

Police Open Fire on Peasants in Lombok, Indonesia

Report from the delegation to Indonesia of the Land Research Action Network (LRAN)

Friday 3 March 2006, by [GUTTAL Shalmali](#), [LRAN](#), [MANAHAN Mary Ann](#), [NARINTARAKUL NA AYUTHAYA Kingkorn](#), [ROSSET Peter](#) (Date first published: 21 September 2005).

On the morning of September 18, 2005, at approximately 9:00AM, Indonesian police forces violently dispersed a peaceful gathering of about 1000 peasants in Tanah Awuk village in central Lombok, Indonesia. The peasants had gathered together to launch a week-long series of activities to commemorate Indonesia's National Peasants' Day on September 24th. More than 300 invited guests, including students, members of Serikat Tani NTB (the local peasants' union) and peasant farmers from 12 other provinces were expected at the meeting. Also invited to this meeting was an international delegation composed of peasant leaders from La Via Campesina, human rights specialists, and researchers from the Land Research Action Network (LRAN), who were in Lombok to attend a National Symposium on Agrarian Reform organized by the Indonesian Federation of Peasant Unions (FSPI).

After first granting a permit for the meeting and then mysteriously withdrawing it at the last moment, both regular and special forces (Mobile Brigade) police arrived with one water canon vehicle, sealed off access to the area and ordered the meeting to disperse. The peasants, who were from the local area, were un-armed and peacefully assembled in front of a simple stage that they had erected for the meeting.

According to eye-witnesses and journalists, the police made an unprovoked attack on the crowd, which included women and children, spraying them with tear-gas and gunfire, consisting of mostly rubber and plastic bullets, with some metal rounds mixed in (this was evident from an examination of more than 60 spent and unspent casings collected from the scene of the attack). Thirty-three peasants were injured, 27 of them with gunshots, and the others from police beatings. Those shot included at least one child and two women. More than 10 peasants were arrested, and included those detained at the scene, as well as others from among the injured who were dragged from their beds at the local hospital later in the day. Police then issued arrest orders for other peasant leaders, and the situation remains very tense.

The more than 300 strong delegation of mostly Indonesians, plus the internationals, was stopped at Praya in central Lombok sub-district (approximately 15 kms from Tanah Awuk) by the police and not permitted to proceed further towards Tanah Awuk. By this time, the meeting has already been violently dispersed. Access by lawyers, journalists and supporters to those who were arrested was denied by the local police on grounds of safety.

Video images repeated throughout the week on Indonesian national television networks included horrifying footage of an unarmed women being violently dragged for about 30 meters across very rough ground by two running police officers, and a man bleeding profusely from the head being roughly thrown against a pickup truck by a policeman grabbing onto his hair.

The local peasants of Tanah Awuk had planned to use the meeting with the Indonesian and

international delegation to discuss their ongoing struggles since 1995 against the construction of a new international airport and to prevent confiscation of their farm lands for the airport site.

Late last month, local peasants held rallies to protest the scheduled arrival of Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in the Tanah Awuk area to attend the ground-breaking ceremony to mark the long suspended start of the airport's construction. FSPI also organized protests in Jakarta in front of the President's Palace and the National Human Rights Commission, and meetings with the National Parliament against the ground-breaking ceremony. The Yudhoyono Administration recently issued a government regulation allowing the state to take over land to be used for the construction of public facilities, even if no agreement has been reached with farmers residing on the land. The regulation stipulates 21 types of development projects—including airports—that allow land to be confiscated. This new decree has raised public concerns and protests throughout Indonesia due to the fear that it would intensify the already common practice of arbitrary eviction for projects that typically respond more to land speculation and tourism development schemes than to the needs of local populations. Lombok already has an attractive and modern airport, which would only require modest lengthening of the runway to accommodate international flights. Such land disputes are quite common in Indonesia, with many cases of arbitrary eviction and land take-overs by the government and private investors. In this case, the airport construction apparently involves major private investment from Europe, and is linked with plans to construct luxury retirement facilities for wealthy foreigners. In other words, the Indonesian Government is applying the principle of eminent domain to benefit private, rather than public interests.

Land confiscation and grabbing, forced evictions and involuntary resettlement of local communities to make way for large infrastructure projects (such as dams, highways, factories, airports, etc.), tourism and luxury housing are commonplace across Asia. As the role and power of private capital in national policy and economic spheres increases, governments in the Asia region are increasingly using the principle of eminent domain to take over land for private or public-private projects. Long settled communities in the concerned area are either relocated with meager or no economic compensation, and/or lose lands crucial to their survival and livelihoods, with practically no avenues and support for legal redress. Where affected communities offer resistance, investors-often with the connivance of law enforcement forces-have no qualms about hiring thugs to intimidate local people and to create divisions and conflicts within affected communities. Many of the lands that are lost to infrastructure projects are prime fertile agricultural lands, and lands with tremendous value for terrestrial and marine biodiversity and ecology. Such land loss has long term implications for the food, economic and social security of local communities who, once deprived of often their only source of livelihood, are left to the devices of the market in inhospitable environments to meet even the most basic needs.

Secretary General of FSPI, Henry Saragih expressed outrage at the airport construction plan in Lombok, because it will be built on productive peasant lands: "It is not in the place that the local government of West Nusa Tenggara and the linked parties who have interest to build the airport pushing their plan on the fertile land, which is the only resource for peasant in Central Lombok to make living."

Despite an abundance of fertile land on the island, and the fact that all available land is used for agriculture, West Nusa Tenggara province-of which Lombok is a part-has a serious problem of child malnutrition, with a huge number of marasmus-kwarshiorkor victims. Writing in the Jakarta Post on 20 June, 2005, Tejo Pramono asks, "How is it possible that malnutrition can occur in a place like Indonesia where, as an agricultural country, vast fertile land is available for producing a diverse range of foodstuffs....There must be a fundamental failure in food system policy as most malnutrition cases have occurred among farmer families; those who produce food." Pramono is right about a fundamental failure in policy, but the failure goes deeper than the food system. In the case of

Lombok, it appears to be a failure of development and economic policy that favours elite interests and profits over protecting the ability of local communities to feed themselves.

Human rights specialists consulted about this incident noted that it was a severe violation of a number of internationally recognized human rights, including the right to physical integrity and the right to peaceful assembly. They also pointed that the violent removal of wounded individuals from a hospital is strictly prohibited under international law. La Via Campesina and FIAN (an international human rights network that specializes in rural issues), have said they will file an official protest of this incident at the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva. It is interesting to note that Indonesia currently occupies the presidency of the Human Rights Commission, despite its failure to ratify key international human rights treaties.

Juana Ferrer, a peasant leader from the Dominican Republic said: "It is a shame that the government evicts peasants from their land, destroying food production in Lombok while at the same time this is a region where hunger is increasing among landless peasants having no access to food." According to Henry Saragih, Secretary General of FSPI and International Coordinator of La Via Campesina, "We can not accept the criminal behavior of the local government and police as they shoot without reason at peasants and do not allow us to meet, to receive the international delegation of La Via Campesina."

The local police claim that violence was instigated by the villagers at the gathering, who threw loose earth and stones at them, and that some tried to attack the police with sticks. However, a review of footage screened on local and national television news programs suggests that villager picked up threw dirt clods at the police as they ran away from the police gunfire. According to the latest news from Tanah Awuk, local government and police forces are pointing to a number of villagers who apparently support the airport project, in a bid to deflect public attention away from police brutality towards a conflict between peasants who oppose or support the plans for a new airport. It is clear that dispute over the land slated for airport construction is at the heart of the Tanah Awuk events.

The authors of this report are all researchers who study land issues around the world. Though it is not our normal practice to make political denunciations as the Land Research Action Network (LRAN), our proximity to what happened (we were on our way to the meeting when the police shot at the crowd), we cannot remain silent. We add our voice, in the most emphatic way possible, to the outcry against this brutal and unprovoked suppression of peaceful assembly. We are also gravely concerned about the on-going problem of unjustified land confiscations for unnecessary infrastructure development projects.

Sticks and stones are poor justification for bullets, continuing intimidation and lack of due legal process. There can be no possible justification for an armed attack by police forces on unarmed civilians standing up for their rights. In Asia, peasant farmers still produce much of the food and nurture the collective ecological wealth. An attack on peasants is an attack on society, and must be condemned in the strongest possible way by all.

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