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Indonesia: Security forces block peaceful demonstration in Papua

Amnesty International calls for an independent and impartial investigation into reports that police used unnecessary and excessive force to disperse a peaceful demonstration in Papua province commemorating International Day of the World's Indigenous People on 9 August 2012.

If the investigation finds that the security forces committed human rights violations, then those responsible, including persons with command responsibility, should be prosecuted in proceedings which meet international standards of fairness, and victims provided with reparations.

At least seven people were arbitrarily arrested during and after the demonstration and are being held at the Yapen District police station. They should be released immediately and unconditionally if they have been arrested solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression.

Police Mobile Brigade (Brimob) and military from the 1709 District Military Command (Kodim) led by the Yapen District Police Chief blocked hundreds of peaceful protesters as they marched on the morning of 9 August 2012 in Serui, Yapen Island.

According to local sources, the Indonesian security forces then fired their guns into the air to disperse the protesters, causing many to flee in fear. At least six protesters were arbitrarily arrested during the demonstration and some were reportedly beaten by security forces during their arrest. The police then travelled to Mantembu village to arrest one of the demonstration organizers, a local political activist. When they could not find him they arrested his wife, who is reportedly eight months pregnant.

The actions of the security forces fly in the face of statements made by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in February 2012 that he wanted an end to repressive actions by the military and police in Papua.

The rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are guaranteed in Articles 19 and 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Indonesia is a state party. Moreover, these rights are protected under Indonesia's Constitution. However, Amnesty International has documented dozens of other cases of arbitrary arrest and detention in past years of peaceful political activists in Papua.

Amnesty International continues to receive credible reports of human rights violations committed by the security forces in the provinces of Papua and West Papua, including torture and other ill-treatment, unnecessary and excessive use of force and firearms by the security forces and possible unlawful killings. Investigations into reports of human rights violations by the security forces are rare and only a few perpetrators have been brought to justice.

During a 2008 gathering to commemorate International Day of the World's Indigenous People in Papua, peaceful demonstrator Opinus Tabuni was discovered dead with a bullet wound clearly visible in his chest, after police opened fire at the crowd. Despite a police investigation, to date no one has been held to account for his death.