

Despite Advances, Indonesia Offensive Uncertain

By Alan Sipress
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JAKARTA, Indonesia, July 23 -- More than two months after Indonesia launched a major offensive against separatists in the province of Aceh, vowing to wipe them out in six months, the chief of the military said today that the campaign could last much longer than planned, despite significant gains on the battlefield.

The military has reported that more than 500 people have been killed in the offensive, most of them rebels of the Free Aceh Movement, which has been fighting since 1976 for an independent homeland in westernmost Indonesia. But Western diplomats estimate that several hundred civilians are among the casualties, including scores of suspected rebel sympathizers.

Indonesian security forces have also moved as many as 40,000 Acehnese villagers from their homes to government-run camps, according to official estimates. Many of the residents have been able to return home in recent weeks as the battle lines shifted. But they have often found their houses and farms looted despite guarantees from security forces that the property would be safeguarded, diplomats and humanitarian officials said.

A report issued today by the International Crisis Group warned that the Indonesian government is promoting separatist sympathies through heavy-handed policies, including forced evacuations. The Brussels-based research organization also pointed to widespread arrests, loyalty screening for Acehnese civil servants and forced participation in mass rallies meant to demonstrate support for Indonesia.

"The government appears to have no clear objectives in this war, no criteria for success other than control of territory and body counts, and no exit strategy," the report said.

Gen. Endriartono Sutarto, Indonesia's military chief, said today that the battle to destroy the rebel force, with an estimated 5,000 members, could take longer than President Megawati Sukarnoputri promised when she declared martial law in Aceh on May 19. Earlier this month the general told reporters that the campaign could take as long as 10 years.

"We have no precedent for this problem being overcome within six months," he said after discussing Aceh at a meeting with Megawati and senior security officials.

He said that the force of 40,000 soldiers and 10,000 police have made headway in routing rebels.

"Now the separatists are in a difficult position, and many of them have surrendered. It means that they have understood that the best way for them is not to continue their fight. It is good progress," Sutarto said.

Megawati ordered the offensive -- the largest since Indonesian troops invaded East Timor in 1975 -- after negotiations broke down with the rebel movement, known by its Indonesian initials GAM, ending a five-month cease-fire that had brought a rare and fleeting sense of optimism to the province. Aceh, rich with oil and gas reserves, has been afflicted by violence for more than a century. Local fighters repeatedly took up arms against the Dutch colonial authorities, and then the Indonesian government.

While U.S. officials have said they oppose the rebels' goal of independence, they have urged Indonesia to seek a peaceful solution that would address Acehnese demands for greater autonomy. A senior U.S. official said earlier this month that the insurgency is rooted in a long history of grievances against Indonesian rule, which include brutal repression during the administration of former president Suharto.

"They hate the military there," the senior U.S. official said earlier this month. "I don't think any Indonesian military campaign will ever have [the] effect of winning hearts and minds in Aceh."

Indonesian authorities have significantly tightened restrictions on media coverage of the conflict and arrested an American freelance reporter who had traveled with the rebels. William Nessen, who has published articles in the San Francisco Chronicle and other U.S. and Australian newspapers, went on trial today in the provincial capital, Banda Aceh, on charges of misusing his journalist's visa. He faces up to five years in prison if convicted.