



Box 5925 Annapolis, MD 21403 [info@srintl.org](mailto:info@srintl.org) [www.srintl.org](http://www.srintl.org)

## FOR FORGOTTEN ACEH

August 4, 2003

### INTRODUCTION

On May 19, 2003, the Indonesian government declared martial law in Aceh, on the northern tip of the island of Sumatra in the Indonesian archipelago. Immediately, the Indonesian military (TNI) renewed attacks on Acehnese; the largest military offensive since the 1975 invasion of East Timor. Aceh's separatist movement, which already saw over 10,000 of its people killed since 1976 in a long-standing struggle with the Indonesian government, now faces the prospect of 200,000 people being cleansed from the province.<sup>1</sup>

Human rights groups estimate some 200 civilians have been killed in Aceh since May 19. Over 40,000 people have fled their homes; many are in camps without clean drinking water and adequate sanitation.<sup>2</sup> More than 300,000 Acehnese have become internal refugees or internally displaced persons.<sup>3</sup> The behavior of the TNI has been brutal: locking civilians in their homes and burning them alive, destroying villages, and using rape as a weapon of war. Numerous civilians were arrested and are being detained in conditions that violate norms relating to the treatment of prisoners and the rights of civilians in conflict situations. The TNI declared that its tough offensive against Aceh, originally supposed to last six months, would now last much longer.<sup>4</sup>

The international community is all but silent on the issue of Aceh, while giving much more attention to the detention of Myanmar pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Though the US, UK, and Australian governments have expressed their concerns at the possibility of human rights violations, the Indonesian military's operation itself has not been openly criticized.<sup>5</sup> Today, it is increasingly difficult to ascertain the extent and nature of atrocities occurring in Aceh due to the government's acquiescence of the military's policy of threatening and harassing reporters and human rights activists.

### BACKGROUND

Aceh is enduring one of Asia's longest running wars. For almost 27 years, the armed Free Aceh Movement (GAM) has been demanding independence from Indonesia.

---

<sup>1</sup> Scott Burchill, People Are Going To Be Slaughtered. *The Age*. May 27, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Kurt Biddle, U.S. Journalist in Danger: Reporters and Human Rights Defenders Targeted for Exposing Indonesian Military Atrocities in Aceh. Indonesia Human Rights Network. June 20, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Pranjal Tiwari, All In The Timing: Indonesia invades Aceh. May 26, 2003.  
<http://www.zmag.org/weluser.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Jane Perlez, Indonesia Says Drive Against Separatists Will Not End Soon. *The New York Times*. July 9, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> *Supra* note 3.



# Survivors' Rights International

Box 5925 Annapolis, MD 21403 [info@srintl.org](mailto:info@srintl.org) [www.srintl.org](http://www.srintl.org)

During Indonesia's war for independence from the Dutch in 1945- 1949 the Acehnese were fierce fighters, and after Indonesia won its independence Aceh was promised "special status," with greater autonomy. However, Jakarta subverted this promise.<sup>6</sup>

In 1971 the discovery of natural gas (LNG) in Aceh brought in large revenue for the central government and multinational corporations, with little money spent on the welfare of the Acehnese.<sup>7</sup> The income Indonesia draws from the Aceh gas fields is a quarter of the country's natural resource revenues.<sup>8</sup> Acehnese people suffered land expropriation, serious environmental devastation and atrocities by the Indonesian military. Resentment over not benefiting from the wealth under their own soil and the extreme centralization of state power in Jakarta led to formation of the GAM in 1976.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, ExxonMobil has provided Indonesian troops with economic and material support, and Acehnese activists and the Washington based International Labor Rights Fund charged the oil giant with complicity in TNI murder, kidnapping and rape of Acehnese living near the facilities.<sup>10</sup> ( See [SURVIVORS' RIGHTS INTERNATIONAL | ATCA Alert](#) <sup>11</sup>)

From 1989 to 1998, Aceh was declared a Military Operations Area (DOM). During this period of military rule, police and military committed systematic human rights violations and crimes against humanity on the civilian population as a means to destroy the GAM. The military burned down houses of families suspected of supporting the GAM, routinely tortured and raped detainees, and left corpses in public places as a gruesome example to others. Human rights organizations estimate that thousands of people were killed or disappeared during this period. Human rights abuses under the DOM left Acehnese with deep resentment toward Jakarta.<sup>12</sup>

After the authoritarian Suharto regime fell in 1998, democratic political space that opened up across Indonesia led to a growing non-violent political movement in Aceh. In 1999 more than one million Acehnese (almost a quarter of Aceh's population) peacefully demonstrated to demand a referendum on the region's political future. Recognizing the potential threat of a non-violent movement, the military directly targeted political activists, human rights defenders, and members of civil society through imprisonment, kidnapping and murder. In 2001 and 2002, almost 3,500 people, mostly civilians, were killed.<sup>13</sup>

After long conflicts and negotiations between the Indonesian government and the GAM, the two sides agreed to a cease-fire and signed a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) on December 9, 2002 in Geneva. Both sides agreed to meet to discuss the CoHA in Tokyo. Indonesia demanded that the GAM give up their call for

---

<sup>6</sup> "Aceh Backgrounder." Indonesian Human Rights Network. <http://www.indonesianetwork.org>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> *Supra* note 2.

<sup>9</sup> *Supra* note 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Supra* note 2.

<sup>11</sup> "Alien Tort Claims Act Alert." Survivors' Rights International, Inc.

[http://www.srintl.org/alerts/alert\\_ATCA.my](http://www.srintl.org/alerts/alert_ATCA.my)

<sup>12</sup> *Supra* note 6.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

The logo for Survivors' Rights International features a stylized orange map of Indonesia with a white outline of a person's head and shoulders superimposed on it. To the right of the map, the text "Survivors' Rights International" is written in a bold, serif font, with "Survivors'" in orange and "Rights International" in black.

# Survivors' Rights International

Box 5925 Annapolis, MD 21403 [info@srintl.org](mailto:info@srintl.org) [www.srintl.org](http://www.srintl.org)

independence and that the GAM disband in order to continue the talks. These political demands were purposely unrealistic. Meanwhile, both sides were subsequently criticized for violating the agreement. The Indonesian government began actively undermining the agreement in February 2003 by arresting non-violent activists for speaking out against Jakarta. Immediately after the talks ended, on May 19, 2003, Indonesian president Megawati declared martial law in Aceh.

President Megawati's government is currently facing an internal crisis, particularly over the effects of its neo-liberal economic policies such as the removal of various subsidies, privatization, extensive job-losses, and instability in market prices. Some polls have recorded some 80% of Indonesian people expressing general discontent with the government, and on May 20<sup>th</sup> 2003, thousands across the country participated in demonstrations demanding political reform and Megawati's resignation. In this situation, the attack on Aceh, which has popular support in Indonesia, could certainly boost the sense of national unity in favor of a government in crisis.<sup>14</sup> In fact, Megawati is shoring up her nationalist credentials for next year's election.<sup>15</sup> The military tried to portray its commission of crimes against humanity targeting civilian Achenese as a battle for national unity rather than a ruthless campaign to destroy and instill fear in an ethnic group. Moreover, in the context of the war against terrorism, the Indonesian government seems to have taken the opportunity to exterminate the insurgency in Aceh.<sup>16</sup>

The reaction overseas has been muted. Protests from abroad have been rarely existent. The Indonesian government has interpreted the relative silence of the international community on the issue of Aceh as support for its actions in Aceh.<sup>17</sup> The military has been free to launch what many Acehnese feel is ethnic cleansing. The US appears to have little influence among the Indonesian government, whose cooperation Washington wants for the war on terrorism as the Indonesian police have been the most important force in rounding up suspected terrorists.<sup>18</sup> Senior Bush administration officials reportedly have decided to release funds for a controversial military training program for Indonesia for the fiscal year 2003. Those concerned about the Indonesian military's poor human rights record condemned the administration's plan to restore International Military Education and Training (IMET) and urged Congress to strongly protest the plan.<sup>19</sup> "For over three decades, the US and Indonesian militaries were extremely close and we saw no move to reform.... The Indonesian military's worst abuses took place when we were most engaged."<sup>20</sup> The Indonesian military will see IMET as a US endorsement of their human rights abuses. On June 27, 2003, members of the US Congress called on the administration to work for an end to Indonesia's military assault on Aceh and a return to

---

<sup>14</sup> *Supra* note 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Supra* note 1.

<sup>16</sup> *Supra* note 3.

<sup>17</sup> Lesley McCulloch, Fear, Pain, and Shame in Aceh. *Asia Times*. July 6, 2003

<sup>18</sup> *Supra* note 4.

<sup>19</sup> "Groups Condemn Bush Administration Move to Restore Military Training for Indonesia, Urge Congress to Strongly Protest." Indonesia Human Rights Network. <http://www.indonesianetwork.org>. July 14, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*.



Box 5925 Annapolis, MD 21403 [info@srintl.org](mailto:info@srintl.org) [www.srintl.org](http://www.srintl.org)

the negotiation table.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, Tapol, Indonesian Human Rights Campaign, and other human rights groups called for an end to arms sales and other military cooperation with Indonesia, saying “the policy of western countries to strengthen their military ties with Jakarta as part of the ‘war against terror’ is wholly misguided and dangerous.”<sup>22</sup>

## HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

The current situation is a nightmare for people in Aceh. According to Indonesia’s National Commission on Human Rights, the military appears to be training militia groups of the kind that acted brutally in East Timor in 1999.<sup>23</sup> The TNI’s overarching mission has been clearly defined by General Sutarto: “You must chase and wipe out GAM... you are trained to kill, so wipe them out.”<sup>24</sup> Indonesia’s independent Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence (Kontras) said that Jakarta’s tactics were resulting in massive abuses of civilian human rights. Kontras said 176 civilians had been killed in the first month, 101 tortured, 50 arrested and 15 had disappeared. It calculated that 202 GAM members had been killed and 112 arrested.<sup>25</sup> The majority of the civilian fatalities were shot by troops. Kontras says, “[We believe] most of the civilian victims were murdered extra-judicially because from the field data it was found that the majority of the corpses had bullet wounds.”<sup>26</sup> More than 40,000 people have become refugees. The military is refusing to disclose civilian casualties. The TNI claimed to have killed about 260 GAM fighters and detained a further 540, of whom 225 have surrendered. Local people said that the GAM fighters killed had been civilians and in some cases those arrested had in fact been executed.<sup>27</sup> According to estimates by the Indonesian military, tens of thousands of civilians have been forced from their homes by the army and placed in relocation camps.<sup>28</sup> Since the imposition of martial law in Aceh on May 19, an alarmingly high rate of Acehnese people have been detained without access to lawyers and charged with treason.<sup>29</sup> Under martial law they are not allowed legal representation for twenty days; this can be extended to fifty days.<sup>30</sup>

Various sources report torture, intimidation, sleep deprivation, overcrowding, and a lack of food and water during detention. The torture is systematic, includes children (under the age of 18 and are reportedly beaten) and elderly victims, and is committed all hours of the day and night. Additionally, the combination of the lack of food,

---

<sup>21</sup> “Congress Expressed Deep Concern about Military Offensive and Human Rights Violations in Aceh.” Indonesia Human Rights Network. <http://www.indonesianetwork.org>. June 27, 2003.

<sup>22</sup> John Aglionby and Richard Norton-Taylor, British Tanks in use in Aceh. *UK Guardian*. June 26, 2003.

<sup>23</sup> *Supra* note 4.

<sup>24</sup> “Indonesian troops told to ‘exterminate’ Aceh rebels, spare civilians.” *AFP*. May 20, 2003.

<sup>25</sup> *Supra* note 23.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>28</sup> *Supra* note 4.

<sup>29</sup> *Supra* note 17.

<sup>30</sup> *Supra* note 2.



Box 5925 Annapolis, MD 21403 [info@srintl.org](mailto:info@srintl.org) [www.srintl.org](http://www.srintl.org)

dehydration, and the heat partially due to overcrowded conditions in detention facilities and jails has resulted in many becoming sick as shared lavatories are blocked for several days, many have open wounds as a result of torture by the police, and the risk of infection in such unsanitary conditions is very high. Furthermore, the Indonesian government has announced that those suspected of supporting the separatist movement in the province will be charge with treason.<sup>31</sup>

Human rights workers and lawyers have also been subject to attack for their work in Aceh. Indonesia's National Human Rights Commission says there have been arbitrary arrests of human rights workers.<sup>32</sup> Kontras closed its office in Aceh because the military's tactics made it too dangerous for its workers to go out in the field.<sup>33</sup> The military frightens into silence anyone who dares to report on the military's commission of atrocities and other serious human rights abuses in the region. The Indonesian government does not want Aceh to be internationally publicized as East Timor was.<sup>34</sup> Indonesian journalists are banned from writing about the rebels, and foreign reporters have effectively been banned from the province.<sup>35</sup> Police and army officials have interrogated journalists reporting on TNI atrocities against civilians; some journalists have received death threats. On June 19, 2003, the US-based Indonesia Human Rights Network called upon the Indonesian government to respect freedom of the press and end harassment and intimidation of activists and reporters working in Aceh.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, the Indonesian government replaced the province of Aceh's 114 sub-districts chiefs with retired soldiers, which would give the military a stranglehold over the province and allow the uninterrupted plunder of natural resources.<sup>37</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In Aceh, a deep sense of injustice and anger has accumulated for decades. Those who are responsible for past atrocities remain free while former president Wahid's promise of a referendum and president Megawati's "no more drop of blood" pledge remain unfulfilled.<sup>38</sup> And now, lots of Acehnese are detained, displaced, tortured, burned, and killed. This tragedy will be compounded by hunger and disease, resulting in several more thousands of deaths if not halted. Jakarta could win the battles, but the current TNI offensive is only deteriorating the already serious situation, which was due to the brutality of the Indonesian military and the lack of Acehnese control over the region's economy. The military operation will create a new generation of GAM, rather than bring

---

<sup>31</sup> *Supra* note 17.

<sup>32</sup> *Supra* note 2.

<sup>33</sup> *Supra* note 4.

<sup>34</sup> Andrew Marshall, Dead Silence. *Time*. June 9,2003

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>36</sup> *Supra* note 2.

<sup>37</sup> *Supra* note 35.

<sup>38</sup> Aboeprijadi Santoso, Another Timor massacre must be avoided. *Jakarta Post*. May 29, 2003.



Box 5925 Annapolis, MD 21403 [info@srintl.org](mailto:info@srintl.org) [www.srintl.org](http://www.srintl.org)

Aceh back into the Indonesian nationalist fold, as Indonesia's past experience with East Timor shows. In this sense, military solution may be no solution at all.

Aceh's appeals to the international community and the UN for assistance and protection are met with indifference. The TNI will continue its policy of severe oppression if it believes the international community will continue to avert recognition of, and cessation of the commission of atrocities by the government's military, or the accountability of its perpetrators through a just resolution. Some argue that Indonesia has the right to maintain its internal integrity and secession will inevitably trigger the domino of centrifugal forces across the Indonesian archipelago. However, how many Acehnese lives are worth the preservation of its existing political boundaries? In addition, there are few reasons to believe that Indonesia's territorial boundaries are more immutable than those of Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, and Czechoslovakia.<sup>39</sup> The international community should pressure the Indonesian government to prevent its military from killing and torturing civilians, including children and the elderly. The Acehnese should not be sacrificed in the name of the war on terrorism. There should be broad recognition and condemnation of the atrocities being perpetrated in Aceh. The international community must pressure the Indonesian government not to undermine the CoHA.

---

<sup>39</sup> *Supra* note 1.