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EAST TIMOR: 20 YEARS ON -- HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS CONTINUE DESPITE RHETORIC OF INDONESIAN GOVERNMENT

New York: As East Timor enters another decade of Indonesian rule, there continues to be a striking gap between the reality of systematic human rights violations on the ground and the rhetoric of the Indonesian Government, Amnesty International said today in a statement to the United Nations (UN) Special Committee on Decolonization in New York.

During the 20 years that Indonesia has ruled East Timor, the rights of those suspected of pro-independence activities have been systematically violated. Again in 1995 a catalogue of human rights violations belies statements by the Indonesian authorities that violations by the security forces are not tolerated.

"In the face of such blatant contradictions, the international community has again failed to place sufficient pressure on the Indonesian Government to improve human rights," Amnesty International said. "The UN member states should take more consistent action to hold Indonesia to account."

Two major periods of unrest -- in November 1994 and throughout January and February of this year -- resulted in large scale arbitrary arrests, torture and beatings, and dozens of political trials including those of prisoners of conscience. There were also reports of "disappearances" and killings. International outrage forced the Indonesian Government to conduct an inquiry into the killings of six civilians in January this year, but other reported killings and "disappearances" have not captured the attention of the international community and thus remain unresolved.

In June 1994, the Indonesian Government argued that there was a campaign of misinformation about East Timor. The government claimed that there was no evidence that it violated its own laws and "fundamental principles". However, the incidence of violations recorded since then by Amnesty International provides ample evidence to the contrary:

- In June 1994, Jose Antonio Neves was arrested without a warrant, detained by the military for a month and interrogated without a lawyer, in contravention of Indonesian law. He is now serving a four-year sentence for his non-violent activities.
- In April this year, up to 24 East Timorese in Jakarta and Dili were arrested on suspicion of planning to organise demonstrations during the visit to Indonesia of UN Secretary General Boutros-Boutros Ghali. They were all arrested and questioned without warrants and without the presence of lawyers.
- Up to 250 East Timorese are known to have been arbitrarily detained since November 1994.
- Those in military detention continue to be at risk of torture, including beatings and electric shocks.

Indonesian authorities claim that not a single member of the armed forces who commits violations escapes punishment. A brief look at recent events demonstrates that this is not true.

Few incidents are investigated. Those which are, result in sentences for members of the security forces which are much shorter than those for civilian and political prisoners convicted of similar offences or of non-violent political opposition:

- In June this year, two soldiers were sentenced to prison terms of four and four and a half years for the murder of six unarmed civilians. Gregorio da Cunha Saldanha, a prisoner of conscience, continues to serve a life sentence for his participation in the Santa Cruz demonstration in November 1991.
- The government has still not satisfactorily investigated the killings of up to 270 people and the "disappearance" of around 200 others during the Santa Cruz massacre.
- The whereabouts of five youths who "disappeared" in January this year remains unknown.
- The alleged killings of between two and five people shot by the security forces in Baucau in January apparently has never been investigated.

While UN mechanisms have themselves provided some of the strongest criticisms of Indonesia, this has not been consistently supported throughout the UN, such as by the Commission on Human Rights. Strong recommendations by the UN Special Rapporteur on torture and the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions have yet to be implemented, resulting in the continuation of violations.

While the chair of this year's session of the UN Commission on Human Rights issued on a statement calling on Indonesia to continue to cooperate with the International Committee of the Red Cross, Henrique Belmiro and Jose Antonio Belo were both recovering in East Timorese prisons from beatings and torture inflicted by the military.

The seriousness of the situation and the failure of the Indonesian Government to act increases the significance of this year's visit by the UN High Commission on Human Rights to East Timor.

"The High Commissioner must use his visit to urge implementation of the recommendations of the UN special rapporteurs, to facilitate unrestricted access for independent human rights monitors to East Timor and to abolish legislation allowing for the imprisonment of prisoners of conscience," Amnesty International said.

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