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East Timor: Forced militia recruitment and arrests in relocation camps

East Timorese pro-independence supporters who have been forced into relocation camps are reportedly being arrested or forcibly recruited into militia units, Amnesty International said today.

The news came as the Indonesian National Army (TNI) and pro-Indonesian militias continued to force people to abandon East Timor for neighbouring West Timor in a move referred to by the United Nations Assistance Mission to East Timor (UNAMET) as a systematic campaign of "forced population movement".

"The East Timorese are being forced to abandon their homes for a life on the run or in makeshift camps, where the militias, police and army can intimidate, arrest and detain them at will," Amnesty International said.

"Some men are reportedly even being forced to join pro-Indonesia militia groups and to go back to East Timor to fight their own people."

Militia groups have been seen in Kupang, the capital of West Timor, and are believed to be active in camps for displaced people in Atambua and Kupang. One eyewitness today reported seeing a militia member carrying a machine gun inside one of the camps in Kupang. Senior militia leaders have also visited the displaced persons in Atambua.

One man from Ermera District, East Timor, was reportedly taken into custody by the security forces in a displaced persons site in Atambua on 7 September, after he had removed an Indonesian flag from a local health clinic.

An East Timorese man, Jose da Costa, was reportedly detained by police along with 19 unnamed women at a camp housing East Timorese. Jose da Costa was arrested after another man in the camp, who suspected that he was a member of the National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT), informed the police of his presence. It is unclear where he and the 19 women -- also suspected of being pro-independence supporters -- are currently detained.

While the Indonesian Red Cross has apparently gained some access to the displaced persons camps, access remains restricted. Journalists and international humanitarian workers have been assaulted at the camps, possibly by militia members.

The forced relocation of East Timorese is believed to have begun on 4 September. Eyewitnesses reported seeing TNI members telling people in Dili to leave their homes and threatening those who refused.

Forced relocation is reported from all districts on East Timor, but in particular the western areas of Ermera, Liquisa, Suai, Dili and Bobonaro Districts. Eyewitnesses in Atambua claim that

the displaced East Timorese are arriving in West Timor in trucks with TNI and militia members in the same vehicles.

Estimates of the number of East Timorese who have already arrived in West Timor range from 44,000 to around 60,000. They are concentrated in three main areas; the majority are in Atambua, near the border with East Timor and around Kupang, the capital of West Timor. Some 8,000 East Timorese are also believed to have arrived in the town of Kefamenanu.

According to United Nations staff 5,000 East Timorese were today gathered at Dili's harbour and being forced to leave.

The Commander of Indonesia's Armed Forces, General Wiranto, has denied that East Timorese are being forced to relocate to West Timor, claiming that the departure of tens of thousands of East Timorese is "spontaneous".

Serious concerns remain for the safety of thousands of internally displaced persons still in East Timor. Along with the around 1,500 people -- mostly women and children -- who have been seeking shelter in the UNAMET compound, where they are at grave risk of militia and TNI attacks on suspicion of being pro-independence supporters. Their situation is likely to become more critical as UNAMET staff prepare to withdraw from East Timor.

"The East Timorese people have already been left with no human rights observers or journalists," Amnesty International said. "Soon there will be no witnesses at all to the TNI and militia violence."

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