

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: ASA 21/019/2003 (Public)
News Service No: 124
19 May 2003

Indonesia/Aceh: Safety of civilians must be the priority

Following the break down of a cease-fire and renewed military operations against armed separatists in the Indonesian province of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (NAD), Amnesty International today called on both sides to the conflict to take concrete measures to protect the civilian population.

"We fear for all Acehnese civilians following return to war," the organization stressed.

The Indonesian government declared martial law in NAD at midnight of 19 May after last minute talks to rescue the five-month-old cease-fire between the Government of Indonesia and the pro-independence armed opposition group, the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM) broke down the previous day. In the previous weeks thousands of troops were deployed to the province in preparation for renewed operations against GAM.

Previous operations, according to Amnesty International, were characterised by widespread human rights violations.

"Both sides have been responsible for serious abuses and ordinary civilians have overwhelmingly been the victims," the organization emphasized.

In 2002 alone, local human rights monitors estimate that over 1,300 people have been killed, the majority of them civilians. "Disappearances", unlawful arrests, torture, destruction of homes and other facilities have also been commonplace.

"International humanitarian law lays down clear standards in the conduct of any war, and applies equally to all parties to a conflict. Both the Indonesian security forces and GAM have a responsibility to uphold these standards, in particular those which protect civilians and members of the armed forces who are wounded or have laid down their arms," Amnesty International continued.

Statements by Indonesian government officials have indicated their intention to minimize civilian casualties during this latest operation against GAM. Amnesty International welcomes these statements and urges GAM to also make public its intention to take every step possible to protect the civilian population.

However, there are already ominous signs that civilians are at risk and that those trying to defend their rights will be targeted. One local human rights organization estimates that there are currently over 15,000 people displaced by recent violence in NAD and that food and medical supplies are not reaching them.

In the meantime, on 11 May two human rights defenders with the East Aceh branch of the Human Rights and Legal Aid Post (PB HAM) went missing in separate incidents. The body of one of them, Raja

Ismail, was found in a river two days later. Abdussalam Muhamad Deli is still missing. These latest incidents add to a lengthening list of human rights defenders who have been unlawfully killed, "disappeared" or illegally detained in NAD. As is the case in most previous incidents, the identity of those responsible for abducting the two men is not known.

"We urge the Indonesian authorities to immediately and effectively investigate these and all other allegations of human rights violations and to bring perpetrators to justice, in proceedings fully consistent with international standards for fair trial," the international human rights organization said.

The organization also called upon both sides to ensure that human rights and humanitarian workers, both national and international, are provided with unimpeded access to all areas of NAD.

The international community, which has already made considerable efforts in support the peace process, can contribute towards the protection of the civilian population by publicly urging both sides to abide by international human rights and humanitarian law. Concerned governments can also use their influence to ensure that, independent monitors, both national and international, are able to monitor the adherence of both sides to these standards.

Background

The Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) was signed between representatives of the Government of Indonesia and GAM in Geneva, Switzerland on 9 December 2002. Mediated by the Swiss-based Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, the agreement was intended as the first step towards negotiating a political resolution to the 26-year-old conflict. Although always fragile, the CoHA did bring about a significant reduction of violence in the province and for a period of a few months the numbers of reported human rights violations dropped.

The international community has lent considerable support to the process. A group of donors, led by Japan, the United States, the European Union and the World Bank, pledged funds for post-conflict reconstruction. An international contingent of monitors from Thailand and the Philippines joined with Indonesian military and GAM monitors to oversee the implementation of the CoHA. Despite the efforts, unresolved differences between the two sides meant that the disarmament of GAM and simultaneous relocation of Indonesian military forces, due to begin in February 2003, never took place and the number of violent incidents began to escalate soon afterwards. Several attacks against the international monitors took place which, some observers claimed, were orchestrated by the Indonesian military.

The international monitors were withdrawn in early May and despite last-ditch efforts by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and the donors to bring both sides together in Tokyo over the weekend, no agreement on the continuation of the CoHA was reached.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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