In the wake of tsunami calamity

Indonesian army steps up war in Aceh

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There are growing signs that the Indonesian military (TNI) is exploiting the current catastrophe in northern Sumatra to crush the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and establish its unchallenged control over the resource-rich province of Aceh.

So far the death toll from the earthquake and tsunami that devastated Aceh on December 26 is more than 100,000 and is likely to rise much higher. From Lhokseumawe on the east coast through the provincial capital Banda Aceh near Sumatra's northern tip to Meulaboh on the west coast, cities and towns have been obliterated.

Transport and other infrastructure have been torn apart. Hundreds of thousands are desperately in need of water, food, clothing, shelter and medical attention. There is now a serious risk that further lives will be lost through disease and hunger.

Yet, rather than concentrating resources on emergency relief efforts, the Indonesian armed forces, with the approval of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, are preoccupied with their counterinsurgency operations against GAM fighters. While refugees are desperate for supplies and relief workers for transport, the TNI has launched offensives against GAM in various locations across the province.

When the tsunami hit, the military already had 40,000 troops and paramilitary police in Aceh as a result of its ongoing campaign to wipe out GAM. The current offensive initiated in May 2003, under former president Megawati Sukarnoputri, included armour and artillery as well as air and naval support and was billed as Indonesia's own version of the US "shock and awe" methods in Iraq.

Despite a state of emergency and a media blackout in Aceh over the last year, human rights organisations have reported gross and widespread abuse of local Acehnese by the military, including arbitrary detention, torture and summary execution. Yudhoyono, a former general, was Megawati's top security minister and played a crucial role in planning and overseeing the offensive until he resigned last March to contest the presidency.

In the aftermath of the December 26 tsunami, the TNI's responded by dispatching an additional 15,000 troops to Aceh, ostensibly to carry out humanitarian relief work. But far from the well-oiled machine that swung into action against GAM the previous year, the military's emergency assistance in the province has been marked by disorganisation, delays and disinterest.

On December 27, TNI chief General Endriartono indicated that the military would respond in kind to a unilateral ceasefire declared by exiled GAM leaders in Sweden to allow relief efforts to go ahead. It soon became clear, however, that the TNI had no intention of passing up the opportunity to inflict a defeat on GAM, which had suffered losses during the tsunami and earthquake.

The first media reports related to a particular incident. On Thursday, a GAM spokesman announced that Indonesian troops had killed two GAM members in the Peurelak area of East Aceh, including the local commander Afrizal bin Abdul Manaf. He said TNI troops had also set fire to a house in the village of Idi Reayeuk. A TNI spokesman acknowledged the clash, but blamed GAM rebels for provoking the incident by ambushing a convoy of military trucks carrying relief supplies.

Sweden-based GAM spokesman Bakhtiar Abdullah strenuously denied that GAM fighters had attacked a convoy. In turn, he accused the military of harassing and torturing suspected GAM sympathisers in refugee camps. The TNI's abuse of refugees was also reported to the Aceh Referendum Information Centre by volunteers working in Banda Aceh. They alleged that refugees on the way to relief centres were being interrogated by the military.

Bakhtiar told the British-based *Guardian*: "The reports we received are that they are moving in more troops under the guise of relief operations. We know that they are trying to track down GAM fighters in the area. We have given strict orders to maintain a ceasefire and hoped that the Indonesian military would respect that ceasefire and refrain from military action."

As it turned out, the clash was not an isolated incident. The *Jakarta Post* this week reported that the TNI had launched operations against GAM hideouts in Teupin, Batee, Seunebok Langa, Gampung Jalan, Kuburan Cina, Buket Linteung and Buket Jok areas of East Aceh. In north Aceh, army attacks were underway in Makmur, Gandapura and Peusangan.

The TNI not only confirmed that the operations were taking place, but was completely unapologetic about them. In comments cited in the *Guardian*, Colonel Ahmad Yani Basuki declared: "We have to maintain security operations to prevent

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the rebels from attacking vital installations and relief operations." According to Basuki, only one third of TNI troops were involved in military operations and the remainder had been assigned to relief work. He provided no evidence, however, for any of his assertions.

Lieutenant-Colonel D.J. Nachrowi told the *Jakarta Post* that the TNI was "now carrying out two duties: humanitarian work and the security operation." He put forward a different argument, maintaining that the military was obliged by the state of emergency to attack GAM. "The raids to quell the secessionist movement in Aceh will continue unless the president issues a decree to lift the civil emergency and assign us to merely play a humanitarian role in Aceh," he said.

Yudhoyono has shown no intention of lifting the civil emergency in Aceh or of reaching a temporary truce with GAM. Instead, in an appeal for national unity, the president has called on the separatist fighters to lay down their weapons, in other words surrender, to facilitate relief operations. The military, of course, would remain armed to the teeth.

Various human rights groups have confirmed that military operations are continuing in Aceh. A spokesman for the British-based Tapol organisation, Paul Barber, told the Inter Press Service News Agency: "Under the civil emergency, the Indonesian military continue to play a leading role and there has been no cutback in the level of military operations in most of the territory."

Nasruddin Abubakar, president of the Aceh Referendum Information Centre, angrily condemned the TNI's actions, saying: "The government is still maintaining the civil emergency and continuing on with military operations in Aceh despite the fact that the death toll is now close to 100,000. Is the government not yet satisfied with the killing? Are Acehnese not citizens of Indonesia?"

The fact that the Indonesian military has been devoting resources—troops, transport and coordination—to its military operations would help to explain the limited and chaotic character of the relief effort in Aceh. Air transport is crucial in reaching remote areas and moving relief supplies into the province, but it has been a shambles. The Indonesian air force has made no effort to either regulate airspace over Aceh or to provide air traffic control to vital airports in Banda Aceh and Medan where international aid is arriving.

Numerous media reports point to the bottlenecks in ferrying aid into Aceh and distributing it. On New Years Eve, an aircraft had to wait 14 hours in Banda Aceh for a takeoff clearance. At one stage the only surviving air traffic controller in Aceh was reportedly left to operate the airport alone. Trucks and fuel have been in critically short supply. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that US relief organisations in Medan, forced to rely on their own resources, had "begged, borrowed and rented" 80 trucks to provide transport.

The disinterest of the Indonesian military in the plight of Acehnese is most graphically revealed by the inexplicable delay in surveying the extent of the disaster on the west coast, which lay in the direct path of the tsunami. It took four days for the Indonesian air force to send a flight over Meulaboh, which one journalist likened to the scene after the Hiroshima atomic bomb.

Highly publicised relief operations are now underway by US and Australian military, which are providing key logistical support. US military helicopters flew the first significant supplies of aid into Meulaboh last weekend. The Australian military teams are in Banda Aceh providing clean water and other assistance. All criticism of the TNI and its appalling human rights has been shelved as these efforts are hailed in the media as ushering in a new period of cooperation.

These joint operations have very little to do with any genuine concern the victims of the December 26 disaster. Both Australian and the US have been seeking to reestablish working relations with the Indonesian military since the fall of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998. The relief efforts provide an ideal opportunity not only to work closely with the TNI but potentially to establish a foothold in Aceh—a key region with significant oil and reserves adjacent to the strategic Strait of Malacca.

As for the TNI, the support provided by the US and Australian military for relief efforts allows the diversion of additional Indonesian military forces into its operations against GAM. There is every indication that the Indonesian military has the tacit support of Washington and Canberra, which, unlike in the case of East Timor, have maintained a complete silence on Jakarta's dirty war in Aceh over the last 18 months.

US military establishment thinking was revealed in a recent comment by the US-based Stratfor Global Intelligence thinktank. It noted that the tsunami disaster might prove to be a boon for the military's campaign against GAM. "Yudhoyono will send more troops into the province to rebuild and clean up ... If GAM does not agree to settle the problem peacefully, Yudhoyono will have more troops on hand to clean them out," it noted.

What is emerging in embryo in Aceh is a return to the relations that existed prior to 1998, when the US, Australia and other major powers relied on the ruthless Suharto dictatorship to safeguard their economic and strategic interests in Indonesia and the region.

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