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Indonesia: Human Rights in the Post Suharto era

President Suharto's decision to step down could be an opportunity to bring about real change in Indonesia provided that the momentum for reform is not lost, Amnesty International said today.

The organisation also urged that other governments abandon their *laissez-faire* attitude to human rights violations in Indonesia and East Timor, and not repeat their previous mistaken policy of accepting the veneer of economic prosperity as an excuse for repression, intimidation and corruption.

"Transferring leadership is not the only answer to Indonesia's problems -- there is a need for wholesale institutional and legal reforms," Amnesty International said. "The last thing Indonesia needs now are more authoritarian leaders who consider themselves above the law and who disrespect human rights. The Indonesian people's contempt for Suharto sends a strong message about their desire for change."

"The current crisis in Indonesia is the result of the leadership's policy of subverting human rights to maintain power and privileges for themselves, their families and their friends. The lack of accountability and transparency, the undermining of legal institutions and the constant harassment and imprisonment of government critics, human rights workers and journalists have brought about the current situation."

During this period of transition the military have a vital role to play and extreme care must be taken to ensure that any actions to restore order do not lead to further human rights violations.

"The Indonesian armed forces must not restrict the movement and activities of human rights workers and journalists, and should ensure that all personnel act in accordance with human rights standards which govern the use of force and the treatment of detainees," Amnesty International said.

As an immediate gesture of goodwill the new authorities should also release all prisoners of conscience, especially those who were jailed through the personal pique of Suharto, such as those imprisoned for alleged involvement in the 1965 coup attempt, and review the sentences of all political prisoners, the organization added.

Immediate steps to demonstrate a commitment to human rights are important now, but long term political and economic stability will only be achieved if the new leadership brings in a wide ranging package of reform, according to Amnesty International. These reforms should make the

Indonesian Government accountable and transparent to its population, strengthen legal institutions, ensure that the military are no longer above the law, and guarantee freedom of expression and opinion.

Amnesty International also called on the international community to follow through on its statements of recent days in support of reform by putting pressure on the new authorities to continue this reform process and by directing their aid programs at supporting fundamental change.

“For too long, governments around the world have been prepared to turn a blind eye to atrocities in Indonesia and East Timor, and in some cases have allowed the sale of military equipment which has directly contributed to human rights violations,” Amnesty International said.

“Belated realisation of the underlying causes of political and economic instability should not be repeated with the new leadership. The international community should act now to ensure that they do not repeat the same mistake.”

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