

Demonstrations in Indonesia: the armed forces at a crossroads

The Indonesian armed forces should exercise restraint in the face of ongoing mass demonstrations in Jakarta, Amnesty International urged today as at least three people were shot dead – and many more were injured – when troops fired into a crowd near the Indonesian parliament.

“It is a tragedy that Indonesia's new political order should be born amid a new wave of human rights violations,” the organization said.

Increasing numbers of demonstrators have rallied in several parts of Jakarta since Tuesday, reaching 20,000 today. They are calling on the MPR, the Indonesian parliament, to make more profound reforms to the new structure of the government. In particular they are urging the military to withdraw from politics and asking that former President Suharto be brought to trial for alleged corruption during his regime.

Today troops opened fire on the main road leading to the parliament building and used water cannons to disperse demonstrators. On Thursday one protester was fatally injured during clashes between the security forces and students. Some 129 people were admitted to hospital.

In recent months, the Indonesian Army (ABRI) has shown greater restraint in handling demonstrations. But there is a risk that the recent killings will undermine public confidence in the professionalism and accountability of the military and the genuineness of the government's reform program.

"As Indonesia's past experience has shown, suppression of protests will only bottle up discontent and fuel further violence." Amnesty International said.

"The military is now facing its most serious test since May. This crisis presents it with a unique opportunity to show a new face to Indonesia's people and the world."

In recent months the ABRI Commander-in-Chief General Wiranto has on several occasions apologized for abuses committed by the armed forces, including during the May disturbances.

"This time, however, it would not be enough for General Wiranto to apologise after the event – he must ensure strict command and accountability to prevent abuses in the first place," Amnesty International added.

"It is imperative that ABRI's leadership issue clear orders to all security forces to ensure that force is only used in accordance with international human rights standards. It should also ensure appropriate protection of the country's ethnic Chinese community."

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