

This week in history: April 29-May 5

28 April 2024

25 years ago: Indonesian military shoots 52 people dead in Aceh

On May 3, 1999, Indonesian troops killed 52 people in the province of Aceh, on the northern tip of the island of Sumatra. Soldiers fired automatic weapons into a crowd of thousands of villagers gathered near the industrial town of Kreung Geukueh to protest at the heavy-handed actions of the military over the weekend. Some people were shot in the back as they attempted to flee.

The confrontation developed after the military claimed that a soldier from a local Guided Missile Detachment unit had been abducted during a meeting of the Aceh Merdeka or Free Aceh movement over the weekend. Local villagers claimed that at least one person was beaten up by troops during an army sweep of the surrounding area. Several thousand unarmed people, including women and children, gathered to express their anger and were then fired upon.

According to one eyewitness, “soldiers chased the crowds and fired at them from behind. They even fired inside a house where villagers who were trying to escape had run.” The armed forces stated that 18 had died and 81 were injured. Officials later acknowledged that 52 had been killed.

Defence Minister and Armed Forces Chief General Wiranto described the shootings as regrettable and promised an investigation, but immediately justified the army’s actions as self defense. The local army commander Major General Rachman Gaffar claimed that the villagers were sympathizers of the Free Aceh organization which had been attempting to invade the missile base. He warned that the Indonesian Armed Forces (ABRI) would “take up arms” against the separatists.

The army killings were part of a crackdown by the military aimed at intimidating the Achenese population, which had a long history of struggle against the Dutch colonialists and then against the Indonesian government after independence in 1945. From 1980, Aceh was proclaimed a military operations zone, giving the army broad powers of search and detention. In 1998, mass graves uncovered in the province indicated that the military had murdered thousands of people in a bid to stamp out the Free Aceh movement.

The brutal killings demonstrated that, in spite of claims of the establishment of democracy after the resignation of the longtime dictator Suharto a year earlier, the repressive apparatus of the Indonesian state remained entirely in place.

50 years ago: Nixon releases edited transcripts of Watergate tapes

On April 29, 1974, US President Richard Nixon announced in a TV address that he would hand over transcripts of conversations recorded

in the White House between himself and senior staff related to the break-in at the Democratic National Convention Headquarters at the Watergate Hotel in Washington D.C. in June 1972. Nixon decided to release the transcripts after months of stonewalling the official investigation into Watergate by the House Judiciary Committee.

The transcripts of the conversations released by the White House were highly edited and the original audio tapes themselves were still not turned over, as ordered by Congress. The written material that was handed over to Congress only began with conversations recorded in September 1972, thereby excluding the crucial evidence recorded in June immediately after the break-in. The material was nonetheless damning.

The transcripts revealed that Nixon authorized payments to silence E. Howard Hunt, one of the lead organizers of the break-in; that Nixon and his aides discussed how to get their story straight to best deceive the public; and that former head of the Justice Department, John Mitchell, had lied during his testimony before the Senate when he denied having played any role in Watergate or the attempted coverup.

Sensing that the political establishment, even within his own party, was beginning to move against him, Nixon’s selected release of evidence was a desperate attempt to show some of the underhanded conduct of his administration, while still concealing the most blatantly illegal acts. In his televised remarks he continued to argue that “executive privilege” protected his operations, and that the office of the president by nature requires secrecy:

I have been reluctant to release these tapes not just because they will be embarrassing to me—which they will, and not just because they will become the subjects of speculation and even ridicule—which they will—and not just because certain parts of them will be seized upon by my political and journalistic opponents—which they will.... I’ve been reluctant because the principle of confidentiality is absolutely essential to the conduct of the Presidency.

Ultimately, this last-ditch effort to prevent the full release of the tapes failed to halt the implosion of the Nixon administration. In order to distance themselves from the White House after the criminal nature of the administration was now out in the open, the Republican leaders in the House and Senate both made statements against Nixon. Senate Republican Leader Hugh Scott called the conduct revealed in the transcripts “deplorable, disgusting, shabby, and immoral” and House Republican Leader John Jacob Rhodes stated that he believed Nixon should consider resigning.

The House Judiciary Committee would continue to demand the full, unedited release of the Watergate tapes, while Nixon refused to make any more evidence available. The issue would be taken to the

Supreme Court, which unanimously ruled against Nixon and forced the release of the tapes on July 24, 1974.

75 years ago: Strike erupts at Ford auto plants over speedups

On May 5, 1949, workers at Ford plants in Michigan, including the massive River Rouge facility, walked off the job in an indefinite strike opposing speedups of the line. The stoppage would paralyze a host of parts suppliers and other flow-on industries, meaning that while some 60,000 workers were directly involved, around 100,000 were idle during the dispute.

The strike was the second in less than a year, provoked by workers' accusations that Ford management was speeding up the line unannounced. This was part of a broader offensive aimed at boosting productivity, without providing any improvements to wages. It occurred in the lead-up to contract negotiations covering the major auto companies later in the year, with the aim being to change the facts on the ground prior to the talks.

During the strike, workers held mass meetings as well as a rally involving tens of thousands in Detroit. The United Auto Workers (UAW) union, however, did everything it could to wear down the strike and ensure a return to work. It isolated the stoppage to Ford, and did not seek to mobilize broader support. UAW President Walter Reuther entered into backroom negotiations with the company, aimed at shutting down the dispute. After three weeks of the strike, Reuther engineered a return to work, based on a vote at a hastily-called meeting that was attended by only around 3,000 of the 60,000 strikers. Previous meetings, with far larger attendance, had rejected attempts to end the stoppage.

The *Militant*, the publication of the Socialist Workers Party, then the Trotskyist movement in the US, explained that the strike had been terminated without any of its demands being met. Ford continued to deny the allegations of a speedup.

The *Militant* stated: “[T]he Reuther leadership does not intend to challenge the company on the real issue—‘the prerogative of management to control speed on the line.’ To truly challenge the speed-up demands direct, on-the-job intervention by the workers in the sphere of production control. But Reuther agrees with the corporations that ‘increased production’ is the answer to all problems, and this, in itself, means he will put up no real struggle on the speed-up issue.” The article concluded by noting that the sell-out pointed to the need for a new leadership, from the rank and file, committed to a program of genuine struggle.

100 years ago: Whampoa Military Academy founded in China

On May 1, 1924, the Chinese nationalist movement (Kuomintang) founded the first modern Chinese professional military school in Whampoa (now the Huangpu district in the city of Guangzhou, formerly Canton) with the nationalist leader Chaing Kai-Shek as its first head.

The opening ceremonies were led by the veteran Chinese nationalist leader Sun Yat-Sen, who delivered a speech that was to form the

lyrics of the national anthem of the current Republic of China in Taiwan.

The construction of the academy was funded by the Soviet Union, and it was staffed primarily by Soviet instructors. The USSR and the Communist International, under the leadership of Stalin, had given political support to the Kuomintang, which the Chinese Communist Party had joined. This led to disaster in the Shanghai revolution three years later. The genuine Marxists in the Left Opposition of the Russian Communist Party opposed this alliance.

Many of the Soviet instructors had been trained in the Russian Civil War. These included Andrei Bubnov, a former commissar of the Red Army in Ukraine, and later a prominent leader of the Left Opposition.

The academy had other notable instructors and students who were to play important roles later, both on the side of the Stalinist Communist Party and on that of the Kuomintang. The academy's first chief political officer was Zhou Enlai, a close ally of Mao Zedong, and later the first premier of the Peoples Republic of China.

The academy trained many officers who would fight the Japanese after 1937 in both the nationalist and Stalinist forces, and then against each other during the Chinese Civil War. These included Lin Biao, who would later become the vice chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, only to be repudiated by the Maoist leadership in 1971. Many other Asian students trained there, including Vietnamese students who were to play a role in the fight against French imperialism. The Stalinist leader Ho-Chi Minh lectured at Whampoa.

Harold Isaacs, in his *Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, notes how, in its first years, “Whampoa bred a new type of military man for China, but it also became the breeding-ground of Chiang's power. To it flocked some of the best youth of the land. From it came some of the sturdiest fighters of the revolution. But the growth of the mass movement, the rising power of the labour unions and the peasant associations, soon drove the dividing line of class through the ranks of Whampoa's cadets.”



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