

A Victim's Personal Recollection and Demand for Justice: Indonesia and the 1965 Massacres

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Carmel Budiardjo shares her personal experience in the aftermath of 1965 and comments on the influences that led her to create TAPOL.

One year ago today, Indonesia's National Commission on Human Rights, Komnas HAM, published a landmark report on its investigation into the mass killings that took place across Indonesia nearly fifty years ago in 1965/66. The Indonesian army, with the support of civilian mobs, gangsters and para-military groups, unleashed a campaign of terror against alleged members of the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) and associated groups, killing up to one million people and imprisoning many more.

Komnas HAM found evidence of systematic and widespread crimes against humanity, but none of its recommendations concerning a follow-up criminal investigation by the Attorney General, the establishment of a human rights court and truth and reconciliation process, and an official apology have yet been acted upon.

The remarkable multi award-winning film, *THE ACT OF KILLING* by Joshua Oppenheimer has recently been drawing international attention to the killings. This was one of the worst mass murders of the twentieth century, but is hardly known about when compared to the atrocities committed in Cambodia, Rwanda and Bosnia. In the past few weeks *THE ACT OF KILLING* has been playing to packed audiences in London and across the country.

The film is not intended for the faint-hearted. Local gangsters in Medan, North Sumatra re-enact their roles in the killings. The film shows in graphic detail how people were murdered. Men were repeatedly stabbed, leaving trails of blood and headless bodies, or strangled with wire round the neck with their bodies thrown into rivers. The latter was often the preferred option as it was 'bloodless' and left no evidence of the killing.

The killers describe quite calmly how they killed 'communists' on instructions from the Indonesian military in Jakarta. It was led by General Suharto who commanded the army and went on to rule the country with an iron fist for more than thirty years, from 1965 - 1998.

What the film does not explain is why communists or alleged communists were disposed of so comprehensively throughout the country. By late 1965, the PKI, with around 3 million members, had become one of the largest political parties in Indonesia, with widespread support from peasants and workers.

In the mid-50s, the Party leadership declared that it would not engage in armed struggle but

would try to win political influence through the ballot box and by means of pro-people policies such as supporting land reform and promoting the rights of workers and of women.

On the night of 30 September/1 October 1965, six army generals were kidnapped and killed. While to this day, no one has been able to identify who gave the order to kill, General Suharto, who was then commander of the special elite forces called KOSTRAD, blamed the PKI and issued a call for vengeance against the PKI and its many associated mass organisations and groups. These included leftwing activists, peasant groups, labour unions, artists, intellectuals and ethnic Chinese.

In the following months, large numbers of people with leftist leanings were regarded as being '*terlibat*' or 'involved' in the killing of the generals and hence subject not merely to arrest but to extermination. I was living in Indonesia at the time and a member of the HSI - Association of Indonesian Academics - which was regarded as one of the organisations associated with the PKI. Many of my colleagues were killed or arrested and I too was arrested. My husband, Suwondo Budiardjo spent nearly ten years in prison.

Like all the other political prisoners, I was held in detention without charge or trial, for three years. We were among the tens of thousands of *tapols* - *tahanan politik* (political prisoner) - who were held across the country, none of whom would ever be tried. We had not committed any crimes but we were incarcerated simply for being members of the PKI or organisations regarded as being closely associated with the PKI.

We were detained by a special unit of the Indonesian military called KOPKAMTIB - Command for the Restoration of Security and Order. There were no formal charges against us, apart from our alleged 'involvement' in the killing of the six generals. When I was interrogated by soldiers, all they wanted me to do was to identify other Indonesians who were members of the HSI who had not yet been arrested or other people I knew who may have been 'involved'. Had I given any names, the troops would have immediately rushed out to look for these people and treated them even more harshly than me. I often felt that as a foreigner I was being treated less harshly because the soldiers were warned that my treatment could lead to an international outcry.

The aim of this nationwide clampdown and the killings and arrests was to destroy the PKI 'down to its roots' - *ditumpas keakar-akarnya* - along with all its associated organisations so as to make way for the Indonesian army to rule the country.

Apart from the hundreds of thousands of killings, tens of thousands of people were held in labour camps across the country, the best known of which was the labour camp on the Island of Buru. The men on Buru were used as forced and unpaid labour, to clear the difficult terrain, uproot stinging and poisonous vegetation in the area and plant crops for their own sustenance. They had to dig the soil and plant crops with their bare hands. No medication was available for the many prisoners who fell dangerously ill from working under the blazing sun or who sustained serious injuries because of the work they were forced to do.

I was released in November 1971 following clarification of my status as a British subject and I was able to return to London. As I left the prison, the dozens of women prisoners said 'Farewell' from their cells and urged me: 'Please help us!'

Living in Jakarta at the time, we had no idea what was happening across the country. In Central Java and East Java where the PKI had won a huge amount of support, tens of

thousands of communists or alleged communists were killed in the six months from October 1965. It was only when friends came to Jakarta after visiting their home towns that they told us what they had discovered. This is how I found out the terrible truth about the extent of the massacres.

Throughout the more than thirty years that Suharto ruled the country, the massacres were a forbidden subject, never mentioned in the tightly controlled media. It was not until 2008 that *Komnas HAM* started its investigation into the killings.

The investigating team interviewed people in four specific areas and saw for itself the places that had been used to incarcerate people, not only regular prisons but also places converted for use as prisons such as schools or church halls. These were places where people were beaten and tortured, beaten on the head with blocks of wood, punched in the face and whipped and where women were sexually assaulted.

No foreign government has condemned the Indonesian authorities for perpetrating these crimes and many Western governments have continued their steadfast support for the Indonesian military. Suharto himself died in January 2008 without ever facing justice. Other senior officers who were responsible for the killings still have not been held to account for their crimes.

President Yudhoyono should now respond to the KOMNAS HAM recommendations, apologise to the victims and end the impunity which has prevailed in Indonesia for so long.

Click here to find out about TAPOL's [Say Sorry for 65 campaign](#)

TAPOL was established in 1973 by Carmel Budiardjo, a political prisoner in Indonesia following former President Suharto's rise to power in 1965. An Amnesty International prisoner of conscience, Carmel was released after three years' imprisonment without trial and returned to the UK. She founded TAPOL (which means 'political prisoner' in Indonesian) to campaign for release of the tens of thousands of political prisoners remaining in Indonesia following the 1965 atrocities, and in support of the relatives of the hundreds of thousands who were killed. While the campaign has since broadened, TAPOL continues to advocate for the victims of one of the twentieth century's worst massacres and best-kept secrets.

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