

13 March 2001

AI Index ASA 21/015/2001 - News Service Nr. 47

Indonesia: Political crisis deepens in Jakarta while repression continues in Aceh and Papua

As political tension mounts in Jakarta with mass demonstrations both for and against President Wahid, escalating human rights crises in outlying regions, particularly Aceh and Papua (Irian Jaya), must not be ignored, Amnesty International said today.

"While all eyes are turned towards Jakarta, the Indonesian security forces are intensifying their repressive approach in Aceh, and peaceful political activists in Papua are being silenced behind prison bars," Amnesty International said.

On 10 March, five leading political activists in Wamena, Papua were sentenced to between four and four-and-a-half years in prison after being found guilty of "conspiring to commit separatism". Amnesty International considers them to be prisoners of conscience and has called for their immediate and unconditional release.

Rev Obed Komba, Rev Yudas Meage, Yafet Yelemaken, Murjono Murib and Amelia Yigibalom, are members of the pro-independence Papua Council Presidium. The five had been accused of "masterminding" a series of violent incidents that took place in Wamena in October 2000, in which over 30 people were killed. There is no evidence that the five were involved. In fact, there are reports that at least some of the defendants attempted to calm the situation.

Meanwhile in Aceh, the trial of Muhammad Nazar, a leading pro-independence activist, is currently underway. Amnesty International also considers him to be a prisoner of conscience. The Indonesian authorities have also recently made statements that they are preparing to launch "limited security operations" in the province. There are fears that this will lead to a further deterioration in the human rights situation in Aceh.

"An approach based on locking up peaceful activists and intensifying military repression will seriously undermine prospects for a peaceful solution to problems in these provinces," Amnesty International said. "These patterns of repression in both Aceh and Papua are an indictment of a reform process which has all but stalled in the face of growing political crisis in Jakarta."

In Papua, 17 pro-independence supporters in Wamena were also sentenced to prison terms of between one-year-nine-months and three-years-six-months on 10 March after being found guilty of attacking the police and carrying weapons without a licence.

The defendants were kicked and beaten by the police following their arrest in October 2000 and during the course of their trial. According to a local human rights organization, members of the Police Mobile Brigade (Brimob) entered their detention centre on 4 February 2001, several

weeks after their trial had begun, and threatened, kicked and beat several of the defendants causing serious injuries.

Both Wamena trials were conducted in a tense atmosphere of intimidation and secrecy. The Indonesian government refused to allow international observers to monitor the trials and a heavy armed police presence around the courtroom made many local people afraid to attend the sessions.

"While we recognize the responsibility of the authorities to bring to justice those responsible for acts of violence, this must be done according to international standards for fair trial," Amnesty International said. "We are calling on the authorities to review the trial in accordance with international standards and to conduct an independent inquiry into all allegations of torture and ill-treatment of the detainees by the security forces."

Background

Muhammad Nazar is the chair of the Information Centre for a Refendum in Aceh (Sentral Informasi Referendum Aceh). He was arrested shortly after helping to organize a pro-independence rally in Banda Aceh, the capital of Aceh province, in November 2000. Over 20 people are believed to have been unlawfully killed during a province-wide operation by the security forces to stop people attending the rally. The precise charges against Muhammad Nazar relate to his involvement in pro-independence activities earlier in the year.

The five Wamena activists were detained on 13 December 2000, three months after violence erupted in Wamena when the security forces killed two people during an operation to forcibly remove pro-independence flags flying in the town. During the violence, 11 more people were shot dead by the security forces and 19 migrants from other parts of Indonesia died at the hands of locals.

The 17 other defendants, the majority believed to be members of the pro-independence militia group, the Papua Taskforce (Satgas Papua), were arrested shortly after the incidents took place and accused of taking part in the violence. Their trials began in early January 2001.

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