

Survivors Describe Mass Killings Under Indonesian Dictator Suharto

Tuesday 29 January 2008, by [DEUTSCH Anthony](#) (Date first published: 29 January 2008).

Hiding out in the dense, humid jungle, Markus Talam watched Indonesian soldiers herd manacled prisoners from trucks, line them up and mow them down with round after round of automatic weapons fire.

It was 1968, and the killings were part of a final offensive by forces under Gen Suharto to wipe out the communist party and secure his position as leader of Indonesia, now the world's most populous Muslim nation.

"They gunned them down and dumped their bodies in a mass grave dug by other prisoners. I remember the sound of the guns clearly: tat-tat, tat-tat, tat-tat ... Over and over again," said Talam, 68, who was later jailed for 10 years after being named a leftist sympathizer.

Suharto, who died on Sunday at a Jakarta hospital, seized control of the military in 1965 and ruled the country for 32 years, suppressing dissent with force and supported by an American government at the height of the Cold War.

Estimates for the number killed during his bloody rise to power—from 1965 to 1968—range from a government figure of 78,000 to 1 million cited by U.S. historians Barbara Harff and Ted Robert Gurr, who have published books on Indonesia's history. It was the worst mass slaughter in Southeast Asia's modern history after the Khmer Rouge killing fields in Cambodia.

A frenzy of anti-communist violence stained rivers with blood and littered the countryside with the bodies of teachers, farmers and others.

"They used to dump the bodies here," recalled Surien, a 70-year-old woman who lived near a bay used as an execution ground. "People called it the beach of stinking corpses because of the smell."

The CIA provided lists of thousands of leftists, including trade union members, intellectuals and schoolteachers, many of whom were executed or sent to remote prisons.

Another 183,000 died due to killings, disappearances, hunger and illness during Indonesia's 1975-1999 occupation of East Timor, according to an East Timorese commission sanctioned by the UN. Similar abuses left more than 100,000 dead in West Papua, according a local human rights group. Another 15,000 died during a 29-year separatist rebellion in Aceh province.

In recent interviews around the city of Blitar, a former communist stronghold, survivors of the atrocities recounted a life on the run, living in caves, being beaten and beheadings of other captives.

"I am disappointed. I saw great cruelties and am lucky I am not dead," said Talam, whose simple two-room home overlooks a valley dotted with overgrown mass graves.

Dragging on a clove-cigarette with trembling hands, he described how he was detained by police but escaped. He stumbled across dead bodies in shallow graves and slept in dank caves with hundreds of

others, eating what the jungle had to offer for 50 days, until being picked up.

Talam, a former member of a left-wing union for park rangers, said he was tortured and beaten repeatedly during interrogations while detained on remote Buru island, where about 12,000 political prisoners were held, 1,770 kilometers (1,100 miles) east of the capital, Jakarta. "Why has no one been put on trial?" he asked.

In fact, the dark era remains largely unknown to many Indonesians. Those believed responsible still wield influence in politics and the courts. Details of the communist purge are banned from school books, and the military has blocked efforts by relatives to unearth mass graves.

Near Blitar, a prominent monument and museum honors the crushing of the communist threat, and the Communist Party is still banned in Indonesia today.

There is no official record of the shootings Talam said he witnessed by the Indonesian army near Blitar, which lies 500 kilometers (310 miles) east of Jakarta.

Though Suharto was swept from power in a 1998 pro-democracy uprising in this nation of 235 million people, no one has ever been tried for the bloodletting, in part because some of Suharto's former generals remain in powerful posts today.

"One of the enduring legacies of Suharto's regime has been the culture of impunity," said Brad Adams, the head of Human Rights Watch Asia.

Moreover, public interest in reviving a turbulent past is muted in the largely poor country, where people are more concerned with day-to-day survival, said Putmuinah, an 80-year-old former communist city council member in Blitar.

"The ones who should be held accountable for those crimes are Suharto, his government and his regime," she said. "Suharto ordered the elimination of communists and left-wing sympathizers."

Putmuinah hid in a cave south of Blitar before being picked up and detained for 10 years. "They robbed me of the opportunity to raise my seven children," she said.

"They beheaded many of us because we were members of the union for women," she added. "I was spared torture because I knew the commander who arrested me."

Suharto's regime capitalized on existing tensions between Muslims and atheist communists, inciting the nation's powerful Islamic groups to join the purge.

Hasyim Asyhari, 67, a former member of a conservative Sunni Islamic youth group in the Blitar region, said the group received army orders to identify, hunt down and kill communists.

He said he is proud of saving the nation from communist domination and helping "turn communist sympathizers into good Muslims."

"We used farm tools, daggers and clubs" to kill prisoners, Asyhari said in an interview. "I followed the orders of the government."

P.S.

* From the Irrawaddy:

* Anthony Deutsch/AP Writer/Blitar.