

Indonesia: Aceh Arrests Could Portend Increased Polarization, Violence

By Jim Lobe

The detention by Indonesian police on July 20 of 15 human rights activists and six negotiators for the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka or GAM) could portend a polarization of the conflict between government and rebel forces at the height of the political crisis in Jakarta over President Abdurrahman Wahid's impeachment and the taking office of the new president, Megawati Sukarnoputri.

"This could be a signal for all-out war," according to Sidney Jones, Asia director of New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) and an Indonesia expert. "With the arrests of people whose security it had guaranteed, the Indonesian government is showing that commitments it makes with respect to Aceh are worthless."

Both HRW and Amnesty International in London issued strong statements about the arrests Friday night, demanding that the due process rights of those detained to be guaranteed and asking friendly governments to press Jakarta for their release.

"The detention of the human rights activists and the GAM negotiating team sends a clear message that the Indonesian authorities are not committed to pursuing a peaceful solution to the conflict in Aceh which would lead to an improvement in the human rights situation there," said Amnesty. It noted that two human rights activists were tortured earlier this week after being detained by police in Rikit Gaib in Southeast Aceh. They were returning from investigating reports of killings of over 100 people in Central Aceh District since early June. The activists, who were released without charge after 48 hours, were carrying documents regarding military involvement in the killings

and the creation of armed militia groups by Javanese settlers in the area.

These developments followed the launch of a new military operation by government forces against GAM in May as a result of which thousands of people are reported to have fled their homes. According to Amnesty, GAM has also stepped up its attacks against Javanese settlers as the violence has intensified.

All of this occurred just as U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell was preparing to leave for Hanoi, the site of this year's Asian Regional Forum (ARF) of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Amnesty called on all foreign ministers to focus their attention on the deteriorating human rights situation in Indonesia, particularly in Aceh and Papua (Irian Jaya), which, according to the group, "pose a threat to national and regional stability."

It also comes as the U.S. House of Representatives prepares to vote on the 2002 foreign aid appropriations bill, which includes tough conditions for resumption of U.S. training of Indonesian military forces. Under the so-called Leahy Amendment, named for Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy, no training can take place until the president reports to Congress that the Indonesian government and its armed forces have taken "effective measures" to bring to justice military officers and militia groups accused of human rights abuses in East Timor and elsewhere in the sprawling archipelago. It also requires the government to facilitate the return of all East Timorese who were displaced to West Timor to their homeland if they wish to do so.

In a 14-page report released last week, the International Crisis Group (ICG) found that Jakarta has made "some progress" in returning

East Timorese to their homes, but “no progress” on any of the other human rights conditions. “(I)t is difficult to see how Presidential certification on these matters could be sent to Congress in good faith,” the report stated. The ICG noted that both the Pentagon and the government in Jakarta, including former president Wahid who had expressed frustration about Washington’s failure to move to renew military aid and arms sales, would like to resume the relationship. While officer training may be helpful, according to the report, it recommended that aid and sales should remain subject not only to current conditions but also to reforms to ensure that the civilian government exercises full control over the military’s budget. “Dropping tough conditions in the near future would send exactly the wrong message to Indonesia on military reform, the role of the armed forces in society and its conduct in conditions of turmoil—especially in provinces like Aceh and Irian Jaya,” said ICG Indonesia Project Director Harold Crouch.

Although forces in the Pentagon are eager to resume ties with the military, the State Department appears far less enthusiastic. “Legislative restrictions on U.S. interaction with the Indonesian military (TNI) are an important reminder to Indonesia and its military of the importance of human rights issues to the world in general and to the United States in particular,” Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Asian Affairs Ralph Boyce told the House Committee on International Relations in testimony last week.

Boyce, who is slated to be named as Washington’s next ambassador in Jakarta, stressed that the TNI “remains a central, truly national institution” in Indonesia, adding, however, that it has an “enormous potential to support—or subvert—Indonesia’s democratization.” Privately, Boyce has indicated support for tough conditions on military aid, although he has also spoken favorably about U.S. efforts to train police. The police force was separated from the military under Wahid.

The recent arrests in Aceh, however, were carried out by members of the Police Mobile Brigade (Brimob) who raided the Banda Aceh office of the Legal Aid Foundation (LBH) during a meeting of the rights activists, as well as the Kuala Tripa hotel where the GAM negotiating team had been taking part in meetings with Indonesian authorities for peace talks, which have taken place in Geneva and Banda Aceh since in May 2000. While Brimob presented arrest warrants for the GAM delegation, police told reporters that they were being taken in for questioning only. Several of the human rights activists were released the same day they were taken into custody.

Amnesty said it saw the moves by the police as an effort to exploit the mounting political crisis in Jakarta to arrest key personalities in Aceh. It noted that before the latest offensive, several activists had been summarily executed and an increasing number of them have been forced to leave Aceh for their own security.

The most notorious murder was that of Jafar Siddiq Hamzah, a U.S. resident and head of the International Forum for Aceh, who disappeared near Medan one year ago. His body was found one month ago with four others, in circumstances suggesting that he had been tortured before his death. HRW noted that the government unilaterally suspended talks on security matters July 1, demanding that GAM’s top commander, Abdullah Syaf’ie, take a direct role in the negotiations. It said that it would continue to guarantee the personal security of GAM’s negotiating team “in relation to their official functions.” At the same time, however, it indicated that no immunity would be granted for activities that were not directly related to their official responsibilities.

The group also noted that the arrests of the negotiators came one day after the Indonesian parliament approved a bill on Acehese autonomy that also provided a greater share of the oil revenue it contributes to the national budget, notably through oil production by Exxon-Mobil. The bill, however, was denounced as inadequate by both GAM and lawmakers from Aceh. Exxon-Mobil was sued in U.S. federal court last month under the 200-year-old Alien Tort Claims Act for responsibility for serious human rights abuses, including murder and torture, committed by the military in connection with providing security for its operations in Aceh.