



From economic crisis to human rights disaster

by Leti Boniol

It was as early as January 1998 when a human rights watchdog foresaw the Asian region's economic upheaval turning into a human rights disaster.

Sidney Jones, executive director of the non government Human Rights Watch Asia had predicted that economic grievances may increasingly take on an ethnic or religious cast. In the past 18 months, Jones said that churches have become as much a target of the Moslem poor as Chinese-owned shops. In eastern Indonesia, which is heavily Christian, Moslem traders from an ethnic group have become the focus of resentment.



Students rally in Airlangga University, Surabaya, East Java demanding for reforms in the economy and politics.

The prospect for violence is high when there is less money, land and water, Jones said. But what is sad is that the security forces in the countries most at risk have not been particularly conscious of human rights when quelling social protests.

None of the most affected Asian countries has a particularly good record on labour rights, she added. These countries may even introduce anti-union measures and restrictions on freedom of association.

As political dissent grows, Jones foresees that martial law and other emergency legislation could look "tempting" to several leaders.

In fact, the National Security Law in Korea, the Internal Security Act in Malaysia, and the Anti-Subversion Law in Indonesia have been used to detain critics and opponents, and student, labour and religious activists.

1998 saw not only Indonesian students but middle-class women going out to the streets of Jakarta to protest the consequences of the In-

onesian currency decline by 600 percent, and their inability thereafter to purchase the most basic commodities necessary for survival.

The protests took a turn for the worse when the desperate resorted to food riots which directly hit the ethnic Chinese who owned most of the shops. The riots became uglier when the mob turned to raping the women. A human rights lawyer suggested that the people had become so frustrated that they could be paid to harass, kill, and rape.

When President Soeharto stepped down from the presidency, and was replaced by his appointee, B.J. Habibie, the protests and riots did not stop. On the last week of September, the beleaguered new Indonesian president, faced by mounting protests and looting, urged the Indonesian military to "get tough" with "troublemakers."

This, amidst new protests caused by military presence in East Timor and the fast rising prices of basic commodities. Farmers have also been con-

ducting sit-ins to demand support for impoverished farmers in Jakarta. In Bogor, students and farmers rallied outside the deputy governor's office demanding the return of the land they claimed had been "stolen." Farmers have also recently chased a group of golfers with hoes and axes and were seen planting vegetables on the golf courses. Hungry Indonesians have also taken to raiding food warehouses, shrimp farms and paddy fields.

Last 5 October, Habibie urged the nation's military to "safeguard his economic and political reform program against radical revolutionaries." Indonesia was threatened with national disintegration, he said. About 300 students demanded an end to the Indonesian military's role in politics, which covers legislation and national security.

Habibie has been the target of a new wave of protests by students and other Indonesians over his inability to stem the worst effects of a deep economic crisis, said an Associated Press report.

Several retired army generals were backing a plan by student leaders to launch a 40-day protest to force Habibie to resign.

"I think this is going to blow," said a Western diplomat.

Reference:

Jones, Sidney, "Social costs of the Asian crisis," *The Financial Times*, 26 January 1998.

Associated Press. "Habibie attacks revolutionary groups," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 6 October 1998, page 12.

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