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INDONESIA: Accountability for Munir's killing vital to protect human rights defenders

On the sixth anniversary of the death of prominent Indonesian human rights defender Munir bin Thalib, Amnesty International calls on the National Head of Police to initiate a new independent investigation into his killing to ensure that all those responsible for his death are brought to justice. The government must also make public the 2005 report of the fact-finding team into Munir's killing as a key step towards establishing the truth.

Munir was found dead on a Garuda Airlines flight from Jakarta to the Netherlands on 7 September 2004. An autopsy carried out by the Dutch authorities showed that he died as a result of being poisoned with arsenic added to his food. Although two people have now been convicted for the killing, there are credible allegations that those responsible at the highest levels have not yet been convicted.

Munir took up the cause of dozens of activists who had been subjected to enforced disappearances during the last months of the Suharto government in 1998. He also played a significant role in uncovering evidence of military responsibility for human rights violations in Aceh and Timor-Leste.

On 31 December 2008, Muchdi Purwoprandjono, a former deputy of the state intelligence agency, was acquitted of soliciting and assisting in the killing of Munir. There were fears that the trial did not meet international standards of fairness after three key prosecution witnesses retracted their sworn testimonies. In February 2010, a special National Human Rights Commission (Komnas HAM) team identified flaws in the police investigation, prosecution and trial of Muchdi Purwoprandjono and recommended a new police investigation.

The lack of full accountability in Munir's case contributes to an ongoing climate of fear among human rights defenders, some of whom have recently come under attack.

On 30 July 2010, the body of journalist Ardiansyah Matra was found naked and handcuffed in a river in Merauke, Papua. Police investigations revealed that Ardiansyah Matra was struck several times before falling into the water and drowning. Local activists believe that his death may be linked to his work covering corruption and illegal logging in Papua, and the recent local elections in Merauke.

On 8 July 2010, two unidentified persons severely beat Tama Satya Langkun, a researcher for Indonesia Corruption Watch in Jakarta. Tama Satya Langkun, who had been investigating suspicious bank accounts linked to several high-ranking police officers, suffered serious injuries in the brutal assault. No one has been arrested or brought to justice for these recent attacks.

The right to life is a key human right, which Indonesia is obliged to respect and protect at all times, under international human rights treaties to which Indonesia is a state party, and under the Indonesian Constitution. Ensuring that those suspected of violating this right are brought to justice is an integral part of Indonesia's human rights obligations. Human rights defenders must be allowed to carry out their peaceful activities without fear. Accountability for Munir's killing will send a clear message that intimidation and attacks against human rights defenders will not be tolerated.

In response to the outcry over Munir's killing, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono ordered an independent fact-finding team to work in parallel with the police investigation. This team gave the President its report in June 2005. However, the report was not made public, though this had been recommended by the presidential decree that established the fact-finding team.

A former pilot for Garuda Airlines, Pollycarpus Priyanto, was convicted of the premeditated murder of Munir and received a 20 year sentence in January 2008, reduced by seven months in August 2010. A former chief executive of Garuda Airlines, Indra Setiawan, was sentenced to one year's imprisonment for being an accessory to murder in February 2008, for falsifying documents that allowed Pollycarpus Priyanto to travel on Munir's flight.

Following his acquittal, Muchdi Purwoprandjono filed a criminal defamation suit (which formally carries a maximum sentence of over five years' imprisonment) against prominent human rights defender Usman Hamid from the Commission for Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KontraS), an organization Munir founded. According to media reports, Usman Hamid had strongly criticized the verdict outside the court and asserted that Muchdi Purwoprandjono was a murderer. The police investigation in Usman Hamid's case is pending.

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