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Indonesia: West Timor attack could have been prevented

Today's militia attack on UN staff in West Timor, Indonesia, which has reportedly left at least three people dead, was a tragedy waiting to happen, Amnesty International said.

"Despite repeated attacks by militia against the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and others involved in assisting and repatriating East Timorese refugees the Indonesian Government has done nothing to stop militia activities -- the authorities must act now before more lives are lost," the organization said.

Efforts to repatriate East Timorese refugees in West Timor have been constantly hampered by threats, intimidation and attacks by militia groups whose members also fled to Indonesia after the Indonesian security forces were forced to withdraw from East Timor by an international military force.

Today's attack on the UNHCR is said to have been prompted by the killing of a pro-integration leader in West Timor.

"The situation in West Timor is a repeat of what we saw in East Timor last year. The militia kill, threaten and intimidate while the Indonesian authorities stand by and do nothing," said Amnesty International

In the weeks running up to the first anniversary of the 20 August 1999 vote, militia activity intensified in West Timor forcing repatriation operations to be suspended on several occasions. On 22 August 2000

two UNHCR staff were assaulted while delivering aid to a camp near the town of Kefamenanu. Staff were pulled out of Atambua on 11 August 2000 after the offices of UNHCR and International Organization for Migration (IOM) came under siege from members of Aitarak. Aitarak is one of the most notorious militia groups whose members are known to have been responsible for killings in East Timor during 1999.

There is overwhelming evidence that the militias were organized, trained and supported by the Indonesian security forces as part of their campaign to prevent East Timorese from choosing independence in last year's vote. Indonesian officials have admitted that the militia are still receiving support from "rogue" elements within the armed forces.

Militia incursions into East Timor in the past two months have forced some local people to flee their homes again. Two UN Peacekeepers, one from New Zealand and one from Nepal, have been killed during militia operations in East Timor.

In the meantime, the remaining 100,000 or so refugees in West Timor are living in squalid conditions, and are subjected to intimidation and misinformation which prevents them from deciding whether to return to their homes in East Timor.

Amnesty International urges the Indonesian authorities not to delay any longer in taking action against the militias.

"The Indonesian Government must disband the militia groups and investigate and bring to justice those responsible for these and other attacks against international and local agencies. Only then secure conditions be created for the refugees, for those involved in trying to help and for the people of East Timor."

Background

On 30 August 1999, the people of East Timor voted overwhelmingly for independence from Indonesia which had forcibly annexed the territory in 1975. In the months running up to the vote there had been an organized campaign of terror by the Indonesian security forces and pro-Indonesian militia against independence supporters.

Immediately following the announcement of the results of the vote on 4 September 1999, a wave of violence was unleashed against the population of East Timor. Hundreds of people were killed, including independence activists, nuns, priests and journalists. Others were raped and beaten. Over a quarter of a million people were forcibly expelled or fled to Indonesia. Although Indonesia has recently named 19 people, including members of the military and militias, suspected of involvement in the crimes so far no one has been brought to justice.

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