

# Indonesian military continues its repression in Aceh

By Carol Divjak  
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Despite peace negotiations held in Geneva last month, the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) is continuing its offensive against the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM) in the north of Sumatra. The current operations are part of a brutal civil war that has raged for 26 years and cost the lives of at least 12,000 people.

The latest deaths took place last week. According to a military spokesman, the army killed two alleged GAM members in two separate clashes in Lhlong village and Lhokseumawe on June 12 and 13 respectively. Three civilians and two soldiers also died. GAM, however, claimed that none of its members had died and accused the military of killing innocent civilians. These incidents are part of a pattern of military violence and repression aimed at intimidating the local Acehnese population.

In early April, President Megawati Sukarnoputri's government dispatched 1,850 fresh troops to Aceh to reinforce army and security forces in the oil-rich province. The force consisted of 825 Kostrad army strategic reserve members, along with more than 500 marines and 412 Kopassus special forces troops. Under the Suharto dictatorship, Kopassus was notorious for its use of abduction, torture and assassination to suppress political opposition, including in regions such as Aceh, East Timor and West Papua.

According to then Kostrad head, Lieutenant General Ryamizard Ryacudu, who saw off the force, the troops currently in the province had become "ineffective" after more than a year in the conflict area. Asked by *Tempo* magazine how he thought the military should deal with the separatists, he replied: "Exterminate provocateurs, shoot rioters".

Significantly Megawati has recently promoted Ryamizard to army chief. The emergence of figures

such as Ryamizard in the top TNI posts is a measure of just how beholden Megawati is to the military. During the protracted moves to oust former president Abdurrahman Wahid last year, Megawati relied on the military top brass to prevent Wahid from blocking impeachment proceedings and declaring a state of emergency.

The military was highly critical of Wahid's decision to allow limited political freedoms in Aceh and West Papua and to open negotiations with the separatists. Under strong pressure from the TNI, Wahid signed a presidential order for a crackdown on GAM in April 2001. Megawati, then vice-president, presided over the "Operation for the Restoration of Security and Upholding the Law" and continued the offensive when she took over as president later in the year.

At present there are an estimated 25,000-30,000 security forces in Aceh and the number of deaths has jumped sharply over the past 14 months. Last year alone, 2,000 people were killed, including 1,600 civilians. So far this year more than 400 have died. According to the European-based International Crisis Group, the TNI operations have succeeded in reducing the area under GAM control to only 30-40 percent of the province as compared to 60-70 percent prior to April 2001.

In a number of cases, locals have accused the police and soldiers of killing innocent civilians either during patrols or in reprisal for GAM attacks. The conflict claims roughly four civilian lives for every soldier or alleged guerrilla killed. At checkpoints throughout the province, the security forces openly extort bribes.

An article this week in the *New York Times* explained: "Often, villagers suspected of having helped the rebels are shot. Here in Butit Meranti, a deaf plantation worker, Abdul Wahab, 35, was gunned

down by soldiers as he emerged from the forest, because unlike some other villagers, he was confused and unable to run away quickly enough, Mr Bin said.

“Almost every day in Lhokseumawe, the city closest to the natural gas fields, workers of the International Red Cross sad they pick up bodies shot at close range and dumped in the street. The cause of death is usually listed as ‘O.T.K.’ for ‘orang tak kenal’ or ‘persons unknown’.”

A report issued by the US-based Human Rights Watch in March strongly criticised the role of the Indonesian National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas-HAM) for covering up one of the most widely reported atrocities in Aceh. In August 2001, 30 men and a two-year-old child from a rubber and palm oil plantation in Julok, East Aceh, were lined up and executed by a group of armed men in camouflage uniforms. GAM and the TNI both accused each other of the killings.

Komnas-HAM interviewed a number of eyewitnesses, virtually all of whom insisted that the army was responsible. But, as the Human Rights Watch report pointed out, investigators failed to follow up on key information and some of the interviews were conducted in the presence of military officers—a situation guaranteed to intimidate witnesses. Komnas-HAM commissioners shelved their findings for five months and only established a formal commission of inquiry in January. No progress has been made in identifying or prosecuting the culprits.

The Megawati administration and the military have imposed a climate of fear and repression in Aceh in order to undermine support for GAM and to impose a political solution that falls short of independence from Indonesia. Last year the Indonesian parliament passed a special autonomy law for Aceh that offers the local administration a larger share of the province’s oil and gas revenues.

During the negotiations in Geneva, GAM leaders took a step toward dropping their previous demand for an independent statelet in northern Sumatra. An agreement was reached that accepted the autonomy law as the starting point for the next round of talks, which are to include other Acehnese representatives in discussion about local government and a ceasefire. The agreement was signed for Jakarta by Ambassador Sastrohandoyo Wiryono Abdullah and for GAM by Dr

Zaini Abdullah.

The US Special Envoy to the Middle East, Anthony Zinni, was present—an indication that the Bush administration is closely following Jakarta’s campaign to stamp out GAM. The US-based Exxon Mobil corporation operates and partly owns three huge gas fields in Aceh and the large Arun liquefied natural gas (LNG) plant. US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matt Daley recently visited exiled GAM leader Hasan di Tiro in Sweden to insist that he accept the government’s autonomy offer.

The talks were the seventh in a series between government officials and exiled GAM members begun in 1999 under the auspices of the Geneva-based Henry Dunant Centre. Despite the negotiations, the TNI continued its operations in Aceh. Less than 24 hours after the latest round, a police mobile brigade unit shot dead Zakaria Yahya, the GAM spokesperson for the Greater Aceh region. Police claim they were not aware of the agreement reached at the talks on May 10.

The attack was designed to send a message both to GAM and the Megawati administration that the TNI was going to dictate the terms of any settlement. The commander of the Iskandar Muda military base in Aceh, Brigadier General Djali Yusuf, insisted his troops would continue to “conduct operations for the restoration of peace”.

The growing assertiveness of the military in Aceh, West Papua and other areas, and its disregard for democratic rights and human life is a sharp warning that there has been no fundamental change in Jakarta since the fall of the Suharto junta.

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