

New evidence of Indonesia's war of repression in Aceh

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For more than seven months, the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) have been waging a war of repression in the province of Aceh, aimed at crushing the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and intimidating the population as a whole.

The TNI and President Megawati Sukarnoputri, who signed an emergency decree placing the province under martial law, claimed that the “shock and awe” operation involving 40,000 soldiers and paramilitary police officers would be over quickly—in no more than six months. But the offensive has dragged on, claiming at least 1,000 lives, and it shows no sign of winding down.

News of the conflict has been tightly controlled. The military has sought to exclude any independent witnesses by rigidly controlling access by journalists and forcing out aid organisations. Most of the limited reports from the province have come from the martial law administration itself.

Deaths, however, are reported virtually every day in the Indonesian press. On December 13, for example, the *Jakarta Post* reported military claims that it had killed five GAM rebels over the previous two days. The article noted that the military had not identified the rebels and had handed over their bodies to villagers for quick burials. Such practices are common place, making it difficult to verify exactly whom the military has killed.

A number of recent reports provide a more detailed picture of the TNI's activities in Aceh. A growing body of evidence points to indiscriminate civilian killings, beatings and torture, and arbitrary justice for suspects dragged before the courts.

On December 18, the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) published a report entitled *Aceh under Martial Law: Inside the Secret War*, based on evidence collected from 85 Acehnese refugees interviewed in Malaysia. The 50-page report documents cases of extra-judicial murder, “disappearances”, physical abuse, arbitrary detention and restrictions on freedom of movement.

The highest levels of the government and Indonesian military are promoting hostility toward the civilian population of the province. Army chief General Ryamizard Ryacudu baldly told the official Antara news agency on December 7: “People who dislike the military emergency in Aceh are GAM members.”

The witness statements make chilling reading. HRW official

Brad Adams said all refugees who were interviewed had a story to tell. “We fear that the abuses we have uncovered against the civilian population may just be the tip of the iceberg.... In case after case, soldiers have gone into villages and publicly executed or beat people seemingly at random,” he stated.

The report presents testimony by seven refugees who claim they have witnessed young Acehnese men being executed by the military on the presumption they were GAM sympathisers. Three others testified to HRW that they had discovered bodies after military operations in their areas.

One witness recounted an incident in Lhokseumawe last May, in which Indonesian troops dragged a man through the streets, demanding that the villagers identify him. The man was then killed by having his head repeatedly smashed against a tree. Another refugee told how troops entered the village of Peureulak in August to search for GAM members. A 20-year-old man was singled out, questioned and then shot. The soldiers ordered villagers to bury the body.

According to the testimony of another witness, a 15-year-old boy was taken away by soldiers on September 4 to answer questions on why he had bought so much fish at a market. His body was found two days later with a bullet wound to his head.

“To be young and male in Aceh is to be regarded with suspicion and to be at risk,” the HRW report comments.

One witness described a seven-day ordeal in May at the hands of troops in which he saw two villagers murdered. He told HRW: “GAM is all in the mountains, but the soldiers are always in the villages looking for GAM.”

In an incident that took place during October, villagers in an area of East Aceh were fired on as they attempted to flee from Indonesian troops searching the area for GAM guerillas. The witness to the event was wounded. He told HRW: “The military goes beyond the targets of the operation. Violence to civilians has passed the limit. They look for GAM, come to the village. If there is no GAM, their emotions run away with them towards civilians.”

On the same day as HRW released its report, the BBC interviewed the Indonesian ambassador to the US, former defence minister Juwono Sudrasono. Significantly, he did not specifically deny the allegations of human rights abuses but justified them. He stated: “You cannot expect accountability in

a war situation.... The precise rules of humanitarian law just go out the window once the shooting starts.”

Such indifference for human rights permeates the Indonesian government’s operation in Aceh. An Associated Press report appearing in the *Taipei Times* of December 7 exposed what is meant by Indonesian officials when they boast about the “lightning quick justice” they are dispensing in the province.

An AP reporter was allowed to interview some of the 1,200 alleged Acehese rebels being held in detention, as well as their families, Indonesian military personnel and legal aid workers. Some prisoners refused to be identified, but all painted a similar picture of their treatment. The report noted: “Suspected rebels in Indonesia’s war-torn province of Aceh get multi-year prison terms after one-hour trials. Many have no lawyers. Confessions, by many accounts, are extracted through torture.”

The chief judge of the court at Pidie, Nani Sukmawati, admitted her court ruled on 72 cases in six weeks. Legal aid official Afridal Darmi told AP that 40 percent of those detained have no lawyer.

A teacher was sentenced to five years jail for allegedly selling rice to raise money for the rebels. There were no witnesses at the trial and the allegations were simply read out. “I blinked and the judge banged the gavel to end the trial”, he said. The teacher claimed that the whole village wanted to testify that he had been raising money for his school but were too afraid to appear in court.

Like many of those interviewed, the teacher reported he had been tortured during interrogation. He said he was treated like a punching bag during several sessions each day and showed the journalist wounds from being dragged across concrete. The teacher said he had witnessed suicide attempts because some prisoners could not stand the beatings.

Whatever the military’s motives for allowing this access to prisoners, the normal practice of the Indonesian authorities is to restrict media coverage rather than facilitate it.

An earlier report published on November 25 by HRW, *Aceh under Martial Law: Muzzling the Messengers: Attacks and Restrictions on the Media*, detailed the systematic attempts under the martial law regime to stop any uncontrolled reporting from inside Aceh.

Prior to the clampdown on media coverage, there had been reports of serious abuses by the military. These included an incident at Mapa Mamplam on May 21 in which eyewitnesses reported the execution of villagers, including three boys. HRW notes: “Such reports have become increasingly rare, not because of an improvement in the conduct of the war, but because the messengers have been successfully muzzled.”

The 33-page report details how foreign journalists have been denied permits to enter the province, or subjected to arbitrary bureaucratic delays in the processing of applications. Resident foreign journalists claim to be in fear of future visa restrictions if they file critical reports.

Indonesian journalists face the most severe risks and

restrictions. Reporters have been arbitrarily detained and subjected to physical and verbal abuse. Journalists have been fired on, despite travelling in clearly marked vehicles. One television cameraman was tortured and murdered by unidentified attackers near the capital, Banda Aceh. Kopassus special forces troops bashed a radio journalist.

The pressure is not limited to journalists in the field. Political pressure in Jakarta has led to self-censorship in the Indonesian media, which the HRW says has resulted “in the war dropping off even Indonesia’s front pages.”

A speech delivered on December 7 by Major-General Sudrajat, the TNI’s director general for strategic defence planning, shed light on the reason for both the intensity of the Aceh operation and the Megawati government’s ability to escape any serious international scrutiny.

Addressing a conference of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific in Jakarta, Sudrajat labelled the separatist movements in the resource-rich provinces of Aceh and West Papua as the greatest threat to the control to Jakarta’s ruling elite. Sudrajat told the conference: “We perceive Indonesia’s integrity as the primary concern, while other countries may presume terrorism is their main concern.” The United States and Indonesia’s neighbours such as Australia, he said, had an “understanding” about this “perception of threats” in Jakarta.

The oil and gas reserves in Aceh are not only important to Indonesia’s ruling elite as a whole but also are sources of income for TNI leaders. Special security arrangements with the operators of the oil and gas fields—as well as outright extortion—have proved very lucrative for the military high command.

The “understanding” of the US and Australia is based on their decades-long reliance on the Indonesian military to protect their commercial interests in the economically and strategically important archipelago. This understanding has been renewed since the fall of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998 and the conflict over East Timor in 1999. The willingness of Washington and Canberra to ignore the state-organised terror in Aceh makes their government’s accomplices to the crimes being committed.



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