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Indonesia: Women, children and activists living in fear of violence in Aceh

"We are used to violence -- we have violence for breakfast" Ridwan, who was 14-years old when his father was killed after being taken from his village by security forces in 1991.*

Civilians are suffering worsening human rights abuses at the hands of both the Indonesian security forces and the armed opposition group in Aceh, Amnesty International said today launching three reports on women, children and human rights activists.

"While thousands of victims of the past still wait for justice, hundreds of others continue to be targets for "disappearances", killings and torture," the organization said. "People continue to live in fear of violence from both sides, not knowing what tragedy might impact their lives next."

Government initiatives to investigate past human rights violations have raised hopes that thousands of cases would be addressed yet the security forces are continuing their tactics of brutality and repression, adding yet more names to the list of victims.

The cycle of violence has affected a whole generation of young Acehnese. Thousands of children whose parents have been killed or gone missing in the conflict continue to be obstructed when attempting to find out the fate of their loved ones and risk becoming victims themselves for their efforts.

Saiful* was just 13 years old when his father "disappeared" in 1991. Saiful's uncle tried to find him, but later the same year, he was

arrested by the military and has been missing ever since. Eight years later, in November 1999, Saiful's older brother was arrested by members of the military and the police and remains missing. Saiful has tried desperately to discover the fate of his relatives, but has been accused of being a member of the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka - GAM) by military officials and threatened with death himself for his efforts.

"The father I loved was taken from me and I have to do something about it. So many of us want to find out where our relatives are. I have to struggle - already we have three victims in my family", Saiful told Amnesty International.

Women in Aceh also continue to suffer serious violations, including rape and other forms of torture. Several women and up to seven young girls were reportedly raped or sexually assaulted when men in military uniforms entered their house in Matangkuli, North Aceh on 7 March 2000 during an operation by the security forces to track down suspected GAM members. Although investigations have been carried out into the incident, no one has yet been brought to justice.

Humanitarian workers and human rights defenders are being targeted specifically because of their work. Activists have been killed, arrested, tortured and "disappeared". The level of intimidation is preventing activists from travelling to carry out their work and areas in which incidents were said to have taken place are sealed off by the security forces.

On 2 September 2000, the body of Jafar Siddiq Hamzah, a human rights activist with the US-based International Forum for Aceh (IFA) was discovered dumped in a ravine with four others, around one month after he had gone missing in Medan, North Sumatra. His body

was reportedly bound in barbed wire and bore marks of torture. Both the security forces and GAM have denied responsibility for his death. A police investigation has so far failed to identify suspects.

During a stop and search operation in South Aceh on 5 September 2000, a 24-year-old volunteer for Save Emergency Aceh, Amrisaldin, was detained by the Police Mobile Brigade (Brimob). He was punched, kicked, slashed with a knife, and had his pubic, chest and armpit hair burnt with matches before being released the next day.

GAM has also been responsible for intimidating and threatening activists. Groups have received death threats, and blacklists banning local communities from accepting assistance are said to be circulating.

"There can be no real peace in Aceh until human rights violations are addressed. Both the security forces and GAM must end the violence against civilians and effective systems of accountability must urgently be set up," Amnesty International said.

Background

The province of Aceh is situated in the northernmost part of the island of Sumatra, about 1,000 miles from the Indonesian capital of Jakarta. Dissatisfaction with Indonesian rule in Aceh has been largely rooted in economic grievances and repressive policies employed by the Indonesian security forces in response to local demands for independence. Between 1989-98, it is estimated that several thousand civilians, including children and the very elderly, were unlawfully killed. Arbitrary detention, torture and "disappearances" were also widespread.

Serious and widespread human rights violations have continued over the last two years. In May 2000 an accord was signed under which both the Indonesian authorities and GAM agreed to halt offensive operations to allow the distribution of humanitarian aid and prepare the

ground for further negotiations on ending the conflict. Known as the Joint Understanding on Humanitarian Pause for Aceh, it came in to force on 2 June 2000 for a period of three months and has recently been extended for a further three months until 15 January 2001. It is now in jeopardy because of abuses by both sides.

While the agreement initially appeared to result in a decrease in the level of human rights violations, within a matter of weeks reported incidents of abuses by both the security forces and GAM escalated once again. In a recent incident, on 10-11 November 2000, thousands of people attended a rally in Banda Aceh, the provincial capital, to call for a referendum on independence for Aceh. However, the security forces blocked people from travelling to Banda Aceh to participate, including by opening fire on convoys of vehicles. The total number of people killed remains unconfirmed but reports from local NGOs indicate that it is over 20.

Mohammad Nazar, one of the organizers of the rally was arrested on 20 November. He is believed to be charged under articles of the criminal code banning the public expression of feelings of hostility, hatred or contempt towards the government. Amnesty International has called on the government to repeal these articles as they violate international human rights standards and have been used in the past to imprison individuals for their legitimate, peaceful activities. If Mohammad Nazar were to be imprisoned purely for exercising his rights to freedom of expression, association or assembly, Amnesty International would consider him to be a prisoner of conscience and call for his immediate and unconditional release.

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** Names have been changed for security.*

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