This week in history: January 24-30

23 January 2022

25 years ago: Riots and rising social tensions in Indonesia

On January 30, 1997, thousands of people, mostly young Muslim men, stormed through the West Java town of Rengasdengklok attacking the homes, businesses and places of worship of ethnic Chinese. In all, 72 businesses, 76 houses and three factories, as well as Christian churches and Buddhist temples, were destroyed or damaged. Hundreds of riot police and military police were rushed to the town to suppress the demonstrators. Clashes also erupted in West Kalimantan, Irian Jaya and the capital of Jakarta.

The Suharto regime responded by establishing 240 military-based "riot alert centers" across Indonesia. Armed forces chief General Feisal Tanjung warned that the military would take tough action.

In the previous four months, there had been three major eruptions of ethnic violence. In October 1996, thousands of Muslims in the East Java town of Situbondo burned over 20 churches and a Buddhist temple. Five people were killed. In December 1996, thousands took part in a mass riot in the town of Tasikmalaya in West Java, leaving at least four people dead and more than 100 buildings destroyed. Six battalions of troops and the Army Strategic Reserve were mobilized to end the riot and impose a curfew. Also in December 1996, 5,000 indigenous Dayak in West Kalimantan burned and looted scores of homes and stores belonging to migrants from the island of Madura. Five people were killed.

The Suharto regime simultaneously confronted a rise in industrial struggles by the rapidly growing working class. Millions of young peasants had been drawn into the cities to work in the factories, supplying cheap labor to the multinational corporations. The year before the riots, vice governor of the National Defense Institute, Juwondo Sudarsono, warned that industrial change would inevitably lead to instability. He remarked that the root of the tensions was not religious but social—the gap between the rich and poor.

The Suharto military regime claimed to have drastically reduced poverty in Indonesia, but in 1997, 22 million were living in poverty. According to some estimates, roughly 82 percent of the population lived on 60,000 rupiah, or $25 a month, or less. At the other end of society, the top echelons of the military dictatorship significantly increased their wealth, working closely with a layer of business cronies. The Suharto family alone was worth approximately $6 billion.

Backed by the US, the military in Indonesia had seized power in a bloody coup in 1965, murdering more than half a million communist activists, workers and peasants. In the following decades, opposition was ruthlessly suppressed, and elections were stage-managed affairs.

50 years ago: "Bloody Sunday" massacre in Northern Ireland

On January 30, 1972, the British Army shot 26 unarmed civilians in Derry, Northern Ireland, who were protesting against the mass arrest without trial and torture of suspected Irish Republican Army (IRA) members. Thirteen people were killed immediately, with one additional man dying days later from his injuries. The event, which became known as Bloody Sunday, sparked a wave of protests throughout Ireland.

Leading up to the shooting was a series of protests against the mass internment of Irish Catholics. Two weeks prior, a march had been planned to the site of one internment camp outside Derry. The marchers were driven off by soldiers, who fired rubber bullets and beat demonstrators with batons.

The Sunday, January 30, a mass protest march in Derry was held in defiance of a ban on all demonstrations imposed by Northern Ireland Prime Minister Brian Faulkner. Preparing to repress the demonstration, the infamous 1st Battalion Parachute Regiment, or "1 Para," was deployed to Derry. The regiment was known for its brutal violence against Catholic demonstrators. Among its crimes was the Ballymurphy massacre in which nine civilians were killed in August 1971.

The march began with about 10,000 participants and grew as it passed through neighborhoods. It was originally intended to reach Guildhall Square, the seat of the Derry city government, where a rally would be held, but the British Army had barricaded the planned march routes. The march organizers decided to move the rally to the Free Derry Corner at the last minute. Amid the confusion, the march splintered into smaller groups with minor clashes between Catholic youth and the British soldiers. Witnesses reported seeing only handfuls of high school aged youth throwing stones at soldiers before being chased off, a common and minor occurrence in Derry.

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However, when some of the rocks landed near the 1 Para forces stationed on rooftops, they responded by firing their rifles indiscriminately into the crowd below. The paratroopers then began sweeping the streets in armored vehicles, ramming demonstrators, and beating them with clubs and rifle butts before arresting them.

As the street sweeps continued, the soldiers opened fire on any crowds they encountered. The unarmed demonstrators attempted to flee as the soldiers approached but were not able to escape the hundreds of rounds fired. Most of those wounded or killed were shot in the back. Some were shot while attempting to aid the wounded. Ten of those killed were under 30 years old; seven of them were teenagers. All were unarmed.

Outrage at the killings spread throughout all of Ireland. A general strike was held on February 2 with a mass rally held outside the British Embassy in Dublin, which was later burned down. Bloody Sunday became a rallying cry of support for the oppressed Catholic population in Northern Ireland. The nationalist IRA saw a sharp increase in support and recruitment in the aftermath.

75 years ago: Prosecution rests in war crimes trial of Japanese military chief

On January 14, 1947, prosecutors at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, organized by the victorious Allied powers of World War II, rested their case against Hideki Tojo, one of the most notorious Japanese war criminals of the conflict. Tojo was charged with crimes against peace and humanity, with prosecutors recommending the death penalty.

Tojo had been minister of war between 1940 and 1944, throughout most of the war in the Pacific. He had also been prime minister for three of those years and had appointed himself as chief of the army's general staff in 1944, taking direct responsibility for its actions, before being removed as the country's defeat approached.

A right-wing militarist, Tojo was implicated in almost all of the crimes of Japanese imperialism during the war. This included the mass killing of civilians in areas conquered by Japan, death marches of enemy soldiers and ordinary people alike in countries such as the Philippines, and the establishment of a network of "comfort women" throughout East Asia, especially in Korea, who were abused as sex slaves of the army.

Tojo was also implicated in mass murder in China, including the 1937 Nanjing Massacre during which Japanese troops went on a six-week rampage after they had sacked the Chinese city, killing an estimated 200,000 civilians.

The Allied powers drew attention to Tojo's involvement in the attack on Pearl Harbor, which had served as the pretext for US imperialist intervention in the war. Tojo was the most prominent of a group of defendants tried at the same time.

General Douglas MacArthur and other top figures in the US occupation of Japan sought to assign overriding responsibility for a host of crimes to Tojo. This was bound up with their protection of the Japanese Emperor and his family, who were viewed as vital props of the authoritarian, US-controlled regime that had been erected after the war.

Tojo would be executed in December 1948.

100 years ago: British Indian police massacre hundreds in Bengal

On January 27, 1922, British Indian police fired on a protest organized by Mohandas Gandhi's non-cooperation movement, killing over 1,500 people at a market in Salanga in what is now the Sirajganj District of northern Bengal, in modern Bangladesh.

Crowds of peasants, artisans and merchants from the predominantly Muslim region assembled there to hear a speech by nationalist leader Abdur Rashid Tarkabagish, at that time only 21 years old. Many listeners had come to oppose the near monopoly of British goods at the market and the brutal oppression of the zamindars, the large landowners who collected taxes on behalf of the British.

When Tarkabagish attempted to speak, police officers arrested and began to beat him. As demonstrators came to his rescue, police lined up in front of a liquor store and began firing into the crowd, killing hundreds and provoking a stampede in which hundreds more died. Victims were buried in mass graves, or their bodies were thrown into the nearby river.

Tarkabagish later became a leading bourgeois politician and member of the Muslim League in British-controlled India, and, after partition in 1947, in East Pakistan. He resigned from the Muslim League over the Pakistan government's massacre of students in 1952. He subsequently became a leader of the Awami League and after 1971 a leader of an independent Bangladesh.

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