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Gang-rape tales shock Jakarta

Andreas Harsono
The Nation, June16, 1998

Over 1,000 lives were lost during the May riots in Indonesia, and it has now been revealed that scores of Chinese women were also gang-raped.

Gruesome stories of brutal sexual violence in Indonesia have slowly begun to emerge as social workers and human rights advocates unearth more details of an organized campaign of assaults, gang rapes and killings of ethnic Chinese women during three days of rioting in Jakarta last month.

It was only last week that the Indonesian media reported the sexual violence, stories of which were initially posted on the Internet, after scores of social workers, feminists and Chinese figures announced a crisis Centre to help the victims.

“Tell me, what kind of human beings are evil enough to rape a 12-year-old girl in front of her helpless parents?” asked Ita F Nadia, the chairwoman of Kalyanamitra, a women’s group which opened a telephone hot line for the victims. “They must be incredibly cruel and brutal.”

The establishment of the center, named the *Solidaritas Nusa Bangsa* or the Solidarity of the Nation State, was announced at a meeting on June 5 in Jakarta, during which Catholic priest Sandyawan Sumardi estimated that dozens of Chinese women had died or committed suicide as a result of the riots on May 14-16.

Sandyawan, who is know for his work among Jakarta’s underclass and has organized an investigation into the attacks, said the anti-Chinese violence had shown a pattern of similarities and usually involved “well built men with a crew cut hairstyle”.

These unidentified men generally came in trucks or buses and encouraged other people in the area to join them in attacking Chinese owned house and looting their contents. Although Sandyawan did not pinpoint any group, his statement is widely interpreted to refer to military men. Rumours circulated widely here that some high-ranking army officers had been involved in the riots.

“They always threatened their victims not to talk. They said they could easily recognize them,” said Sandyawan, adding that the provocateurs had also gang raped Chinese women before leaving the street.

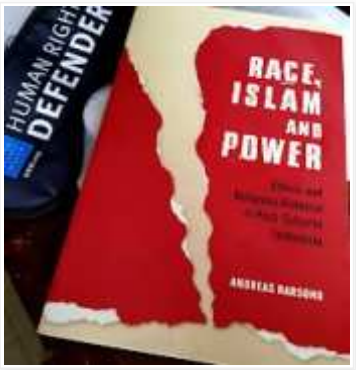
Rita Serena Kolibonso of the Mitra Perempuan women’s group estimated that around 100 Chinese women had been raped during the riots.

Andreas Harsono

Dia bekerja buat Human Rights Watch (New York) sejak 2008. Pada 1994, dia ikut mendirikan Aliansi Jurnalis Independen (Jakarta), Institut Studi Arus Informasi (Jakarta, 1995), dan jadi anggota awal dari International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (Washington DC, 1997). Pada 2003, dia ikut mendirikan Yayasan Pantau (Jakarta) dan Suara Papua (Jayapura, 2011). Dia kuliah teknik di Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana (Salatiga) pada 1980an. Pada 1999, dia belajar jurnalisme sebagai Nieman Fellow di Universitas Harvard (Cambridge).

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“We don’t know how many have been molested or forced to strip. They obviously want to terrorize the Chinese, especially the women, “she said.

According to Kolibonso, Chinese woman are triple minorities, not only because they are ethnic Chinese, whose population is estimated only four per cent of Indonesia’s 202 million people, but also because they are mostly Christians or Buddhists in a predominantly Muslim Indonesia, and because they are women in a male dominated society.

Both Kolibonso and Nadia, who give legal and psychological counselling to the victims, refused to expose the victims to the media, saying that the victims were "extremely traumatized" and that the publication of their names might endanger their lives.

The sudden resignation of Indonesian strongman Suharto on May 21 apparently overshadowed coverage of the brutal violence, as did the student movement which helped forced Suharto to step down, but rumours about the gang rapes started to surface on the Internet immediately after the riots which saw more than 100 shopping malls and thousands of shops and houses razed to the ground.

Jakarta hospitals recorded more than 1,100 deaths during the riots, mostly of looters or residents trapped in burning buildings and homes. The riots are widely thought to be the worst in Jakarta’s modern history.

Data from the Coordinating Body for Nations Unity (Bakom-PKB), a government-controlled Chinese association, reveals that 1,286 Chinese-Indonesians have reported to the organization that they were victims of the riots.

Vice chairperson Rosita Noor added that 29 of the victims had been raped, two of whom had committed suicide after the rapes. She called upon the Indonesian government to investigate the gang rapes and upon the military to protect Chinese Indonesians.

Noor said the 1,286 was “much too small” to the real number of the victims. She said her organization would seek international assistance if the Indonesian military, whose members had allegedly provoked the riots, could not guarantee the safety of the victims. “We would invite a UN special rapporteur to investigate the crimes.”

Kolibonso, Nadia, Noor and Sandyawan have painstakingly compiled accounts of what transpired from interviews with victims and witnesses. They included the following:

- A female Chinese student was abducted at a bus stop, taken to a swamp near the airport and raped by four men in a car. There was a green uniform in car, and she asked her abductors if they were officers. “if you are the police, you must help me. “she told them. One of them answered: “No, I have to teach you a lesson.”
- One young woman had a lucky escape after her taxi was stopped by a mob in the middle of the night on May 14. She was forced out of her taxi and forcibly stripped in front of the crowd, “Then a man pushed through the crowd, pulled me out and gave me Muslim clothes to wear, “the woman said.
- In the midst of the riot, a group of men stopped a city bus and forced all the non-Chinese woman to disembark. “Then they chose a number of women among the Chinese and raped them inside the bus,” Sandyawan said. “The victims of that incident are in a state of depression. They are presently in a hospital with their families.”
- A 10-year-old girl returning from school discovered that the shop and house where her family lived and worked had been burned. As she went in search of her parents, she was seized by two men and raped in front of her neighbors.

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- A man told the Indonesian Human Rights Commission about how his wife's attackers had mutilated her genitals with a razor blade after raping her. He also informed the commission of a friend's wife who committed suicide by drinking pesticide a few days after she was raped.
- One woman a bank officer, told the *Kompas* newspaper that she had been seized from her boyfriend's motorcycle by rioters. The mob beat her boyfriend, who pleaded for mercy. The Chinese girl fainted and when she regained consciousness discovered bruises on her body, especially between her legs.
- In an incident of public humiliation, a group of about 15 men entered a bank where 10 ethnic employees were taking refuge from the riots. The men locked the door, made the women take off their clothes and ordered them to dance. In another incident of harassment, a number of ethnic Chinese women were reportedly stripped and made to swim in a filthy pond.

Nadia told of an ethnic Chinese woman who hid in her house with her two younger sisters as the rioters approached. About 10 men came into the house and found the sisters on the third floor. They forced the two younger women to take off their clothes and told the older sister to stand in a corner. After raping her two sisters, the two men pushed them to the ground floor, which arsonists had set on fire.

When her mother heard of the deaths, she had a heart attack and died, "Nadia said, "The sister who survived the ordeal is now in a psychiatric hospital. That is one of the many stories we have confirmed.

Some Indonesian journalist who covered the riots said that they had heard that most of the gang rapes had occurred in the Kapuk, Kota and Jelambar areas in the north western part of Jakarta.

Noor said the 29 rape cases that had come to hear attention had taken place mostly in the Kapuk area in northern Jakarta and four in the Kota area, which is unofficially knows as Jakarta's Chinatown.

In an effort to respond to horror of these stories, which have shocked many Indonesian's President B J Habibie on June 11 ordered the ordered the armed forces to investigate "organized crimes" that had helped provoke the riots. Indonesian police have also asked victims to report such cases, but so far none has done so, apparently fearing possible retribution.

Posted by andreasharsono at 4:00 AM

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