

# Indonesian military intensifies operations in Aceh

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Despite scant media coverage of its operations in the north Sumatra province of Aceh, evidence is emerging that the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) is engaged in forced evacuations and extra-judicial executions as part of its campaign to terrorise the local population and wipe out the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM).

Last week the air force used its US-built F-16 fighters for the first time to bomb a five-kilometre stretch near the village of Babus Salam in North Aceh. Air Force Chief of Staff Marshal Chappy Hakim claimed that a force of 100 to 150 GAM fighters was operating in the area. He declared the attack was to “force the rebels to come out of their hiding place, as this will make it easier for us to attack them”.

It will “give them some shock therapy,” Hakim said. Light Bronco counter-insurgency aircraft were also used to rocket and strafe the area. Such indiscriminate attacks, which are just as likely to kill and maim innocent civilians as GAM rebels, are part of a calculated strategy of driving the local population out of the war zone.

The Indonesian press reported on June 13 that the TNI had forced “thousands” to leave their homes in the village of Juli so that it could attack a suspected rebel base. The villagers were shifted into tents at a temporary camp east of Bireuen. According to the *Jakarta Post*, by June 14, “13,000 residents had moved and more were streaming into camps” designed to hold up to 200,000 people.

At a press conference in Jakarta late last week, TNI chief General Endriartono Sutarto made clear that forced evacuations have only just begun. He said the six-month operation, now in its second month, had been divided into two parts. During the first two months, the emphasis will be on gaining territorial control while in the last four months the army will concentrate on “separating” the civilian population from the GAM.

Sutarto said “poor discipline” among TNI soldiers had led to atrocities against civilians. He admitted that his

troops were responsible for the deaths of seven villagers in Matang Kumbang and the mistreatment of others in Lawang. Both villages are located in the allegedly pro-GAM area of Bireuen.

The TNI chief also announced that the military had obtained night vision equipment and intended to carry out more extensive nighttime operations. “We think most people will stay in their homes at night and only those involved in suspect activities will be outside,” he said. On the night of June 5, TNI troops opened fire on two German tourists, killing the man and wounding his wife.

On June 23, the TNI spokesman for Aceh, Colonel Ditya Soedarsono, said the army had last weekend deployed three dozen British-made Scorpion tanks, stepping up the offensive. He denied that the tanks would be used against ordinary people, but to “kill those who are controlled by [GAM leader] Hasan de Tiro to kill people”.

As of last week, the government claimed that 225 GAM “rebels” had been killed in fighting and another 300 arrested since the offensive began on May 19. Police put the number of civilian dead at 108. These figures, however, are likely to be gross underestimates.

The Indonesian Red Cross (IRC) has announced that it has taken 194 bodies in civilian clothing to morgues in the province. IRC secretary-general Iyang Sukandar said the figure did not include those buried immediately after death by their families in accord with Muslim custom.

On June 12, the Indonesian National Commission on Human Rights confirmed that a mass grave had been found in Nisam subdistrict, where there has been heavy fighting. While information is sketchy, unconfirmed reports put the number of bodies at 100.

Other reports provide a further insight into what is taking place.

\* Villagers in Blang Seupang in the Jeumpa subdistrict

forced a convoy of journalists from RCTI TV and Radio 68-H to stop as it passed through their village. They told reporters that on June 13 marines entered the village and asked about GAM members. The soldiers forced 34 men to lie in the ground while they trampled on them. Four showed the newsmen their wounds.

\* The provincial education office has reported that in the past four months 60 teachers have been murdered and 500 schools torched. The TNI blames the GAM but the murder of a 20-year-old Muslim boarding school teacher Muzakir on June 16 points directly at the military. He was taken from his home in Seumirah by four men and his body found tied against a tree, dressed only in underwear. His throat had been slit.

Local villagers were fearful that the killers were still in the area so the body was left to a group of journalists to cut down. Again, the military claimed the GAM was responsible. But villagers said the four men who grabbed Muzakir spoke Javanese—the dialect spoken by most TNI troops, not GAM members. They also said that no GAM fighters had been in the area since the TNI took control at the start of the offensive. Soldiers had set up posts near the village and regularly patrolled it.

\* Legal Aid Institute director for Aceh, Afridal Darmi, told the *Jakarta Post* that civil rights activists were regularly being detained and interrogated by police. Several, including four members of the Centre for Human Rights and two volunteers with the Indonesian Red Cross, have been accused of having relations with the GAM and charged with subversion, which carries a penalty of life imprisonment.

On June 7, Saiful Bachri, an activist with KONTRAS (the Commission for Victims of Violence and Missing Persons), was shot dead. The military blamed the GAM. But one volunteer told the *Jakarta Post* that he and many others were fleeing Aceh because they feared abduction by military-backed militias. At least three pro-Jakarta militias are active in the province. The TNI used militias to attack pro-independence groups in East Timor in 1999 and regularly uses such thugs in West Papua and other areas.

\* The military is also attempting to bring local administration under its control. On June 9, after a meeting in Blang Sepang, 76 village chiefs resigned en masse after being forced to attend a compulsory propaganda course run by the military on the “Unitary State of Indonesia”. Home Affairs Minister Hari Sabamo dismissed the protest saying: “In this emergency situation, we need leaders who are patriotic.” Army chief General

Ryamizard Ryacudu immediately offered to replace the village leaders with soldiers. Civil administration is reportedly inoperative in many areas of the province.

These reports provide only a limited glimpse of what is occurring, as the military has imposed tight media censorship. All Indonesian journalists in Aceh are required to work with military units and undertake a four-day course which, the TNI claims, is to teach first aid and survival skills. The *Jakarta Post* reported, however, that the main emphasis is on “how to cover the war from the nationalist perspective”. Martial law administrator Major-General Endang Suwarya has forbidden the airing or printing of GAM statements and has called for “patriotic journalism”.

Some 20 officially-vetted foreign journalists operate under similar constraints. As of last week, all unauthorised foreigners were banned from entering the province. Indonesian authorities are hunting William Nessen, an American freelance journalist who has been operating with a GAM unit. He reported that he tried to surrender to TNI troops but was fired upon and forced to flee.

Jakarta has stepped up pressure on Sweden to muzzle the GAM leaders in exile there. A high-level delegation led by Ali Alatas, a longtime foreign minister under the Suharto dictatorship, presented Swedish authorities with documents which they claimed prove that the exiled leaders had organised armed rebellion and acts of terror.

The ability of the Indonesian government and military to proceed with their huge military offensive in Aceh and to trample on basic democratic rights has been abetted by an almost complete silence in Canberra, Washington and the European capitals. Having declared their support for Indonesia’s territorial integrity, these governments are turning a blind eye to the military’s abuses in Aceh.

The offensive marks a return to the methods of the Suharto dictatorship, during which thousands of people were killed as the military sought to crush all opposition to its rule in the oil and gas rich province.



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