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THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN INDONESIA

ISSUE

The human rights situation in Indonesia remains of concern following a number of setbacks over the past year and signs, both positive and negative, of increased sensitivity by the Indonesian government.

BACKGROUND

A complex country not well known to Canadians, Indonesia is quickly emerging as a major player on the international stage. This new status is a reflection of its size, phenomenal economic growth, impressive natural resource base and strategic location in Asia. Following on the political and economic chaos that characterized the Sukarno era, the Soeharto government has made unity, stability and development its top priorities. While it has enjoyed success in all three areas, the government has made use of the military, judicial system, legislation and press controls in ways not always respectful of human rights.

Developments over the past year have heightened international concern about human rights in Indonesia. In May, the suspicious death of a union activist and a generalized strike led to a riot in North Sumatra that highlighted the limited labour rights enjoyed by Indonesian workers in one of the more dynamic economies in the region. In June, the Indonesian government banned three prominent news magazines because of reporting on government corruption and economic policies. Warnings were issued to other prominent Indonesian media in further attempts to limit press freedoms. Ensuing demonstrations were met with force and many demonstrators were detained. Also in June, Indonesia publicly threatened the Philippines with political and economic sanctions to force the cancellation of a non-governmental conference on East Timor eventually held at the University of the Philippines.

In July, a demonstration in East Timor was forcefully suppressed by Indonesian security forces equipped with riot-control gear following a series of incidents reminiscent of the situation that preceded the November 1991 Dili incident. In this latest event, approximately 50 demonstrators were injured and many were detained. Further incidents of violence during the APEC meetings in November speak to the heightened tension between the Timorese and the large occupying military force.

While there have been setbacks, there have also been some advances as demonstrated by the restraint exercised by the security forces in dealing with both peaceful and more violent (as in Dili, in November) public demonstrations. Recent meetings between the Indonesian Foreign Minister and exiled Timorese leaders, the visit to East Timor of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Summary and Arbitrary Executions and the improved access enjoyed by the ICRC in East Timor and the country as a whole are further indications of the government's increased sensitivity to international concerns.

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