

Indonesia: Human rights defenders in Aceh arrested as attention distracted by political crisis

The Indonesian police are exploiting the fact that the world's attention is focussed on the mounting political crisis in Jakarta to carry out a wave of arrests in Aceh, Amnesty International said today.

Fifteen human rights activists were detained today when members of the Police Mobile Brigade (Brimob) raided the Banda Aceh branch of one of Indonesia's leading human rights organizations, the Legal Aid Foundation (LBH). The activists were forced to squat with their arms in the air and then lie face down in the yard before being taken to the Aceh Besar police headquarters. At the time of the raid the 15 had been meeting to discuss arrangements for a week long campaign against militarism which began on Monday.

Four were released the same day. Amnesty International considers those still in custody to be prisoners of conscience and is calling for their immediate and unconditional release. In the meantime they should be given immediate access to legal representation, members of their families and medical assistance.

At the same time heavily armed members of Brimob arrived at the Kuala Tripa hotel where members of the armed opposition group GAM had been taking part in meetings with the Indonesian authorities for peace talks. Six members of GAM were taken for questioning to the office of the Regional Police Chief.

"The detention of the human rights activists and the GAM negotiating team sends a clear message that the Indonesian authorities are not committed to pursuing a peaceful solution to the conflict in Aceh

which would lead to an improvement in the human rights situation there."

Earlier this week two human rights activists were tortured after being detained by police in Rikit Gaib in Southeast Aceh. Indra P. Keumala and Happy were returning from investigating reports of killings of over 100 people in Central Aceh District since early June. They were stopped at a military checkpoint because they were carrying documentation which pointed to military involvement in the killings and in the establishment of militia groups in the area. They were released without charge after 48 hours.

While the future of the Indonesian President, who is facing impeachment in the next days, is an issue of great national importance, Amnesty International urged Indonesian political leaders not to allow the security forces to use the opportunity to carry out human rights violations in Aceh or elsewhere in Indonesia.

The organization also calls on other governments to publicly condemn these latest arrests and to demand that an alternative to repression and human rights violations is found to the problems of Aceh.

Background

Widespread and systematic human rights violations have been perpetrated in Aceh for many years in the context of counter-insurgency operations against GAM. A peace dialogue has been pursued by the Indonesian Government and GAM which had resulted in a series of agreements since June 2000 aimed at suspending military operations on both sides. The agreements failed to stem the conflict and both sides continue to commit grave human rights abuses.

A new military operation which began in May 2001 has resulted in an intensification of the conflict. There have been reports of scores of killings at the hands of the security forces and GAM, many of the victims are believed to be civilians.

Human rights defenders have been specifically targeted and have been subjected to arbitrary arrests, torture and extrajudicial killings. An increasing number of activists have been forced to leave Aceh for their own security. Those that remain are unable to carry out their legitimate human rights work.

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