

Savage Attacks Terrorize Migrants on Borneo

By Rajiv Chandrasekaran

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SAMPIT, Indonesia, Feb. 23 -- Asyrini and her family were less than a mile from a makeshift refugee camp on Thursday when a mob of screaming, machete-wielding men caught up with them.

"You people don't belong here," she recalled one of the men growling at her family, which migrated to this town in central Borneo from another Indonesian island more than a decade ago. He threatened to turn them into satay, a dish of grilled meat on a stick.

Moments later, the men, members of the native Dayak ethnic group, set upon her brother, beheading him and holding up his head as a trophy before marching off in search of other families from Asyrini's homeland, Madura Island.

By the end of the day, Dayak fighters had beheaded and hacked to death scores of Madurese migrants, including women and young children, in one of the most savage raids of ethnic violence to strike Indonesia in recent years.

The violence continued today as thousands of Dayaks armed with knives, homemade spears and tridents descended on Sampit -- about 450 miles northeast of Jakarta, in the province of Central Kalimantan -- from outlying areas to cleanse the town of Madurese. Bands of whooping Dayaks went house to house, searching for Madurese and burning their villages, reducing them to charred wastelands and forcing tens of thousands of migrants to flee. Severed heads were displayed on the roadside, and one group of fighters bragged that their leaders were playing soccer with one.

The provincial health director said today that at least 143 people have been killed, the vast majority of them Madurese, since fighting between the rival ethnic groups began on Sunday. He said there would likely be a significant rise in the death toll once officials discovered corpses that had been dumped in remote areas and those that were burned inside homes.

The fighting on the verdant flatlands of Borneo is the latest in a series of brutal ethnic clashes that have erupted across the Indonesian archipelago. The country has struggled to deal with a breakdown of law and order after more than three decades of authoritarian rule and also with the fallout of the former government's forced migration policies.

Indonesia is already besieged by a bloody sectarian conflict in the Spice Islands and separatist insurgencies in two resource-rich provinces, and the rise of ethnic violence could destabilize vast areas of the world's fourth-most-populous country, officials and analysts say. During the 32-year reign of former dictator Suharto, the government forcibly moved people to every corner of the nation to relieve overcrowding and to dilute the political strength of local ethnic groups.

Tensions frequently arose between the new arrivals and indigenous populations, particularly over jobs and other economic concerns. During the Suharto years they were kept in check by military repression. Now that Suharto has fallen and Indonesia is struggling with democracy, however, the military and police have stopped employing the same tough measures.

Although the Dayaks and Madurese peacefully coexisted for years -- sometimes even intermarrying -- tensions have escalated in recent years over economic issues. Dayaks accuse the Madurese of monopolizing stalls at the market and controlling the local bicycle taxi business. The Madurese also established farms on what traditionally had been Dayak land.

"The Madurese people were a vehicle for economic growth," said Abu Jihan, the leader of a Madurese youth group. "It was a problem for the Dayaks. They couldn't compete with us."

Here in Sampit, as in several other recent hot spots, police officers and soldiers have largely let troublemakers run amok. Truckloads of armed Dayaks drove through the town today, past police checkpoints, with no attempt to confiscate their weapons. Outside the town center, Dayak mobs set fire to scores of homes without any intervention by soldiers and policemen, who rode by on motorcycles. Dayak men also set up roadblocks on every route out of town and searched vehicles for Madurese passengers.

Law enforcement officials complain that the country's new democratic government has left security forces understaffed and under-funded, and the

officials say they worry that a new focus on human rights abuses has made officers afraid to use aggressive tactics to stop the violence.

The police commander in Sampit, Bambang Pranoto, said he has deployed almost 900 officers and soldiers but that his men have been outnumbered by the thousands of Dayaks who have flooded into town. As a consequence, he said, he redeployed his men to protect the grounds of a government building where 13,000 Madurese have sought shelter.

Madurese refugees say security forces should have at least tried to exert some control. "They aren't doing anything," said Mohammed Nur, a Madurese leader in the refugee camp. "They are just sitting around."

In Sampit, people from both ethnic groups say the conflict began Sunday when a mob of Dayaks attacked and killed five Madurese. Pranoto said the mob was provoked to attack by two Dayaks who were upset that they lost their jobs to Madurese in a government reorganization.

A day later, the Madurese retaliated, killing several Dayaks. Within hours, the crisis was out of control.

Because the Dayaks vastly outnumber the Madurese, they were able to gain the upper hand. Known as fierce warriors with a long tradition of headhunting, the Dayaks said today that they would not allow the migrants to return to their community.

"We will only be satisfied when they leave this land altogether. There is no compromise," said Andung Rahmat, a Dayak leader. As he was speaking in front of a ransacked hotel that serves as his group's headquarters, a yellow dump truck filled with Dayak fighters rumbled by. As it turned the corner, one of the men hoisted a severed head as the others cheered.

Academics who have studied Indonesia's internal migration policies contend that the problems here have been exacerbated because the government never tried to get the two groups to interact or to solve their problems peacefully.

"They moved people around, but there never was any effort to develop a multicultural society," said Imam Prasajo, a sociologist at the University of Indonesia. "They created enclaves instead of teaching people how to live in a pluralistic community."

Now, the Madurese from Sampit will join an estimated 1 million other Indonesians who have become refugees in their own land, fleeing from fighting in Aceh, Irian Jaya, the Spice Islands and other parts of Borneo. The government plans to ship several thousand of them to Java on Saturday, where they likely will join other Madurese who fled a severe outbreak of Dayak violence in the western part of Indonesian Borneo that resulted in several hundred deaths in 1997 and 1999.

"We don't care about revenge," Asyrini, a 30-year-old mother of two, said in the parking lot of a government building here that has been transformed into a refugee camp. "We want to go back to our homes."

But, she said, "that will never happen. I don't think we can ever live next to the Dayaks again."

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