

Ending the human rights abuse in Papua

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A video with images of torture allegedly committed by members of the Indonesian military against Indigenous Papuans has now been broadcast all over the world. The images displayed are shocking and horrific.

The brutal scene shows that torture was deliberately committed by the perpetrators, and therefore cannot be regarded as mere unprofessional conduct.

It seems the government policy of isolating Papua from the rest of the world — by not allowing access to foreign journalists, international human rights workers, researchers and diplomats — has not been able to cover up the military brutality against the Papuan people. In fact, many people around the world have watched these brutal scenes.

However, this was not the first case of torture committed by the Indonesian security forces against Papuans. And it won't likely be the last, either.

In fact, Papuans have long suffered under the human rights abuses committed by Indonesian authorities. Since Indonesia took over the territory of Papua in 1963, the Indonesian military has conducted at least 10 massive military operations against indigenous Papuans.

Papuans living in places where military operations were once conducted have horrific stories to tell about all forms of rights abuse. They will tell you, for example, about how they watched as their houses were burned down, their garden and source of livelihood destroyed, and witnessed their friends, acquaintances and family members killed during military operations.

They also have stories about how their loved ones were tortured, intimidated and killed by security forces.

Papuans know President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono ordered for an investigation of the recent torture tape, so as to uphold the rule of law. However, they have no faith in this move producing change for good.

The President's promise of justice will be nothing more than lip service, for the simple fact that very few military personnel have ever been held accountable for human rights abuses committed against Papuans.

Indeed, perpetrators of rights abuse are at times even recognized as national heroes by the government. Papuans have never heard any stories about the government's success in imprisoning rights abusers.

Needless to say, impunity still prevails in Indonesia.

Even if the perpetrators being investigated are ever punished, more torture and other human rights violations will likely continue to happen in the future. Papua will not be free from human rights abuse.

The reason is that since 2001 thousands of additional troops have been added by the government in three old infantry battalions. Three new battalions have also been established in Papua.

And, along with the formation of new regencies throughout Papua, several new military district commands have been expanded. Thousands of troops have also been deployed along the border with the independent state of Papua New Guinea.

More human rights abuses are also expected to happen because Papuans are basically considered by security forces as neither human beings nor Indonesian citizens.

Every indigenous Papuan is initially suspected of being a separatist or at least a supporter of the separatist movement that supposedly poses a threat to Indonesia's territorial integrity.

Indonesian troops deployed among the Papuans thus see themselves as assigned among enemies of the Indonesian state.

They are instructed that their main duty is to maintain the territorial integrity of Indonesian state. They are therefore in Papua to eradicate separatism.

Consequently, thousands of Papuans were believed to be victims of military operations conducted to eradicate separatism. Many Papuans suffered from maltreatment and other forms of rights abuses committed by security forces.

Papuan history has revealed that any Papuan can be killed easily by the military or police anytime and anywhere in Papua, based on the suspicion of them being separatists. And the killers are protected because they have killed Indonesia's enemies.

With the presence of thousands of troops in Papua, it is more likely the rights abuses will happen. The very image of the Indonesian state and security forces will be destroyed again by rights abuses committed by these security forces.

Therefore, the central government should now think about what policies it can put in place that will prevent its troops from committing further human rights violations against civilians in Papua. There are four indicators that can measure the government's commitment and political will to exercise a consistently implemented preventive policy.

First, the government should publicly admit that the torture displayed in video is undeniably a violation of human rights. Consequently, the perpetrators should be taken to neither a civilian court nor a military court, but the human rights court.

Second, the government should allow an independent team comprising internationally recognized human rights experts to conduct a comprehensive investigation of all alleged violations of human rights in Papua from 1963 until today.

Documenting past cases of human rights abuse is a necessary step so that the same abuses are not repeated in future.

Third, the government should withdraw or at least reduce the number of troops it has deployed to Papua. It should be recognized that deploying thousands of troops means creating thousands of possibilities for further violations of human rights.

Fourth, all parties should realize that more human rights violations are likely to occur in Papua unless the root causes of Papuan separatism are resolved. The government and the indigenous people of Papua should thus engage in a constructive dialogue to identify these root causes and settle them without unnecessary bloodshed.

The government should take the initiative by showing the international community its willingness and commitment to settle the Papuan separatism issue through dialogue with Papuans.

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