

# Indonesia: Trials underway into Suharto-era atrocities

John Roberts

24 November 2003

Four trials have begun of 14 current and retired members of Indonesia's armed forces (TNI) for a massacre carried out nearly 20 years ago, on September 12, 1984. Evidence emerging in the courts has the potential of becoming a political embarrassment, not only for the regime of President Megawati Sukarnoputri, who is closely aligned with the military, but with the American and Australian governments, both of which have moved to re-establish close ties with the TNI.

The military officers have been charged over the murder of Muslim civilians at the impoverished north Jakarta port area of Tanjung Priok. Apart from military operations against separatists in Aceh, West Papua and East Timor, the Tanjung Priok massacre was the most infamous and bloody in the era of the Suharto dictatorship, which came to power following the CIA-backed coup of 1965-1966 that left more than half a million Indonesians dead.

At the time of the atrocity, military authorities claimed 16 people had been killed after an unruly mob of Muslim protestors attacked troops and state property. Families and eyewitnesses, however, have consistently maintained that up to 400 people were slaughtered when troops fired on a peaceful protest without warning. They insist that bodies were dumped all over the Jakarta region.

The incident occurred in a period when Suharto was becoming increasingly worried that right-wing Islamic organisations were emerging as vehicles for political opposition to the government. While his regime had previously worked with such layers in its anti-communist killing sprees, rifts began developing when Suharto refused to acquiesce to their demands for sharia law and an Islamic state. By the late 1970s, crackdowns had begun, targeting opposition organised through mosques and Islamic centres.

The most significant accused in the Tanjung Priok killings is Major General Sriyanto Muntrasam, current commander of the TNI's Special Forces—Kopassus. He has been charged with failing in his responsibility as captain to prevent his men from firing on several thousand demonstrators.

Two retired major generals, a captain and 10 subordinates face charges in three other trials. The junior officer, Sustrisno Mascung has been charged, along with his men, of carrying out the shootings, while one of the retired generals, Pranowo, faces charges over the handling of the prisoners taken on that day. The first trial began in mid-September, when the chairman of the panel of civilian judges, Andi Samsan Nganro, declared they should be

concluded in 180 days.

Until now, the military's 1984 account of what happened has remained the official version. Even after the fall of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998, Indonesian authorities continued to do their utmost to prevent the truth from coming to light.

In 2001, however, in response to international demands in the wake of the 1999 massacres in East Timor, legislation was passed providing for special human rights courts to investigate abuses by the military. In 2002 and 2003, convictions were handed down to 6 of 18 officers charged with human right abuses over the TNI-organised killings in East Timor. But, under intense pressure from the military, the courts imposed only token sentences. The real culprits behind the violence—a number of high-ranking officers in Jakarta—were never even charged.

The current trials are only the second to be convened under the human rights law. Their origin lies in a report handed to former president Abdurrahman Wahid in July 2000 by the National Human Rights Commission, Komisi Nasional Hak Asasi Manusia (KOMNAS HAM). Suharto created KOMNAS in June 1993 as a result of widespread international pressure in the aftermath of the 1991 Dili massacre in East Timor. Predictably, the report played down the Tanjung Priok massacre, after KOMNAS HAM officials appointed Soelistyowati Soegondo as chairman of the commission of inquiry.

In 1984, Soegondo was working in the Ministry of Justice. He oversaw the extension of the period of detention for some of the 175 prisoners who were captured and, in some cases, tortured after the killings. Other members of the nine-man commission included former military officials—at least one of whom had close ties to Benny Moerdani, the armed forces chief at the time of the massacre. The commission blocked any participation by non-government organisations into the investigation.

KOMNAS HAM's report concluded that while human rights abuses had, indeed, occurred, there was no massacre and no evidence of bodies being dumped. It found that although 33 people had been killed, their deaths were a result of troops being forced to fire on an unruly mob. Some, it declared, were killed by the mob. The report found that 36 prisoners were subjected to torture. It recommended that the government apologise to the relatives of the victims and that the matter be closed.

The extraordinarily clumsy and transparent attempt to bury the issue failed, however, resulting in a further inquiry and the present trials.

Some of the victims' families had been induced by KOMNAS HAM and military officials to sign peace pacts with the TNI at the conclusion of the initial investigation. But others had refused. Outside the court on the first day of the current trials was Dewi Warda, wife of community leader Amir Biki who was killed at Tanjung Priok. Accompanied by human rights groups protesting the lack of indictments of any senior commanders, she told the media she had refused to sign any peace deal. "I would be betraying my husband and the other victims of Priok in their graves," she said.

A *Washington Post* account of the court proceedings against Kopassus chief Sriyanto on October 30 provides a glimpse of the pressure exerted by the military on eyewitnesses and the court. Sriyanto's lawyers had already challenged the authority of the court to deal with events that occurred 19 years ago. Moreover, official army spokesman Colonel Nachrowi questioned the application of the human rights law to Tanjung Priok, claiming that the trials were being manipulated to undermine national unity. Human rights groups allege that witnesses have had death and kidnapping threats made against them.

The *Post* reported, "... scores of uniformed soldiers wearing the red berets of the Kopassus special forces crowded into the third-floor courtroom of the Central Jakarta courthouse to demonstrate support for their commander. Scores more arrived from other army units. The soldiers, many transported to the courthouse in military trucks and vehicles, triple-parked out front, packed the aisles, overflowing through the French doors into the hallway. Some were barely old enough to recall the 1984 massacre."

Sriyanto claimed that his troops were not there to intimidate, but simply to exercise their rights as citizens.

Despite the heavy military presence, witnesses recounted the events of September 12, 1984 that had been covered up for so long. Husen Sape told the court how he had joined a protest demonstration in Tanjung Priok to demand the release of four Muslims who had been detained by police. Police had invaded a mosque after a local cleric had made criticisms of the Suharto government. When worshippers reacted angrily, police returned in force and arrested the four men.

The sequence of events suggests the initial police action was designed to provoke a demonstration, thus luring Muslim militants out onto the streets.

As the protest approached the local police station, troops fired on the crowd without any warning, spraying it with rifle fire. Sape testified that after the initial rounds, troops listened for moans among the fallen, shooting any survivors. He said that he played dead and was thrown onto a military truck with at least 12 corpses.

Another witness to the day's events, Yusron Zainuri, gave evidence that the marchers flung themselves to the pavement when the troops, who had their bayonets fixed, suddenly opened fire. He was hit in the arm and chest. Zainuri said more troops arrived and began killing survivors. He said one soldier stood over him and shouted that he was still alive. The soldier fired again but just missed. Zainuri was placed on the back of a military truck. He said he could not count the corpses but they were piled four high.

The witnesses' accounts accord with information leaked out over the years. The al Araf mosque had listed 63 people killed,

despite the swift removal of bodies and evidence from the scene. In 1993, *Tempo* magazine quoted Brigadier-General H. M. A. Sampurna as saying unidentified bodies were buried at a location in Jeger hamlet, Rambutan village, East Jakarta.

Whatever the exact number, such a large-scale slaughter in the Indonesian capital would not have been possible without approval at the highest levels of the military chain of command. But, just as in the East Timor trials, the most senior officers have escaped scrutiny. Both Moerdani and Try Sutrisno, former Jakarta military commander, are prominent political figures and neither has been charged. Suharto himself has never faced a court.

The trials are proving highly inconvenient to President Megawati, who was installed with the support of the military on the basis of her pledge to adopt a tough line against separatist movements in Aceh and Papua. Under Megawati the military has launched a major offensive in Aceh and clawed back much of the political clout it lost in the wake of Suharto's downfall. She faces an election next year.

At the same time, in the name of the "war on terror" the Australian government has recently begun renewing ties, not only with the TNI, but specifically with Kopassus.

In August, Canberra announced a joint training program between the Australian military and Kopassus, and defence chiefs revealed that Sriyanto would visit Australia in September for discussions. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer insisted at the time there would be "vetting" of any Kopassus personnel involved in human rights abuses.

Whatever the outcome of the Tanjung Priok trials, Sriyanto's high-level visit exposes Downer's remarks as nothing more than a cynical ploy aimed at covering up Canberra's long-standing relations with Indonesia's specialist thugs and practitioners of state terror.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**