

INDONESIA: Behind the 'religious' violence in Maluku

12 July 2000

The sinking of the overloaded *Cahaya Bahari* ferry on July 6 -- which killed at least 481 Christian refugees fleeing the latest outburst of violence in Indonesia -- highlighted the scale of the human tragedy unfolding in the north-eastern province of Maluku.

Since the violence erupted in January last year, some 4000 people have died and almost 500,000 have been displaced or left homeless. Whole communities have been decimated and aid agencies such as Medecins Sans Frontieres say that there is "complete chaos and breakdown of law and order".

Describing the situation as "sectarian violence" or "religious clashes" between Christians and Muslims, the mainstream media have not explained the roots of the conflict or the apparent inability of the Indonesian government to end it. Although there have been claims that forces loyal to former President Suharto or sections of the Jakarta elite are fueling the strife to undermine President Aburrahman Wahid's "democratic reforms", the reality is far more complex.

Civil emergency

On June 23, Wahid placed a ban on travel to the Malukus amid reports that Islamic vigilantes from Java were behind much of the latest violence. On June 25, two companies from the Mobile Brigade were dispatched to reinforce the 19 battalions stationed in Maluku. According to armed forces chief Widodo A.S., further reinforcements could be sent, "depending on the situation on the ground".

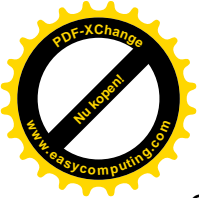
Neither measure brought the situation under control and on June 26 Wahid announced a state of "civil emergency" in Maluku and the newly formed province of North Maluku. The Maluku police chief and head of the provincial prosecutor's office, Surjadi, told the June 27 *Jakarta Post* that it will only be revoked when the situation in both provinces "has returned to normal".

A civil emergency is one step away from marshal law, such as that imposed during the height of the violence in East Timor last September. One notable difference is that regional control remains in the hands of the civilian government, which can ban public gatherings, impose a curfew, search houses and detain suspects indefinitely.

Church leaders have called on the United Nations to intervene. The June 27 *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that the bishop of the provincial capital of Ambon, Joseph Tethool, wrote a letter to UN secretary-general calling on the UN to stop the fighting. The letter accused many soldiers of incompetence and of having "taken sides".

Indonesia's ministry of foreign affairs said Jakarta would not agree to UN political or military intervention.

Taking sides



Claims of military involvement in the conflict -- supplying weapons and other forms of direct or tacit support -- have been made by Muslims and Christians alike. Other reports suggest that soldiers are simply too scared to intervene and military commanders frequently claim that their forces are outnumbered.

Benny Liando, secretary of Ambon's Roman Catholic Cathedral, was quoted on June 27 by Agence France-Presse as saying, "The key to whether this status will be able to bring peace here is the military ... If the security personnel can remain neutral, then hopefully, peace will come."

Liando said there was a commitment to neutrality at the leadership level, but it was another story among soldiers on the ground. "If this neutrality is absent, I am afraid this state of emergency will only lead to more bloodshed."

Malik Selang, secretary of the Maluku chapter of the Indonesian Council of Muslim Scholars, also expressed pessimism: "The military commander has called on all security personnel to return to their bases, but several have ignored the order and joined the other side". Political researcher Bambang Triono of Gajah Mada University said, "The problem now is that security personnel are trapped and carried away by the conflict. There are personnel who appear to be protecting Christians while others appear to be protecting Muslims."

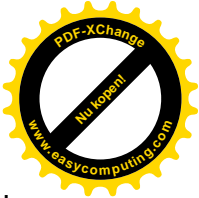
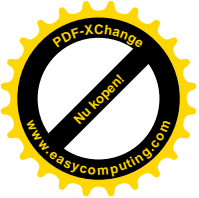
Just how high up the command structure this involvement is being sanctioned remains unclear, but a number of institutional and material factors encourage the practice on the ground. The territorial command structure -- which places military bases and posts at every level of Indonesian society -- has resulted in military involvement in almost every facet of Indonesian society, including the bureaucracy, legislature and economy. In short, the military has evolved from an arm of national security into a uniformed mafia.

Their activities range from extortion, protection rackets (strike breaking and private security), maintaining monopolies on essential commodity distribution, regulating Indonesia's massive "informal sector" (street vendors), gambling and prostitution. It is not hard to imagine that protection rackets -- being paid to defend one side or the other -- would be rife in the midst of communal violence.

Another factor is that the wages of low-ranking soldiers and police are extremely low, particularly for those trying to support a family. Offering protection or supplying weapons to a gun-hungry market would be an easy way for soldiers to supplement their wage.

Observers have noted the increasing use of modern weapons in the fighting and recent seizures of weapons and ammunition support this. Associated Press said that on July 4 the navy uncovered a "huge cache" of military-style and homemade weapons on a vessel in Ternate, an island south of Halmahera which has been the scene of some of the most violent clashes in recent weeks.

Adding to the problem is the fact that, as Maluku governor Saleh Latuconsina told Agence France-Presse on June 27, soldiers' pay is often months late, leaving them



dependent on the local population for food. It is likely that food is sometimes provided in exchange for protection or weapons.

Troop replacement

Official concern about this problem resulted in the commander of the Pattimura Military Command being replaced on June 26 by Colonel I Made Yasa, a Hindu from Bali who, it is hoped, will not be seen to favour either side. According to the July 27 *Jakarta Post*, Yasa said, "I will try my best to be neutral ... I call on both warring parties to restrain themselves and stop the fights." He set July 1 as the deadline for the two groups to hand over their weapons and for "missing" to report to barracks.

The military also announced that 1200 of the 10,200 troops in the Malukus will be replaced because they have been taking sides. Military spokesperson Graitto Usodo was quoted in the June 28 *South China Morning Post* as saying these soldiers "have been there too long [and] may have become involved emotionally ... There are some rogue elements ... that are not acting professionally. They are taking sides."

More than 40 members of the security forces have been killed and the military has acknowledged that police and soldiers have been shooting at each other. Some local battalions have ceased to exist after the soldiers deserted to fight alongside Christian or Muslim communities. In Ambon, in particular, a religious divide has emerged between the police, who are mostly Christian, and the army, who are mostly Muslim.

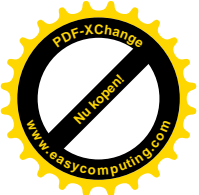
According to Agence France-Presse on June 26, police and military installations are being increasingly targeted by the population. A number of police stations, military posts and barracks have been attacked and burned down, the attackers seizing large caches of weapons in some instances.

Roots of the conflict

The roots of the conflict are not so much in religious differences as in a range of local disputes between the communities which were ignored or suppressed during the Suharto dictatorship.

In Ambon, Christians were believed by many Muslims to have preferential access to government jobs. Government jobs, which ensure a secure income, social standing and additional sources of income from corruption, are eagerly sought after and **Christians feared that the influx of Muslims from other islands, part of the government's transmigration program, would lead to more Muslim representation in the civil service. Tensions between local communities and transmigrants have long been a cause of violence in many parts of the country.**

Under the Suharto dictatorship, religious organisations -- particularly Islamic -- were the only forms of social organisation allowed to flourish. Political parties, trade unions, student groups and other mass political organisations were dismantled, forcibly merged or taken over and, by the early 1980s, had ceased to play any significant role in Indonesian society. Although non-government organisations were allowed some freedom to operate, strict regulations prevented them from playing a political role.



The religious card was and is still used to garner political support and there are plenty of underemployed people willing to take up arms on behalf of their communities if given a little money and encouragement.

In North Maluku, where some of the fiercest fighting has taken place recently, the conflict involves a long-standing rivalry between the traditionally dominant sultans of the islands of Ternate and Tidore, which are at the heart of the nutmeg and cloves trade. It also involves resentment among the Christian minority on the main island of Halmahera towards Muslims who were resettled in their neighbourhood after a volcanic eruption 25 years ago.

Complicating the situation has been the struggle over control of resources and territory in the wake of Suharto's overthrow, including control of the new province of North Maluku.

Another factor is the arrival in recent weeks of thousands of well-funded, well-organised Muslim militants from Java -- the Lakasar Jihad -- who say they have come to fight a *jihad* (holy war). Wahid explicitly ordered them not to go to the Malukus, but the security forces at the Tanjung Perak port of Surabaya in East Java did not stop them from boarding ships on the grounds that the militants were not carrying weapons.

The militants have now obtained modern automatic weapons, presumably from sympathisers in the military, and they are reported to have been involved in large-scale attacks on Christian communities, causing heavy casualties.

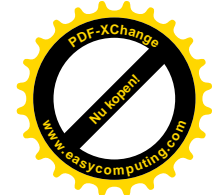
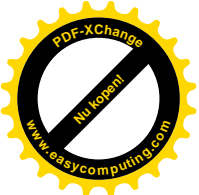
Reports from the village of Duma on Ternate, where as many as 142 Christians were killed and another 160 were wounded on June 19, said that jihad fighters moved freely around town. A succession of Christian areas across Halmahera have been overrun. "The pressure on Tobelo is now intense", a Manado-based church source told the June 28 *South China Morning Post*. There are "thousands of Christians with nowhere to go".

Conflict in the elite

Although the inability of the government to control these "external" factors is partly a result of the disarray in the administration, there is little doubt that some sections of the political and military elite are at least tacitly encouraging the violence.

The Lakasar Jihad clearly have high-level backing -- they received training in a camp in Bogor near Jakarta on land owned by an influential political figure, Hilal Thalib, the chairperson of the Al Irsad Foundation. Someone is paying for their food, accommodation and transport.

On June 3, Wahid publicly accused several legislators of being behind the unrest, adding that the government now had enough evidence to "nail" those concerned. Although he did not name names, he was quoted on July 3 by Agence France-Presse as saying, "One of them is a heavyweight who has been difficult to legally net because of the lack of evidence".



Wahid and several of his senior officials have repeatedly accused unidentified people who were influential during the Suharto era of being behind the communal violence in several parts of the country. According to the July 6 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, there is a growing sense that the Maluku violence is part of a deliberate campaign to weaken -- though probably not topple -- the president ahead of the People's Consultative Assembly session in August. The *FEER* quoted politics analyst Cornelius Luhulima as saying, "They want to use the Malukus as a battleground for political change in Jakarta".

The *FEER* said these figures range from disaffected retired and serving military officers trying to stir the political pot in Jakarta, to well-funded Muslim extremists seeking to capitalise on a shift in the demographic balance of a region that was once a Christian majority in an otherwise Islamic nation.

It may be, however, that Wahid and those around him are seeking to shift the blame for the slow pace of political and economic "reform" and their failure to solve the many regional conflicts onto shadowy members of Suharto's regime. Certainly, the latter are anxious to slow down reform and prevent recriminations against those involved in political and human rights abuses under Suharto.

The fact that a simple fare dispute between a Christian bus driver and a Muslim passenger could escalate into a regional conflict is also testimony to the brutalisation of Indonesian society under the Suharto dictatorship and the consequent culture of violence that developed.

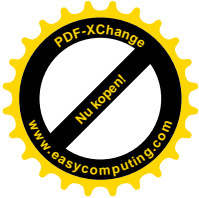
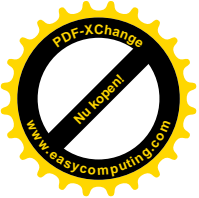
Following Suharto's overthrow, the combination of increased democratic space, the lack of social and legal institutions to mediate disputes, and an utterly discredited military and police force has led to outbreaks of communal violence throughout the archipelago. In Jakarta alone this year, the city morgue has listed 103 "victims of mob violence", beaten to death or burned alive by local residents for crimes as minor as stealing a motorbike.

Anger and resentment within communities has been fuelled by poverty, unemployment and the lack of development. The majority of Indonesians -- peasants and the urban poor -- gained little from the country's "economic boom" during in the 1980s and early '90s. Instead, most continued to struggle to survive while watching a tiny elite layer amass huge wealth.

Later, it was this majority which suffered most from the 1997-98 economic crisis. According to a survey by a World Bank-funded monitoring agency, more than 40% of textile and garment workers and more than 75% of construction workers have lost their jobs. Around 40% of those people classified as poor before the crisis have had to sell their "assets" to survive.

Official wage rates have gone up, but employer compliance is low and, in any case, the rises that have been granted -- all less than 50% -- don't even restore real wages to 1997 levels.

The austerity measures demanded by the IMF if Indonesia is to be eligible for continued assistance under the \$40 billion bailout package will further impoverish the



majority of Indonesians. Under these circumstances, the kind of conflicts occurring in the Maluku are likely to persist and spread.

In the final analysis, it is the IMF, World Bank and Western governments that supported the Suharto dictatorship for 32 years that are to blame for the human tragedy now unfolding in the Maluku.

BY JAMES BALOWSKI



From: International News, Green Left Weekly issue [#411](#) 12 July 2000.