Human rights group condemns Indonesia's "hidden war" in Aceh

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21 October 2003

A Human Rights Watch (HRW) paper issued last month provides further details of the repressive campaign that the Indonesian government is waging in the oil-rich province of Aceh. The province was placed under martial law on May 19 and a massive operation involving 40,000 Indonesian troops and police is underway to crush the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM), which has fought for independence from Jakarta for some 30 years.

HRW condemns the situation in Aceh as a "hidden war". It stated on September 19: "The Indonesian military has barred all independent witnesses from observing its four-month campaign against a long-standing insurgency, obscuring the extent of the war's human casualties.... the current information vacuum, caused by restrictions on Indonesian observers and the closing of the province to independent observers, foreign correspondents, diplomats, and international human rights organisations, may be hiding a humanitarian disaster, or at least warning signs of an impending disaster."

The report outlines how the restrictions have made it all but impossible to access the majority of Aceh's 4.2 million people. At the time it was published, United Nations (UN) and international humanitarian aid agencies were only being permitted to operate in Banda Aceh, the provincial capital. Only two non-Indonesian UN workers and no international members of non-government organisations had been given the required visas to work in the capital since martial law began. Relief supplies can only be distributed by Indonesian government bodies—some of which are directly connected to the military. International journalists are likewise prohibited from travelling outside the capital.

According to the October 14 *Jakarta Post*, the Indonesian military claims to have killed more than 900 GAM fighters since the declaration of martial law, with a further 1,800 being arrested or surrendering. The lack of outside scrutiny has given rise to serious concerns that the fighting has been accompanied by a campaign aimed at terrorising civilians and ending any sympathy for GAM. There are fears that some of the officially acknowledged deaths were in fact civilians caught in crossfire or killed for political reasons.

Recent situation reports by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) have noted local media allegations that at least seven civilians were killed from October 3 to October 10, with another 13 civilians reported killed from September 27 to October 3. HRW notes that at least 77 village heads and 13 sub-district leaders in the province have been replaced with retired military officers, recalling the era of the Suharto dictatorship when the military controlled almost every aspect of life from the village up. Acehnese have also been compelled to carry identity cards, make loyalty oaths and display the Indonesian flag. As many as 500 schools have been burnt to the ground, particularly in areas where support for GAM is the strongest.

The HRW paper warns that "the trickle of information leaking out suggests that thousands of Acehnese civilians have been forced to flee their homes to escape the conflict or to seek food and shelter." Civilians face shortages of food, water and sanitation and a "breakdown" in the provision of education and health care. At least 2,559 families are currently displaced from their homes, according to OCHA. The organisation has reported that at least 24,730 families—over 100,000 people—were forced to leave their homes during the first three months of martial law.

HRW's concerns were lent weight by a September 30 report by Teuku Samsul Bahri, a member of the Indonesian-based human rights body Kontras-Aceh, in which he accused the military of inflicting a "humanitarian crisis" on Aceh.

Kontras alleges that 30 villages in the Lokop district of East Aceh were subjected to pervasive repression

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following the declaration of martial law. Farmers were only permitted to work on their land for three hours and had to report to a military guard post and hand over their ID cards. “If people breach these rules,” Kontras alleges, “they are accused of being GAM members.” The same three-hour work rule was also applied to fishermen, making it impossible for them to catch enough fish to sustain their living standards.

The military applied stringent rules in relation to the transportation of foodstuffs in East Aceh in order to prevent food falling into the hands of GAM fighters and to intimidate the population. According to Kontras, shopkeepers and traders were only allowed to carry three sacks of rice and one sack of sugar, while villagers were only allowed to buy one kilogram of rice and 500 grams of sugar per day. In addition, the military forced farmers to sell their crops at low prices to military-appointed buyers, ostensibly to stop foodstuffs being sold to GAM. As a result of the restrictions and profiteering, farmers left crops to rot in the fields and there are reports of malnutrition.

Teuku Samsul Bahri also reported that “many activists and volunteers spread across Aceh who are working for Kontras have gone into hiding.” One of its volunteers, 21-year-old Muzakkir Abdullah, was found murdered on June 17 in North Aceh and other human rights campaigners have received death-threats. According to evidence compiled by Kontras, 329 civilians have been killed by the military, 78 are missing, 213 have been arbitrarily detained and 315 have been subjected to beatings and ill treatment. It believes the true numbers are far higher.

The Indonesian government reacted angrily to both the HRW paper and the report of Kontras-Aceh. A military spokesman, Ahmad Yani Basuki, told Agence France Presse on October 2 that Kontras’s accusations were “all lies”. “Do you think the TNI [Indonesian Armed Forces] want to kill the people of Aceh? We are here to save the people from GAM’s stranglehold,” he said. The TNI was, however, forced to admit that it had put 12 soldiers on trial on September 25 over accusations they beat civilians in the North Aceh village of Geulumpang Sulu during operations in the area in late August.

The record of the TNI under the Suharto dictatorship was one of unchecked brutality against any perceived threat to the interests of the ruling elite. In key resource-rich or strategic areas such as Aceh, West Papua and East Timor, the military imposed a reign of terror, at the cost of tens of thousands of civilian lives, in its attempts to crush support for separatist movements. The current Indonesian government of President Megawati Sukarnoputri has cloaked the current campaign in Aceh in secrecy in order to free the hand of the military to use the same ruthless methods. For its part, the TNI sees the operation as a means of strengthening its political position in the country and undermining the limited steps that were taken following Suharto’s fall to curb its power.

The Megawati government is able to wage its hidden war in Aceh because of the complicity of the major powers, particularly the United States and Australia. Only four years ago, the human rights abuses of the TNI were cynically exploited by the Australian government and the United Nations to justify its military intervention into East Timor. However, because Washington and Canberra do not consider a separate Aceh to be in their immediate interests, a blind eye is being turned to the military repression in the province.

Aceh campaign commander General Endang Suwarya has requested that Megawati extend the military operation against GAM until the general elections scheduled for next April. The commander of Indonesia’s armed forces, General Endriartono Sutarto, indicated to a news conference that a longer period of martial law might be imposed. He told journalists: “We can’t pinpoint when we can paralyse GAM. From past examples in the world, dealing with guerrillas can take decades.” In effect, Sutarto is proposing the same indefinite military rule of Aceh as prevailed under Suharto.

The government is currently making a one-month evaluation of the request according to security minister Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. The martial law legislation expires in mid-November.

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