

AI INDEX: ASA 21/101/98

14 November 1998

Indonesia: immediate action needed to check abuses

President Habibie's calls for a crackdown send an ominous signal about respect for human rights, Amnesty International warned as disturbances in the capital escalated.

Characterising the mass protests of recent days as "subversive", President Habibie reportedly ordered Indonesia's military to take "firm actions in line with the prevailing laws and regulations." Despite moves to repeal Indonesia's Anti-subversion law, draconian security powers remain in force in Indonesia and are used to jail peaceful critics of the government.

"President Habibie should be ordering greater restraint not greater repression. What Indonesia needs now is space for the peaceful expression of popular anger and discontent. As past experience has shown, suppression of protests will only bottle up discontent and fuel further violence."

In recent months, the Indonesian Army (ABRI) has shown greater restraint in handling demonstrations and commander-in chief General Wiranto has apologised for abuses. But the events of recent days will only undermine public confidence in the professionalism and accountability of the military and the genuineness of the government's reform program.

"Apologies and condolences are not enough," Amnesty International said. "Units alleged to have committed abuses, such as breaching guidelines on the use of live ammunition and force, should be immediately suspended from duty, pending full and independent investigations."

As the events of May showed, it is vital that enquiries be ordered quickly, evidence preserved and witnesses protected. Appropriate measures must also be put in place for the protection of vulnerable groups, particularly the country's ethnic Chinese community.

"Clearly, the Indonesian authorities face a serious challenge in maintaining order. But protection for human rights becomes more not less important in such a crisis situation."

Amnesty International called on APEC leaders assembling in Kuala Lumpur to press the Indonesian authorities for restraint and underscore the importance of securing human rights in the country's political transition.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION/INTERVIEWS

Kuala Lumpur: John Kellock/Tim Parritt on 44 831 667215 or 60 12 373 7556; if calling in Malaysia, please call 012 373 7556

London: AI Press office 44 171 413 5729

ENDS.../

