident Usman Menamin reported that soldiers had burned the motorcycle of his brother and a friend at a roadblock. Residents later found the bodies of the two men with their hands and toes cut off. According to the report, villagers say these abuses are commonplace.

* In the first week of the military offensive, the price of rice and cooking oil nearly doubled. Food supplies to the provincial capital Banda Aceh have dwindled and the road from the capital to Northern Sumatra is under threat. Shopkeepers say they will no longer make the journey because their trucks will either be attacked and burned by "unidentified" men or their food stocks pilfered by TNI troops at the numerous check points along the roads.

Similar problems are occurring in other areas.

* In the GAM stronghold district of Bireuen the irrigation system has been deliberately damaged, threatening 6,500 hectares of rice crop that feeds a population of 150,000, as well as the area's income earning cash crops of coconuts, pawpaws, bananas and mangoes.

Reports remain sketchy because of TNI and government efforts to censor information and remove independent observers.

The Aceh operation deputy commander, Brigadier-General Bambang Darmono, told a press conference on May 24 that dispatches from Agence France-Presse (AFP) and the Indonesian newspaper *Korantemp* on the May 21 civilian killings were a "provocation" and threatened to sue both for libel. Any reporting of statements by GAM has been forbidden.

Jakarta has also sought to silence GAM spokesmen outside the country. It has formally requested that Sweden deport for trial in Indonesia four GAM members, including prominent leader Hasan Tiro. Sweden has refused the request on the basis that the four are all Swedish citizens.

According to the *Jakarta Post*, Indonesia's Foreign Affairs Ministry has informed five international non-government organisations and four United Nations agencies concerned with humanitarian relief in Aceh that they should leave the province. Declaring that the local government and Indonesian Red Cross would handle all relief work, Foreign Ministry spokesman Marty Natalegawa declared: "They should be aware of this policy and leave Aceh. Their physical presence and direct contact in Aceh are not needed due to security reasons."

In similar vein the Home Affairs Ministry has ordered the World Bank to suspend its aid operation in Aceh that annually supplies \$US7.5 million to 1.7 million people in 2,875 villages.

The US based Human Rights Watch (HRW) has reported two attacks by thugs on the offices of the Indonesian human rights group Kontras (Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence) in Jakarta on May 26 and 27.

Kontras has been monitoring TNI activity in Aceh. It accused youths in the Permuda Panca Marga, a group associated with pro-government violence, of involvement in the attacks. HRW's Asia division executive director Brad Adams issued a statement noting: "The failure of the police to respond to these attacks on a leading human rights organisation sets a bad precedent for all groups

working in Aceh."

Last Friday US Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz issued a word of caution to the Indonesian government about its conduct of the military offensive.

Speaking at the Asian Security Conference in Singapore alongside Indonesian Defence Minister Matori Abdul Djalil, Wolfowitz declared that the questions in Aceh could not be settled militarily and required a political solution. He called for international monitors to be allowed into the province to "encourage the world to believe that Indonesia is behaving and its troops are behaving."

To further emphasise the point, Wolfowitz referred to the murder of two US citizens at the Freeport-McMoRan copper and gold mine in Papua in August last year in which TNI involvement has been indicated by both the Indonesian police and an initial FBI investigation. "The issue of the Freeport killings is a very important issue," Wolfowitz pointedly remarked. "We have made it clear at the highest level we need satisfactory cooperation from Indonesia or it will affect our whole relationship."

The statement is significant, since Wolfowitz has been among those within the Bush administration pushing for the lifting of a US Congressional ban on links between the TNI and the Pentagon, imposed after the TNI-organised violence in East Timor in 1999.

Only recently, administration supporters in the US Congress brushed aside objections from relatives of the Freeport victims, voting for training funds for the TNI from Washington's International Education and Training Program.

Wolfowitz's remarks indicate a growing concern in Washington at the consequences of the TNI's indiscriminate terror campaign for the province's long-term stability. The US has substantial economic interests in the oil and gas rich area, including a giant refinery, which is part owned by the US corporation ExxonMobil.



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