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Indonesia: Victims of the Aceh conflict still waiting for truth, justice and reparation

Victims and family members are still waiting for the Indonesian authorities to provide them with truth, justice and full reparation almost eight years after the end to the devastating Aceh conflict, Amnesty International said in a new report released today.

The report, [“Time to Face the Past”](#), documents the failure of local and central authorities to establish the truth of what happened during the years of violence which left between 10,000 and 30,000 people dead, many of them civilians. Many of those who had their lives torn apart by the conflict are still suffering immensely.

“The Indonesian government’s failure to provide genuine truth, justice and reparation for victims and their families is causing immense suffering for people in Aceh today,” Isabelle Arradon, Amnesty International’s Deputy Asia Pacific Director, said.

“Family members still do not know what has happened to disappeared loved ones and are struggling to get by, while those responsible walk free. The situation is breeding resentment that could sow the seeds of a future return to violence.”

The Aceh conflict between the armed pro-independence movement Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM) and the Indonesian government dated back to 1976, and peaked during military operations from 1989 until a peace deal was signed in 2005.

It took a devastating toll on the population in Aceh, a region on the northern part of Indonesia’s Sumatra Island.

Amnesty International and other human rights groups have documented a range of crimes committed by members of the security forces and their auxiliaries against the civilian population, including unlawful killings, enforced disappearances and torture.

Human rights abuses by GAM included hostage taking and the targeted killings of those suspected of ties to the government.

Many of these human rights abuses constitute crimes under international law, including possible crimes against humanity and war crimes. Under international law, Indonesia has an obligation to investigate these crimes, and where sufficient evidence exists, to prosecute suspects in accordance with international fair trial standards.

Furthermore, the 2005 peace agreement called for the establishment of both a Human Rights Court and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Aceh – neither of which exist today. Hardly any of those responsible for serious human rights abuses have been brought to justice, while attempts to provide

reparation to victims have been inadequate.

“Victims we have talked to are happy with the relative stability since the 2005 peace agreement, but can’t understand why their rights to truth and justice are not respected,” Arradon said.

Although there have been limited attempts by the Indonesia government and the National Human Rights Commission to investigate what happened in Aceh, the results have not been made available to the public.

Attempts to establish a truth commission at the national level have also failed. The Constitutional Court in 2006 struck down a deeply flawed law attempting to establish such a commission, because it provided that victims could only receive reparation if those suspected of the abuses had been granted an amnesty.

Parliament is due to take up the debate on a national truth commission again before 2014, but it is unclear if there is political will to establish one.

Meanwhile, victims and family members in Aceh are left without information about what happened during the conflict – including the fate of hundreds of “disappeared” persons who have yet to be accounted for.

As time passes, there is a risk that valuable information is being lost, making the establishment of an effective truth commission even more urgent.

“[We] want to know why until now the government has not acknowledged that we suffered human rights abuses,” an Aceh victims’ representative told Amnesty International.

“We are still fighting, not against the government, but for the government to remember what happened to us. They do not have the right to forget.”

The failure to establish the truth has contributed to a culture of impunity for the serious rights abuses committed during the conflict – not a single new case has been prosecuted since the 2005 peace agreement.

At the same time, a climate of fear still pervades in Aceh, with some victims’ representatives telling Amnesty International that they have received threats for their work on impunity for past crimes.

“The failure to prosecute those responsible is having grave consequences on the rule of law today. There is currently no adequate vetting mechanism in the security forces to identify those accused of rights violations and to ensure they are not placed in a position where they can simply carry on past practices,” Arradon said.

“This is true across Indonesia, where we are continuing to document serious human rights violations by security forces.”

Efforts by the authorities to provide reparation to victims of the Aceh conflict have been patchy and inadequate.

The steps taken so far have mostly involved financial compensation, and have been aimed at the Acehnese population at large instead of individual victims of human rights abuses.

There has yet to be a comprehensive reparation programme that, on top of financial compensation, includes other measures such as a formal apology, and commemoration programmes for victims.

Some groups, like many women survivors of sexual violence during the conflict, have been unable to access the existing programmes. .

“By addressing the situation in Aceh, the Indonesian authorities could not only heal open wounds but also

help to strengthen the rule of law and secure the peace process for the long-term,” Arradon said.

”It would also send a strong signal to other victims of human rights abuses and their families in Indonesia, who are waiting for measures of truth, justice and reparation to address crimes committed in other situations.”