

Indonesia's dirty war of repression in Aceh

John Roberts
11 August 2003

At the end of July, a delegation from the Indonesian upper house of parliament (MPR) visited the war-torn province of Aceh in northern Sumatra and proclaimed the huge military offensive against the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM), begun on May 19, a success.

Deputy Speaker Soetardjo Soerjogoeritno, leader of the 15-member delegation, based his conclusion on the number of houses flying the red-and-white national flag and the number of local Acehnese who have taken loyalty oaths to the Indonesian state. In fact, these “successes” are the product of a massive campaign of repression being conducted by more than 30,000 troops, backed by 13,000 police, armoured vehicles, warplanes and artillery.

President Megawati Sukarnoputri has proclaimed a state of emergency throughout the province, allowing authorities to impose a battery of anti-democratic measures, including tough censorship provisions. Journalists are required to attend courses run by the armed forces (TNI) and then work with military units. Foreigners have been banned from the province. But from the little independent reporting of the war available, a very different picture emerges from that painted by the Jakarta politicians.

A report in the *Jakarta Post* in early July described a “loyalty ceremony” attended by 12,000 people from 54 villages in the Kuta Baro district of the Aceh Besar regency. It noted that most of those taking part were elderly or sick, as younger people had left, either to join the insurgents or out of fear of being accused by the army of being “GAM sympathisers”.

A 30-year-old injured man explained that martial law authorities had “asked” the villagers to attend three days earlier, after flooding the area with troops and armoured vehicles. “As civilians, we had to accept the invitation because if we rejected it, we would be labeled GAM supporters,” he told the newspaper. “Honestly, most people have been living in fear since

they are physically powerless, but nevertheless have strong opinions on independence and on the necessity of a self-determination referendum for the province.”

A report published by the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) on July 23, entitled “Aceh: How not to win hearts and minds,” outlined the measures being used by the military to intimidate the entire population and purge the provincial administration. These include:

- * The forced flying of Indonesian flags. On 21 May, 37 houses were reportedly burned to the ground in the Peusangan district of Bireun for not flying the national flag. The report noted that the TNI-backed militias in East Timor in 1999 used similar methods, targeting families who refused to fly the Indonesian flag for violent attacks.

- * The staging of oath-taking ceremonies, like that at Kuta Baro, throughout the province. In the capital Banda Aceh on June 2 and June 17, ceremonies were held involving 15,000 civil servants, police and military and 10,000 youth respectively.

- * The political screening of the province's 86,680 civil servants and local elected representatives and village heads. The screening process is referred to as *litsus*—a term last used during the 1965-1966 CIA-backed military coup during which hundreds of thousands of Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) members and sympathisers were rounded up and killed or imprisoned.

Civil servants are required to attend a panel and answer questions that include the political affiliations of family, friends and colleagues. Those who pass the test must then swear a new loyalty oath. Those who do not or refuse to attend can be disciplined, sacked or brought before a court.

- * The screening process has been effectively extended to the whole population by the requirement that everyone obtain new identity cards. To qualify for

a card, a person must fill out a questionnaire asking for information similar to that required of civil servants. Before a card is issued, the police must clear the applicant of any suspicion of involvement with the GAM.

* The forced displacement of civilians is continuing. The ICG reported appalling conditions in the refugee camps with inadequate drinking water and sanitation. In one camp in Cot Gapu, 300 people a day were falling ill. Estimates on the number of detainees vary but, in early July, social affairs officials said 48,000 people were living in camps. Those released from these camps often return to find their property looted, despite the military's promise to guard possessions. The Jakarta Elshinta radio station reported one case in which farmers, returning to their homes after 25 days in a camp, found that their livestock, televisions and furniture were missing.

* An internment camp has been established on the island of Pulau Nasi, 5 km from Banda Aceh, to hold 1,000 suspected GAM supporters. The regime is similar to that used to inter PKI members from the mid-1960s. Detainees have been told that food will be supplied for six months, after which they will have to produce it themselves. Just as PKI prisoners were classified as A, B or C according to their political involvement, the Acehnese will be classified as "serious, average or less serious" according to their alleged association with the GAM.

Fighting is continuing in the province. The martial law administration claimed at the end of July that the GAM had only 1,300 armed supporters in the field as opposed to 5,000 when the offensive began. The army puts the number of rebels killed since the start of the operation at over 600. But neither figure has been independently verified.

A number of the dead may be civilians accused of being GAM suspects. In mid-June, the Commission for Involuntary Disappearances and Victims of Violence in Aceh (Kontras Aceh) announced that it had been able to document 176 civilian deaths, 101 people tortured, 15 people disappeared and 50 arrested.

A number of mass graves have been found in Central and South Aceh, which have been hurriedly dug up by soldiers. The army claimed that the scores of victims were executed by the GAM before the current fighting began and that it was simply helping villagers recover

the bodies. Human rights activists, however, have denounced the exhumations, pointing out that the law requires the presence of forensic experts at such excavations to preserve evidence.

When it launched the offensive, the military insisted that it would be concluded successfully within the six-month state of emergency. But when Sukarnoputri addressed the opening session of the Indonesian parliament (MPR) on August 1, she gave no indication as to when the operation would end. Several military leaders have hinted that the military will stay in the province for as long as it takes to suppress the GAM.

What is taking place in Aceh is a return to the methods used by the military under Suharto to destroy the separatist rebels. In the decade prior to Suharto's ousting in 1998, the province was declared a Military Operations Area and thousands of troops were poured into northern Sumatra. Civilians were raped, tortured or summarily executed in a bid to terrorise the population into submission.

Now another dirty war is being conducted by Megawati and the military, with the tacit approval of the US, Australia and other powers, not only to stamp out opposition in Aceh but to send a message to separatist movements in other provinces.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact