

Borneo Violence 'Out of Control'

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SAMPIT, Indonesia, Feb. 25 -- A weeklong wave of ethnic violence and anarchy on the Indonesian half of Borneo island escalated sharply today as mobs of indigenous fighters expanded the area under their control in a spree of beheading and burning that has overwhelmed security forces.

Thousands of native Dayak people armed with machetes and homemade spears fanned out across hundreds of square miles of Central Kalimantan province to hunt down migrants from the island of Madura. Scores of young Dayak men, packed into trucks and riding motorcycles, set off into the jungle this morning to search for Madurese families who had attempted to flee the carnage. By late afternoon, hundreds of homes were ablaze and several freshly decapitated bodies were strewn along the roadside.

The increase in the violence that has already claimed at least 270 lives raised doubts about the ability of Indonesia's military and police forces to restore order in this largely undeveloped, 60,000-square-mile province with a population of 1.4 million about 450 miles northeast of Jakarta, the Indonesian capital.

Although several hundred additional police officers and soldiers descended on the port of Sampit over the weekend, the Dayaks have overwhelmed them and have effectively taken over a large swath of the province, where they are operating vigilante patrols. By this evening, legions of Dayaks moved in on the provincial capital, Palangkaraya, burning dozens of Madurese homes and setting up vehicle checkpoints across the city to search for the migrants.

Most of the security forces remained confined to a few square blocks in Sampit to protect more than 15,000 Madurese who were waiting for ships to evacuate them to other parts of the Indonesian archipelago. Few officers or soldiers could be seen patrolling other areas of Sampit.

Outside Sampit, there was almost no sign of a police or military presence on the roads. In several towns, police officers simply hunkered down in their barracks, and at one police station, officers could be seen playing chess as dozens of Dayaks set fire to nearby houses.

"The police and the army are letting this happen to us," Yanti, a 24-year-old woman, said in the Sampit refugee camp. "They aren't doing anything to stop the Dayaks."

"This is our land and we are in charge," said one Dayak manning a roadblock near Sampit.

Hostility between the minority Madurese and the majority Dayaks has existed for more than four decades since the government began moving tens of thousands of Madurese to Central Kalimantan to relieve overcrowding on their native island off Java. The mass forced migration resulted in land disputes and economic rivalries, but they were suppressed during more than three decades of authoritarian rule under former Indonesian leader Suharto.

The long-simmering tension finally erupted a week ago, when a mob of Dayaks attacked and killed five Madurese. Officials said the mob was encouraged to attack by two Dayaks who were upset that they had lost their jobs to Madurese in a government reorganization.

The provincial health director said he feared the death toll could rise considerably as Dayaks flushed more Madurese from the dense vegetation. Others warned of deteriorating conditions in the squalid refugee camp in Sampit, where officials said five people died over the weekend from illnesses. About 7,500 people were evacuated aboard two navy ships, but three other vessels that had been promised to transport the refugees did not arrive.

Police and military inaction during crises has become increasingly common in Indonesia, where there has been a series of brutal ethnic clashes. The country has struggled to deal with a breakdown of law and order since Suharto was forced out in 1998 and also with the fallout from his government's forced migration policies.

In the Moluccas islands, where fighting between Christians and Muslims has claimed more than 5,000 lives in the past two years, security forces have been accused of doing little to keep the warring sides apart.

Security analysts have said that the country's police and military units are under-equipped and underpaid, sapping their desire to perform their jobs. At the same time, officers have been urged to stop engaging in outside business ventures that have long paid for most of the armed forces' operating costs.

"The military is very demoralized," said Salim Said, a military analyst in Jakarta.

In the central government's first official response to the weeklong ethnic conflict, the country's top security minister and the armed forces chief toured Sampit today and pledged to restore order.

["We refute the perception we acted too late," the coordinating minister for security and political affairs, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, told reporters in Palangkaraya on Monday morning. "The local authorities, backed up by the local police, tried their best to control the situation."

[An additional battalion of soldiers, comprising 600 men, arrived Monday morning in Palangkaraya, bound for Sampit. Yudhoyono said it could take three days to bring the situation under control.

Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, who embarked on a controversial trip to the Middle East and Africa during the crisis, said in Cairo that special forces units may need to be sent to the province. The conflict has not drawn widespread international attention.

Despite being armed with automatic weapons against opponents carrying knives, local police officials said they did not have enough officers to confront the Dayaks and reestablish control.

In the town of Samuda, about 25 miles south of Sampit, the police chief said his 21-man contingent, augmented by 28 emergency response officers, was no match for the hundreds of Dayak fighters who brandished spears and brazenly occupied the town. As he spoke, several armed Dayaks drove by the police station in a red minivan with the words "Dayak Patrol" spray-painted on its side.

"It's out of control," said the chief, Jarwo, who like many Indonesians uses only one name.

On a drive from Sampit to Samuda this afternoon, several recently beheaded bodies were seen along the road. At one location, a group of Dayaks boasted to a group of reporters that they had just killed three people nearby. Two of them were decapitated and one had the heart ripped out.

One of the Dayaks said he had eaten a piece of another victim's heart, which would help to "make us brave and to strengthen our spirit."

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