

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

OP-ED

UN review highlights Indonesia's human rights challenges

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This week, the eyes of the international human rights community — and in particular those of the diplomats working at the United Nations headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland — will be turned to Indonesia.

The country's human rights record is coming under scrutiny at the UN Human Rights Committee, which will examine Indonesia's compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

This might sound like a pointless exercise in red tape, but don't let the alphabet soup fool you — the ICCPR is a crucial treaty binding states to respect international standards of key civil and political rights.

A party since 2006, this year will mark the first time Indonesia will have been reviewed by the Committee.

For us at Amnesty International, it offers a crucial opportunity for the Indonesian government to demonstrate its commitment to the protection and promotion of human rights.

We have seen human rights progress in Indonesia over the past years, but there are many challenges remaining.

Indeed, many of the issues we raised in our submission to the Committee this year have been highlighted by Amnesty International to the Indonesian authorities time and time again.

In particular, we are concerned about persistent human rights violations by the security forces, restrictions on freedom of expression, and a failure to address crimes of the past.

While both the Indonesian police and military have undertaken some positive reforms over the past decade, Amnesty International continues to receive steady and credible reports of violations by the security forces. These include torture, excessive use of force, and even unlawful killings.

A recent example, that also made international headlines, happened in March when 15 Kopassus (Army's Special Forces) members forced their way into a prison outside Yogyakarta and shot dead four detainees who had been accused of killing another Kopassus member in a bar brawl. After many denials, the military finally admitted that soldiers had been involved in the incident, but still claim that it only amounted to "insubordination" and not a human rights violation — indicative of the culture of impunity still surrounding the security forces.

Since the end of the Soeharto rule in 1998, Indonesia has taken significant steps forward on basic civil liberties, lifting many of the draconian restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly.

However, there are still lingering and strong concerns — in particular in regions like Papua and Maluku, where authorities continue to use legislation to lock up peaceful pro-independence political activists, some for as long as 15 years.

Moreover the recent passage of the law on mass organization will restrict freedom of expression and association as well as stifle the work of human rights defenders.

All in all, Amnesty International is aware of over 70 people imprisoned for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression— they are all prisoners of conscience, and must be released immediately.

We have also seen increasing levels of discrimination, harassment and attacks against minority religious groups in Indonesia, including Ahmadiyah, Shia and Christian communities.

Just a few weeks ago at least 160 Shia followers, including children, were forcibly evicted from their temporary shelter at a sports complex in Sampang, East Java and taken to a refugee facility in Sidoarjo.

They long to return to their homes and livelihood but have been denied to do so by the local authorities since the attacks against them by anti-Shia mobs in August 2012. They are effectively being punished for being the victim of mob violence.

Furthermore, the Indonesian government has failed to deliver justice, truth and reparation for past violations, particularly those committed by its forces or agents during past armed conflicts in Timor Leste and Aceh.

This year Amnesty International released a report on the failure to face the past in Aceh, and the immense suffering this is still causing for ordinary people there. Families do not know what has happened to “disappeared” loved ones, while many struggle to get by without adequate reparation.

This is not a unique situation, but one seen across Indonesia where unaddressed past abuses remain open wounds.

Addressing this issue would not only do much for many Indonesians today, but also help defuse tensions that could re-erupt in future conflict.

A very first step must be to implement a national law on a truth commission in line with international standards — this is something that has been debated for years but has yet to become reality.

The upcoming review in Geneva is a timely reminder for all that human rights concerns persist in Indonesia.

With Indonesia emerging as a regional leader, addressing human rights issues seriously would have enormous impact not just for its own people but also in other ASEAN countries — many of whom struggle with the same issues.

The Indonesia authorities should use this review as springboard to undertake key reforms over the next year and leave a strong human rights legacy for the new administration that is taking office after the elections in 2014.