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Hundreds of Women Were Raped During the May 98 Riots. Will They Ever See Justice?

By Arzia Tivany Wargadiredja May 18, 2017, 7:00am

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All it took was a trip past an overpass in Slipi, West Jakarta, to leave Siska shaking with terror. Nineteen years ago, Siska, then a medical student, was waiting for a bus under the same overpass with her friend when a gang of men forced the women into a black Toyota Kijang SUV and sped off.

The women were thrown out of the SUV in nearby Kebon Jeruk. Both had been sexually assaulted. One man slashed Siska's breasts. She fainted the minute the

blade touched her skin. When Siska came to she was bleeding heavily and abandoned on the streets far from home. The men fled the scene. As far as Siska knows, they were never prosecuted for their crimes.

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“In the past, whenever I was reminded of that incident, my entire body would shudder and break out in a cold sweat,” Siska recalled. “I would suddenly have this utter revulsion toward my breasts. At first, I would scream out, crying hysterically whenever I passed this area.”

Siska, whose name was changed to protect her identity, told her story to a researcher from the National Commission on Violence Against Women (*Komnas Perempuan*) for a report on the mass rape of Chinese Indonesian women that occurred during the May 98 riots. Her story was included in a report titled “in denial!” that was released five year after the riots.

The riots were one of the darkest periods in Indonesian history. Riots broke out throughout the nation as Gen. Suharto’s New Order government failed to curb the effects of a region-wide economic crisis. Indonesia lost 13.5 percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in a single year. The rupiah was in free-fall. The government tried to raise the price of gasoline by 70 percent. The price of electricity tripled. Students were in the streets, protesting at campuses in most major cities to demand that Suharto step down.

But officials with the New Order regime were pointing the finger at the country’s ethnic Chinese minority, a group that was **long used as a scapegoat** by those in power.

The country had seen a rise in sporadic anti-Chinese riots throughout much of the year. But in May, tensions boiled over. Riots broke out in the country’s third-largest city—Medan, North Sumatra—on 4 May 1998 after a student was allegedly killed by a tear gas canister. By the 12th the violence had hit the capital

after security forces opened fire on a crowd of student protestors gathered at West Jakarta's Trisakti University. Angry mobs soon took over the streets, looting and setting fire to Chinese Indonesian owned shops and targeting ethnic Chinese communities in a wave of violence that lasted for days.

More than 1,000 people were killed in Jakarta alone, many of them looters who **died in a series of large fires**. Initial estimates uncovered evidence of at least 168 rapes in the Indonesian capital. There were another 300 reported nationwide. Most of the victims were Chinese Indonesian women.

On July 15, 1998, then president BJ Habibie condemned the violence against women in a formal government apology over the events that had occurred only two months earlier. The new *Reformasi* government established a fact-finding mission to investigate the riots shortly after Suharto's fall. *Komnas Perempuan* was established in October 1998 by presidential decree. It was tasked with investigating the allegations of mass rape.

The two fact-finding missions, the Joint Fact Finding Team (TGPF) and the Volunteers Team for Humanity (TRuK), soon found compelling evidence that the rapes had indeed occurred. They submitted their reports to the central government within a month and waited for a response.

But by 2003, the commission's follow-up investigation reached a damning conclusion. The central government had failed to take the investigation any further. The victims, many of them members of the country's ethnic Chinese minority, were instead forced to live in a society that doubted their claims, denying that the rapes ever happened. The report concluded that five years later, rape victims still hadn't found justice, writing:

"Such circumstances unfolded in the midst of denials about the tragedy that persist to this day. Refutations were made by the state, which until today has still failed to execute any follow-up measures on the outcomes of the investigation into the May 1998 riots. Accountability for the gross human rights violations that occurred in the incident have never been brought to bear. This state of denial is

also manifest in the attitude of broader society, which refuses to acknowledge that the rapes and sexual assaults actually occurred."

That report came out in May of 2003. But when I met with Mariana Amiruddin, a commissioner at *Komnas Perempuan*, she told me that in the 14 years that followed, little had changed.

"There wasn't any development on the rape cases because there were a lot of denials," Mariana told me. "[The rape cases] were denied and considered lies. It's as if they never happened."

Mariana has spent the last two years pushing for a renewed interest in the case, arguing that the victims deserved justice. When we met, Mariana had just finished a meeting with several victims' families. She would later hold a memorial and condemn the government's inaction on the matter.

The memorial was held amid the nameless tombs of East Jakarta's Pondok Ranggon Public Cemetery. Former president BJ Habibie was there. He **promised** to personally deliver all the fact-finding mission's reports to President Joko Widodo and urge him to look into why the investigation never progressed any further.

The former president was mobbed by reporters after the event. They wanted to know, had he changed his mind in the 19 years since his apology? No, he said. Then why were the rapes still unsolved, the reporters asked. He said the *Reformasi* government was, at the time, focused on the **very real concerns** that the country was about to fall apart.

"Yes, [the rapes] happened," Habibie said. "They happened. I don't know what is being done at the moment or what obstacles [the current administration faces]. But there was no use in focusing on certain problems if the consequence was letting our nation divide into several countries like what happened to Russia. We could've split up into 20 to 30 countries. But we stayed united and there was no civil war."

The National Commission on Human Rights (*Komnas HAM*) also seemed far more interested in investigating the shootings at Trisakti University that started the riot and the disappearance of 23 pro-democracy activists during the twilight of Suharto's regime than the rapes, Mariana explained.

"*Komnas HAM* was in charge, and it seemed to me that they focused more on the shootings and kidnappings," she told me. "There have not been any follow ups regarding the rapes. Back then, Habibie formed the TGPF to investigate the rapes, but the victims were already too traumatized.

"One victim who agreed to testify at the UN, Ita Martadinata [Haryono], was murdered. The only institution that could prove the incidents occurred is *Komnas Perempuan*."

The United Nations' Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women made a visit to Indonesia in November of 1998 and **determined** that Chinese Indonesian women were targeted in the mass rapes. But many victims were reluctant to come forward. Nearly all of them had received anonymous death threats in the mail, showing that their assailants both knew their names and where they lived. Most didn't want to report the rapes to the police because they feared being forced to take the stand in court. No one wanted to talk publicly about what happened and face the stigma or the possible reprisals from rapists still at large.

Sandyawan Sumardi, a reverend who investigated the rapes as part of the Joint Fact Finding Team, reached a similar conclusion, received **similar** death threats. His team met with many of the victims face-to-face, interviewing the women, as well as the doctors, nurses, and those who rushed to the victims' aid. He told me stories about the victims. One woman was raped in a taxi for nine hours before she was dumped unconscious on the street. Another was violated with a curtain rod by men who forced their way into her apartment. The city's hospitals were overflowing with victims but, amidst all the chaos and suffering, the two women struck up a friendship.

“At that time I was thinking maybe as fellow victim, they could comfort each other,” he told me. “So that’s why I took her to visit the second victim. I only introduced them, then they just held each other’s hands and supported each other. Both of them survived.”

Today, the memories May 98 still fill Sandyawan with emotion.

“I can’t believe it’s been almost twenty years,” he told me.” I am still so angry.”

Siska spent a year recovering in Singapore after an airline, shocked at her terrible state, let her board a flight without a ticket or passport. She underwent plastic surgery to repair the damage to her breasts. But it took much longer to repair her psyche.

“I had panic attacks five to six times a day,” she said. “I would claw at my hair, face, and stomach like a lunatic. Each day I would stare at my breasts for hours in front of the bathroom mirror. While pointing to my breasts, I would curse loudly, ‘because of you I have been reduced to this. You were the ones severed, but I am the one to suffer the pain. I am the one in pain… not you. Do you understand?’”

She returned to Jakarta and changed her name. Siska had gained some weight while abroad. She felt like her new body, as well as her new name and haircut,

protected her. It made her anonymous, someone different from the woman who was sexually assaulted during the riots. As long as no one recognized her, she felt safe, she said.

But she planned to continue her studies abroad in the US and then return to Singapore to live full time, working at a plastic surgery center to help women like her. Siska said she always felt uneasy back home, like a defenseless deer wandering through a forest of tigers.

“I don’t know, because I am Chinese, wherever I go I feel like I’m being followed,” she said. “I feel like I can easily be attacked at any time… I feel safer in Singapore because not many people know about my background.”

Siska's story was taken from the Komnas Perempuan report "in denial!" Her name was changed to protect her identity.

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