

Dayaks Loot and Burn City As Borneo Violence Spreads

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PALANGKARAYA, Indonesia, Feb. 27 (Tuesday) -- Armed gangs of indigenous Dayak fighters took over the streets of this provincial capital on the Indonesian half of Borneo island on Monday, looting and burning scores of homes and businesses in a campaign of ethnic terror that security forces have been unable to quell.

Plumes of acrid smoke drifted across this city of 160,000 people as young Dayak men brandishing spears and machetes zipped around on motorcycles to search for immigrants from Madura Island and torch their possessions. Additional soldiers and police officers were dispatched to the city, but they made no attempt to stop the violence. Many remained within the grounds of the police station, while others gawked at the bedlam from a safe distance.

Although Dayak vigilantes in Palangkaraya had burned some homes and set up checkpoints Sunday night, they waited until Monday to fully sweep into the city, laying waste to Madurese neighborhoods and setting up roadblocks of burning tires. The occupation of Palangkaraya -- about 500 miles northeast of the Indonesian capital, Jakarta -- is the latest victory in the Dayaks' violent quest to rid the province of Central Kalimantan of Madurese.

Officials said no Madurese were killed in the city Monday, but the last few hundred fled their homes, joining tens of thousands of other migrants across the province who have tried to escape the violence.

On Tuesday morning, the mayor of the town of Sampit, which has been the site of some of the most severe clashes, said that 103 corpses were found dumped near a government office. The discovery has raised the death toll to more than 400 since the ethnic fighting began on Feb. 18. Almost all the victims have been Madurese, and many of them were beheaded by the Dayaks, who are descendants of a tribal group in Borneo known for practicing headhunting and cannibalism until the late 19th century. Some of the dead also had their hearts cut out.

Government officials warned that the conflict could continue to spread through the province as emboldened Dayak mobs seek new villages to attack. Dayak fighters also continued to search jungle areas for thousands of Madurese who are believed to have gone into hiding.

"The communal conflict could move to more remote areas that are difficult to reach," Indonesia's coordinating minister of security and political affairs, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, said at a news conference here. He said security forces would be able to bring the situation under control in three days.

Some government officials, military analysts and Madurese refugees have questioned the ability of Indonesia's military and police to restore order in the largely undeveloped province.

An additional army battalion of 600 soldiers arrived in Palangkaraya on Monday bound for Sampit. President Abdurrahman Wahid said at a summit of developing nations in Cairo that he had dispatched special forces units to the province, although none had arrived by Monday evening, according to local officials.

Despite the additional manpower, the military and police appeared to take few steps to confront the rampaging Dayaks. As a Madurese neighborhood went up in flames this morning, 25 camouflage-attired soldiers stood on the sidewalk and watched.

Asked why they were not trying to put out the fire or to apprehend the people who started the blaze, one of the soldiers said, "It's not our duty to do this." Another said there were "too many" Dayaks for them to intervene, even though the soldiers were equipped with automatic weapons and the Dayaks had only crude machetes.

A police spokeswoman declined to comment when asked whether officials still had control of the city. She said the police and military were following "standard procedures" in addressing the violence.

Yudhoyono said security forces were initially concentrating their efforts on guarding Madurese refugees. "The priority is first to take serious efforts to save lives," he said.

The animosity between the Madurese and the Dayaks arose more than four decades ago, when the government began moving Madurese off their native island to relieve overcrowding. More than 100,000 were relocated to Borneo, causing land disputes and economic rivalries with the native Dayaks.

In 1997 and again in 1999, Dayaks killed hundreds of migrants in the adjacent province of West Kalimantan, purging it of almost all of its Madurese inhabitants.

The Dayaks appear to have no clear political agenda other than to drive Madurese from Central Kalimantan and regain economic opportunities they believe they have lost. The Dayaks are not seeking any fundamental political changes, such as a new provincial government or promotion of their language.

The ethnic tension in Central Kalimantan exploded when a mob of Dayaks killed a group of Madurese. Officials said the mob was encouraged to attack by three Dayaks who were upset that they had lost their jobs in a government reorganization.

A national police spokesman said the three Dayaks suspected of having instigated the violence have been flown to Jakarta for questioning, the Associated Press reported. The spokesman said investigators believe the men paid the Dayak mob \$2,000 to attack the Madurese, according to the AP.