

## INDONESIA

### ISSUE

With the economic crisis has come frank and open debate on political as well as economic issues. However, the human rights situation in Indonesia continues to cause concern.

### BACKGROUND

The ongoing economic crisis in Indonesia has resulted in an explosion and openness of public debate on economic, social and political issues including the presidential succession. Calls for political change have come from many quarters: prominent mass Moslem organizations; former eminent Ministers of the Government; retired generals; newspapers -- especially the Jakarta Post; and Megawati Soekarnoputri, daughter of Indonesia's first President. Responding to IMF pressure, President Soeharto announced in mid-January 1998 unprecedented changes to the country's economic structure, abolishing cartels, monopolies and subsidies that had benefitted businesses of family and friends. Implementation of Government's austerity measures in coming months will be hard-felt by the population.

The year 1997 was one punctuated by outbreaks of ethnic and religious violence in West Kalimantan and South Sulawesi, riots, demonstrations throughout the country, a renewed wave of violence in East Timor, and hostage-takings in Irian Jaya. The campaign period leading up to the May 1997 parliamentary election was widely considered to be the most violent since the beginning of the thirty-two year-old New Order Government, characterized by rioting and violent clashes between party supporters. Encouragingly, restraint was exercised by the security forces in dealing with demonstrations.

Decades of social and economic reforms have steadily improved the lot of the average Indonesian, although tens of millions of Indonesians will fall below the poverty line this year due to the current economic crisis. Political and civil reforms, however, lag behind. The Indonesian Constitution (1945) makes little reference to human rights, nor has Indonesia ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, or the Convention on Torture. Indonesia is developing draft legislation to counter discrimination against persons with disabilities; nevertheless, economic barriers remain to hiring disabled workers, and education and health care systems are poorly equipped to deal with special needs. As a result, Indonesia's disabled population is largely dependent on the support of family and charitable organizations. Homosexuality is illegal according to Koranic law, but is tolerated if discreet.

Indonesian human rights NGOs were active during the year, and the media continue to encourage public debate on issues such as economic policies, political developments, judicial independence, corruption and even activities of the President's family. The Indonesian National Human Rights Commission (Komnas Ham) has undertaken independent investigations into prominent human rights cases such as the Liquica killings, the Marsinah affair and the Jakarta 1996 riots, and has grown to occupy an important political place in Indonesia.