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Major Military Attack Unfolds Against Rebels in Indonesia

By ASSOCIATED PRESS

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia, May 19 (AP) — Indonesia began a major military offensive today against separatist rebels in the northwestern Aceh Province, firing rockets, parachuting in troops and landing marines after peace talks collapsed and martial law was imposed.

More than 1,000 soldiers landed in the province, rich in oil reserves, in what is expected to be Indonesia's biggest military operation since it invaded East Timor in 1975.

Indonesia's military chief, Gen. Endriartono Sutarto, said on arriving in Banda Aceh, the provincial capital, that he had ordered soldiers to hunt for those rebels who refused to surrender and to "destroy them to their roots."

About 30,000 government troops are trying to crush about 5,000 poorly armed guerrillas in a dense, mountainous forest. The sides have been fighting since 1976, making this one of Asia's longest-running conflicts.

By late afternoon, no rebel casualties had been reported and troops were meeting minimal resistance, said Maj. Gen. Syafrie Syamsuddin. One Indonesian marine was killed in an accident while landing on a beach in bad weather, he said.

The attack today signaled a return to military confrontation after the breakdown of a Dec. 9 cease-fire between the government and the Free Aceh Movement. The accord — which envisioned autonomy, rebel disarmament and military withdrawals — unraveled in recent months after violence and recriminations in the province, which is 1,200 miles northwest of the capital, Jakarta. More than 12,000 people have been killed in the decades of fighting.

President Megawati Sukarnoputri ordered a crackdown after rebels refused to honor a government-imposed deadline for laying down weapons and abandoning their demand for independence. Five rebel negotiators were arrested and accused of carrying out a series of recent bombings in Indonesia.

A presidential decree authorized six months of military rule in Aceh, giving the authorities wide powers to make arrests and limit movements in and out of the province.

Residents braced for harsher strikes and heavy casualties.

"The rebels will hide behind the civilians, and how will the army tell the difference? Many people will die," a resident named Mawarni said after praying at Banda Aceh's main mosque.

The government estimated that the number of refugees in Aceh would balloon to 100,000 from the current 5,000.

Today, attack planes droned over Banda Aceh and fired rockets at a suspected rebel weapons cache at a hillside base. The blasts destroyed an abandoned chicken coop and farmers' huts near empty villages.

Six C-130 Hercules transport aircraft released 458 parachuters over an airstrip close to Banda Aceh, Maj. Gen. Erwin Sujono said. More than 600 marines landed from one of 15 warships off the province's northern coast, an area with a heavy concentration of rebels, he said.

Aceh, on Sumatra island's northern tip, was once an independent sultanate and has a long history of defiance, beginning with a Dutch colonialist invasion in 1870.

The Acehnese were at the forefront of Indonesia's fight for independence during the 1940's. When Indonesia declared independence in 1945, Aceh was promised autonomy but never received it — the first of many broken promises by Jakarta that triggered a series of Acehnese rebellions.

Many Acehnese in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, want to be governed by a brand of Islam much stricter than that practiced in the rest of the country.

But the crackdown is not only about keeping the vast archipelago nation of Indonesia in one piece. Extortion, drug running and arms smuggling have allowed elements on both sides to profit from the conflict. Also at stake are huge reserves of oil and gas that local residents want to keep.

Weekend talks in Tokyo were arranged hastily under pressure from international donors alarmed by the prospect of renewed fighting. Even as the two sides talked, thousands of Indonesian troops massed in the province.

The European Union, Japan, the United States and the World Bank issued a joint statement today saying they "deeply regret" that the two sides "failed to seize the unique opportunity before them."

The rebel leader Malik Mahmud said that he believed that the Indonesian government was "looking for a way to declare war" and that he had no intention of compromising.

