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Indonesia

Permanent emergency in Aceh

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IV was going to press as news came in of the terrorist bombing in Bali which led to the deaths of almost 200 people. While the Indonesian government has been accused of laxity in its treatment of Islamic militants, it has been ferocious in its repression of genuine movements for self-determination like those in the province of Aceh. The article below was taken from the September 2002 issue of the solidarity bulletin Tapol. It has been shortened slightly for space reasons.

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/15_Indonesian_army_Aceh.jpg]
Indonesian army patrol in Aceh

Since July a political issue constantly on the front pages in Jakarta has been the likelihood that a civil or military emergency/martial law will be declared in Aceh. However, all the talk about declaring a state of emergency in Aceh is beside the point because the Acehnese have been living in a state of emergency for decades. With the exception of a short interval of relative peace in 1999 and 2000, most parts of Aceh can be described as war zones. The death toll since the beginning of the year has risen to around fifteen people a day, most of them civilians. Clashes between the TNI (Indonesian armed forces) and/or POLRI (Indonesian Police) on the one hand and GAM (Free Aceh Movement) on the other are virtually daily occurrences.

The government's move to raise the issue of declaring an emergency in Aceh is more to do with the political situation in Jakarta where Cilangkap, the TNI headquarters, is increasingly calling the shots. The military leaders want to grab even more power than they already have. At the beginning of August, Major-General Djali Yusuf, the military commander of Iskandar Muda, the military command of Aceh, made a report to President Megawati, in which he spoke of the continuing violence in the region and accused GAM of great brutality. He also announced the creation of a special unit, Satgas Rajawali (Rajawali Special Unit), a combat unit trained and equipped for counter-insurgency and anti-guerrilla warfare. The Rajawali units include troops from the army (Kopassus), the navy (Marines), the air force (Paskhasau) and Kostrad, the army's strategic corps.

DOM and the emergency

In response, President Megawati instructed Major-General Djali Yusuf to 'act decisively' against all those involved in acts of violence. From that moment on, all the focus of attention was about declaring an emergency situation in Aceh.

Ever since the birth of the Indonesian Republic in 1945, the use of violence by Indonesian troops has been a regular feature.. The resurgence of rebel movements such as the Darul Islam and the RMS (South Maluku Republic) in the fifties was met by Jakarta with swift military action, always accompanied by great brutality.

After the resurgence of GAM in the late eighties, the dictator Suharto turned Aceh into a DOM (Daerah Operasi Militer or military operations zone), which gave the military free rein to do whatever they thought fit. In practice this meant special forces, notably Kopassus, the red berets combat unit, using their intelligence agents to extract information from villagers. According to official figures, the death toll during DOM, from 1989 till 1998, was at least one thousand; a similar number disappeared and thousands were left physically disabled, widowed or orphaned. After the fall of Suharto, DOM was lifted but in 2000 the military started to apply the same violent methods again. DOM had again become the reality though no one was calling it that.

During the Wahid presidency several new constructions were initiated. A special autonomy law which renamed Aceh as NAD (Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam) was enacted by parliament but it has made little difference on the ground. In 2001 two presidential instructions or Inpres (Instruksi Presiden) were issued to deal 'comprehensively' with the situation in Aceh but in practice only the security measures as prescribed by TNI/Polri were implemented. After becoming president in July last year, Megawati issued yet another Inpres this year which, like its predecessors, claims to be aimed at seeking a 'comprehensive' solution but all that has happened is that violence has increased significantly since the beginning of the year. The Inpres was due to expire on 31 July and this has been used as the justification by the TNI to press for a stronger military solution.

It is more than obvious that the military wants something more than just an Inpres. Firstly, they want more troops in Aceh, and secondly, with their experiences in East Timor still fresh in their minds, they want to be given a legal umbrella that would protect them from facing charges of gross human rights abuses or crimes against humanity.

Despite the successes of the recent military campaign in Aceh, GAM guerrilla units are still present in large numbers in the countryside. Members of the security forces openly admit that it is very difficult to distinguish GAM people from the local population, thereby giving credence to the popularity of GAM among the population. The call for an increase in the number of troops is the army's way of dealing with this situation.

The demand for an emergency situation in Aceh coincided with the start of the ad hoc trials on East Timor, where a few highly-placed TNI officers are facing trial. Although no Indonesian human rights activist is convinced that the generals responsible for the mayhem in East Timor will be duly punished, the trials are nevertheless a humiliation for the armed forces. No one denies that the ad hoc trials would never have happened without strong international pressure.

On the opening day of the first trial, top generals demonstratively sat in the first row of the public gallery and embraced their colleagues when they arrived in court as defendants. TNI headquarters, represented by spokesperson Major General Syafrie Syamsuddin, whose own hands are stained with East Timorese blood, made it clear that the armed forces do not accept the present situation. TNI basically wants absolute impunity in Aceh and don't care whether it is called a military emergency, a civilian emergency or whatever. The DOM situation introduced in 1989 by President Suharto gave TNI the kind of security they are now seeking.

The political process

The idea of declaring an emergency in Aceh created quite a stir in Indonesia. Outspoken NGOs were strongly against it while most public figures and political commentators warned against it. Some members of parliament said that the government had basically failed to handle the situation in Aceh properly and concluded that TNI/POLRI had failed to create a conducive situation for security for the Acehnese.

The bottom line regarding an emergency situation is that it will only worsen the situation, that it will increase violence while at the same time jeopardising the negotiations between GAM and the Indonesian government. In an attempt to sort things out, Coordinating Minister for Political and Security Affairs Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) paid a brief visit to Aceh to consult different sectors of society. Yet the trip was hardly necessary because it was obvious that everyone in Aceh, even including the governor, Abdullah Puteh, known as a prominent member of the Jakarta elite, rejected the suggestion that an emergency should be declared.

There is a difference of opinion between political generals like SBY and the military top brass on Aceh. SBY is trying to maintain a balance between the negotiation strategy and the military strategy. During his brief visit to Aceh, civil

society there used the opportunity to express total rejection of an emergency. Every day demonstrations took place in Banda Aceh and in a closed meeting with NGO representatives, a Position Paper by Acehese NGOs was handed over expressing the view that the conflict should be resolved by just and democratic means while avoiding the military approach.

What SBY succeeded in doing, whether intentionally or otherwise, was to turn the issue into a major political issue. The very idea of declaring a military emergency gave Acehese civil society across the entire political spectrum an opportunity to speak out, saying that dialogue is the best way to proceed. Articles and comments in the media drew attention to the fact that at the latest round of negotiations in Geneva in May/June, mutual agreement was reached that a new approach, called All Inclusive Dialogue (AID, original in English), should be pursued. Although the modalities of AID have not yet been worked out, the general assumption is that Acehese civil society as a whole will take part, which means plural representation of society on both sides of the negotiations. Agreement was also reached on the need to have a cease fire.

Major western powers including the US and the UK have given clear signals to the government that negotiations is the way ahead..

The TNI general staff have made it clear in a number of statements that they reject negotiations. The generals argue that the talks have produced nothing and make it clear that they resent the very idea of the Jakarta government sitting round a table with 'separatists'.

Overall TNI Strategy

But there are indications that all the fuss being made by TNI stalwarts about Aceh is part of a wider strategy to gain a greater role at the heart of Indonesian politics again. Some military analysts argue that the Aceh conflict is being used by the TNI as a stepping stone back to power.

The Maluku conflict erupted in January 1999 while the reputation of the TNI was at its lowest ebb. TNI's involvement in starting and fostering the conflict is well known. The longer the Maluku conflict has continued, the more public opinion has shifted, from seeing the security forces as part of the problem to seeing it as part of the solution.

The same trend can be seen in Aceh. In February this year, despite a wave of protests, a new military command, Kodam Iskandar Muda, was established in Aceh, another major victory for TNI. But their demands went much further, demanding foolproof impunity for their military operations. Instead of being seen as the culprit, TNI is emerging as the 'guardian' of law and order in Aceh, or as the generals define it, the only force capable of guaranteeing the preservation of NKRI (Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia, the Unitary State of the Indonesian Republic).

Business bonanza

In economic terms, the conflicts in Maluku and Aceh have produced a bumper harvest for the army and the police. With the swift approval of parliament, the government allocated a generous budget increase for the TNI and POLRI, each getting an additional 1 trillion rupiahs (about US\$ 115 million). This was quite a feat, considering the economic problems still besetting the Indonesian economy, including a heavy domestic debt. The two territorial commands in Aceh and Maluku now have a tri-function: military, political and last but not least, an economic function.

Permanent emergency in Aceh

The funding of the armed forces is usually described as 25 per cent against 75 per cent, the former being what they receive from the state budget while the latter is what they must find from other sources. In conflict areas like Maluku and Aceh, the figures are more extreme and are put at 10 to 90 per cent. The war economies in Maluku and Aceh involve security officers in practically every economic sector including a wide range of illegal activities such as illegal taxes, extortion, trafficking in women, prostitution, gambling and so on. In both places the military and police are also up to their necks in illegal logging, fishing and smuggling luxury goods into the country.

The TNI has a multiple agenda in Aceh. While the military top in Jakarta repeatedly promise to wipe out GAM, it is clear that many sections of the security forces are benefiting from the war economy and it is in their interest to keep the conflict going. The Aceh issue is also being used to blackmail the political elite in Jakarta, up to and including President Megawati, by insisting that they need all the manpower, equipment and money they can lay their hands on while enjoying impunity, allowing them to step up their brutality without fear of facing charges of human rights violations.