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Indonesia: Human rights activists being 'swept out' of Aceh

Human rights defenders are being forced into hiding and prevented from carrying out their work as the Indonesian security forces step up counter insurgency operations in the province of Aceh in the north of Sumatra.

"In a pattern seen in East Timor last year, anyone who reports on the human rights situation is being targetted and driven away to ensure that there are no witnesses to the excesses of the security forces," Amnesty International said.

Attacks against human rights activists in Aceh have increased in recent weeks and they have become the victims of unlawful killings, "disappearances", arbitrary detention, harassment and intimidation. Many have fled fearing that they will be tracked down by the security forces.

"It is now virtually impossible for human rights defenders to carry out their work in Aceh with any degree of security. These attacks on activists are creating an environment in which the security forces can torture and kill free from any kind of scrutiny and, ultimately, accountability," Amnesty International warned.

Attempts by activists to investigate the daily occurrences of "disappearances" and killings that are taking place throughout the province are being blocked. Most recently, volunteers from the People's Crisis Centre (PCC) - a human rights monitoring organization staffed mainly by students - were prevented from investigating the shooting and subsequent "disappearance" of two farmers in North Aceh because of a virtual blockade of the area by the security forces.

Jamani A Gani and Zulkifli Ahmad were reported in the media to have been shot by security forces who were conducting a "sweeping operation" looking for supporters of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). The two, who had been attending a ceremony in honour of Jamani A Gani's wife's first pregnancy in the village of Blang Seupeng in Matang Kuli sub-district, North Aceh, hid when the security forces arrived but were discovered and shot before being taken away in sacks. It is not known where the two men were taken, or whether they are dead or alive.

Another PCC team which had been sent to the district of East Aceh to investigate reports that seven activists from a local NGO, Committee of Society for Reform (KOMUR), had been tortured while in detention in February, was also prevented from carrying out its work because of the heavy presence of security forces in the area.

"By initiating talks and saying it will bring human rights violators to justice, the Indonesian Government says it wants to improve human rights in Aceh. However, it takes no action to protect civilians against the excesses of its own security forces," said Amnesty International.

The Indonesian Government must take immediate measures to protect human rights activists and ensure they have full access to all areas of the province.

Background

There are unconfirmed reports that close to 200 people have been killed so far this year in the context of counter-insurgency operations by the Indonesian security forces against Free Aceh Movement (GAM).

Amnesty International has documented a number of recent cases of extrajudicial killings, “disappearances” and arbitrary arrests of human rights activists in its recent report *Indonesia: Acehese Human Rights Defenders under Attack* (AI Index: ASA 21/06/00)

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