

Indonesian police kill three protesters during anti-mine protest

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Indonesian police have killed at least three protesters on the island of Sumbawa. The latest crackdown to protect mining interests is reported to have led to about 20 people wounded, including 9 critically, and 36 people arrested after local police attacked an unarmed crowd on December 24.

Video footage of the shooting was aired on Indonesian media, showing police firing into the air while an officer and other soldiers fired into the nearby crowd. The graphic footage also featured police beating and arresting terrified protesters.

The protest took place at the small port town of Sape, on the island of Sumbawa east of Bali, which is part of the province of West Nusa Tenggara. Sape is the key port for ferry crossings to the neighbouring island of Flores.

The protesters were part of the Anti-Mining People's Front, which had blockaded the port from December 19 to protest against mineral exploration in the area. Australian Arc Exploration (ARC) and PT Sumber Mineral Nusantara (SMN) are surveying for a future gold mine. The protesters consisted mainly of local farmers and fishermen who feared that mining activity could damage the local ecosystems and their livelihoods. They demanded the revocation of the two companies' exploration rights.

Authorities initially sought to justify firing into an unarmed crowd. West Nusa Tenggara police chief Brigadier General Arif Wachyunadi said his officers had to remove the protesters. "The rally was disturbing public order as it hindered the flow of people and vehicles from Sape harbour for Flores," he said.

Indonesian police spokesman Major-General Saud Usman Nasution said that police fired on protesters after they had set fire to dozens of government buildings, banks and homes. This was later contradicted by reports that the attacks on buildings connected to the government and mining companies were in response to the shootings.

The police also claimed to have discovered large stockpiles of weapons, including firebombs and machetes, and to have arrested "provocateurs". The size of the alleged armoury shrank, however, in subsequent reports, and no names of the so-called provocateurs have been released.

Protests across Indonesia, mostly involving students, took place in the days after the crackdown. In Sape, a further demonstration attracted 800 people, mostly from the Anti-Mining People's Front. In the provincial capital of West Nusa Tenggara, Mataram, on the island of Lombok, some 700 protesters marched on the legislative building demanding the dismissal of the Bima district chief and the national, provincial and district police chiefs.

The Indonesian government has responded by seeking to both placate public anger and protect state and business interests. On December 27, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono ordered the Indonesian police chief Timur Pradopo to investigate the protest at Sape. He called for an avoidance of any form of violence when dealing with protesters.

Presidential spokesman Julian Aldrin Pasha stated, however, that it was possible that violent action at Sape

could not have been prevented. The comment leaves the door open for further violent crackdowns on protests.

Indonesia Police Watch presidium chairman Netta Satti Pane has called for the dismissal of responsible city and provincial police chiefs to “prevent an escalation in protests and public anger”. He stated that the police did not act in accordance with official procedure as they failed to use non-lethal weapons such as rubber bullets and tear-gas.

The incident is only the latest conflict between mining corporations and locals in Sape. In February, a large protest to stop the mining permits led to a confrontation with the police. The unrest had forced Arc Exploration to cancel its operations in the area, but they had planned to resume in December due to “support for the company’s activities” from local authorities and community groups.

There is a long history of state repression in Indonesia in support of foreign business interests, especially in lucrative economic activities such as mining.

In West Papua, the US-owned Freeport Mine has recently been involved in a long-running dispute with 8,000 strikers over pay and conditions. The miners struck and set up barricades that were later attacked by the police and military. A miner was killed and at least a dozen wounded by paramilitary police during an incident at the port of Timika.

The company has admitted that it has paid millions to top local military commanders to ensure security for its operations. The company also paid 635 police and military personnel 1,250,000 rupiah (\$US134) a month, which has been dubbed ‘pocket money’ by National Police Chief General Timur Pradopo.

The Indonesian Human Rights Commission has stated that it is common for resource companies to provide “incentives” to police including cash payments, housing, food and transport.

Arc Exploration was formed in 1983 to conduct gold exploration in Indonesia. ARC’s project in West Nusa

Tenggara is one of three operations in Indonesia. The company owns 95 percent of the shares in the project, with Sumber Mineral Nusantara owning the remainder as well as the mining permit. The presidential director of Arc Exploration, George Tahjia, is also a commissioner of Freeport Indonesia.

The Indonesian Human Rights Commission has opened an inquiry into the events at Sape. Investigators have reported that some of the victims were shot by police as they were running away, while others were lying on the ground. The Commission has called for the mining companies to cease operations, pending further negotiations with the local community. Arc Exploration has subsequently announced that it is temporarily suspending its operations in the province.



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