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Indonesia: Crackdown on freedom of expression in Maluku

At least 70 people have been arrested or imprisoned for peaceful pro-independence activities in the province of Maluku, Indonesia over the last two years, Amnesty International revealed today. The Indonesian government should immediately and unconditionally release all those detained for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression, belief and association.

New research indicates that at least 22 of them were severely tortured in detention. The 22 activists, led by Johan Teterissa, were arrested on the 29 June 2007 after performing a traditional war dance in front of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in the city of Ambon, the capital. The dance culminated with the activists unfurling the Benang Raja flag, a symbol of the Maluku independence movement.

After their performance the police, particularly the anti-terrorist unit Detachment-88, detained all 22 of them. They were not granted access to legal representation and held incommunicado.

They were beaten, forced to crawl on their stomachs over hot asphalt, whipped with an electric cable and had billiard balls forced into their mouths. The police also beat them on the side of the head with rifle butts until their ears bled and fired shots close to their ears. The police threatened them continually with further torture, sometimes at gunpoint, to force them to confess.

Twenty one of them, including Johan have since received sentences of between seven and 20 years' imprisonment for 'rebellion' under Articles 106 and 110 of the Indonesia Criminal Code, while one is still awaiting trial.

In the past two years another 48 people have been arrested and imprisoned on charges of subversion, some for up to 17 years, for activities such as owning, sewing or transporting the 'Benang Raja' flag. The most recent arrest took place on 18 July 2008.

One of those imprisoned for subversion is Simon Saiya, who was also forced to confess his involvement in "terrorist" activities after torture and other ill-treatment by the police. Amnesty International has received information that he is being detained in a police cell at the police mobile brigade (Brimob) detention centre in Tantai, Ambon awaiting trial and is concerned about his safety.

The Indonesian authorities should conduct an effective and independent investigation into the allegations of human rights violations by members of the security forces in Ambon, Maluku, including the torture and other ill-treatment of detainees; and prosecute those found to be responsible.

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