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Indonesia: Release peaceful protesters jailed for raising a flag

The Indonesian government has arrested at least 152 people for activities related to the raising of flags symbolizing regional independence over the past two years as part of a crackdown in areas with a history of separatist movements, Amnesty International revealed in a report released today.

At least 93 people are currently in detention in Papua and Maluku for charges associated with flag-raising activities.

In the report, *“Indonesia: Jailed for raising a flag – prisoners of conscience in Maluku”*, Amnesty International documents how the Indonesian government has failed to distinguish between peaceful political activists and armed groups in its response towards non-violent pro-independence activities in Indonesia. Some of those detained were subjected to torture and other ill-treatment during detention and interrogation, and some were sentenced to imprisonment after unfair trials.

“In the past few years Indonesia has made important advances in respecting free expression. But these cases show that when the sensitive issues of regional independence are at stake, the Indonesian government has made no distinction whatsoever between armed separatist groups and peaceful political activists. This blurring of the lines has allowed them to detain scores of people simply for the peaceful act of raising a flag,” said Donna Guest, Amnesty International’s Asia-Pacific Deputy Director.

“The Indonesian government has a right and duty to maintain public order in its territory. But it cannot imprison people in Maluku or Papua – in some cases for up to 20 years – just for the simple act of raising a flag,” said Donna Guest.

At least 72 people have been arrested and detained for their peaceful political activities in the last two years in Maluku province, including for simply unfurling the banned Benang Raja flag, symbol of South Maluku independence. Further, in Papua, Amnesty International has documented the arrest of at least 90 people during 2008 for raising the Morning Star flag.

On 29 June 2007, 23 people performed a traditional ‘Cakalele’ dance at an event organized to celebrate National Family Day in Ambon, Maluku province. At the end of their performance, the dancers unfurled the Benang Raja flag. Police arrested 22 of the dancers, subjecting them to severe beatings and torture during their interrogation and detention.

“The Indonesian government should conduct an independent and impartial investigation into the reports of torture and other ill-treatment,” said Donna Guest. “Those found responsible should be held to account as a matter of priority and victims should be granted reparations.”

The 22 dancers are now serving long prison sentences of between seven and 20 years, while one other is awaiting trial. On 10 March 2009, 18 of the detained were transferred to Java, over a thousand kilometres away from their families.

“The Cakalele dancers are prisoners of conscience who should be immediately and unconditionally released,” said Donna Guest.

Amnesty International called on the Indonesian government to release all those imprisoned for peacefully exercising their right to free expression, and to establish a working group to review its policies and practices – including its legislation – to ensure they do not infringe on the rights of all Indonesians to peacefully express their opinions.

To see a copy of the report “*Indonesia: Jailed for raising a flag – prisoners of conscience in Maluku*” please click [here](#).