Jakarta marks a forgotten anniversary

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In a quiet ceremony in East Jakarta last Wednesday, a monument was unveiled in memory of the violence that tore through Indonesia in May 1998. The May '98 Memorial (*Prasasti Mei '98*) is the first major public monument to commemorate the time, beyond a few small memorials established by students and human rights groups.

The statue takes the form of an outstretched hand draped in cloth, with a needle and thread mending a tear in the fabric. It towers above a mass grave in the Pondok Ranggon cemetery where hundreds are buried with only the inscription: 'Victims of the May '98 tragedy'. Sculptor Awan Simatupang says the red thread on the statue symbolises the ongoing healing process for survivors and family members of victims of the violence 17 years ago that led to the fall of Suharto's New Order and ushered in an era of democratic reform.

For such a defining moment in Indonesia's recent history, the violence of May 1998 that broke out in several major cities across the country receives surprisingly little public attention today.

The anniversary of the Jakarta riots last week passed quietly for most mass media, and only about 100 guests attended the unveiling of the statue on Wednesday at the mass grave where more than 200 unidentified victims are buried. The total number of deaths in Jakarta during the riots is said to be more than 1200, many of whom were trapped inside burning buildings. At least 85 women were

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Ok, got it

Yet victims and their families are far from seeing justice for the perpetrators. President Jokowi made a campaign pledge last year to reopen investigations into the riots and push for legal resolution of the human rights violations that occurred. A bill on forming a Truth and Reconciliation Commission is due to be deliberated by the Government this year, though relatives of victims have demanded an ad hoc tribunal.

The unveiling of the May '98 Memorial is a small step towards facing the events of the past, but it is a significant one. [fold]

Although Jakarta's governor did not attend the ceremony as originally planned, he was represented by a banner-sized photograph of himself laying the foundation stone for the statue last year, when he was still deputy governor to Jokowi. Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, better known by his Chinese nickname Ahok, remembers watching the city burn while his wife was pregnant with their first child in 1998. Though he knew his family was in danger, he made the decision not to flee as many other Chinese Indonesians did at the time. Last week, Ahok sent representatives of the city government to hold a public dialogue with victims and others at the unveiling ceremony, which was organised by the National Commission on Violence Against Women (*Komnas Perempuan*).

While public amnesia seems to have become the norm in Jakarta, several survivors of the violence and family members of those who died have kept up the struggle for justice. Every Thursday, a group of them gathers outside the State Palace in Central Jakarta together with other victims of human rights abuses, holding black umbrellas as a sign of their unresolved grief. Among them are parents of student protesters who were shot at Trisakti University, and family members of those who died inside burning buildings which were barricaded closed during the riots. Sometimes they are joined by university students who are too young to remember 1998, but who come to show their solidarity with matching T-shirts and slogans shouted over megaphones. They rally around the motto *melawan lupa* — 'refuse to forget'.

In discussions with city officials at last week's ceremony, students and artists asked about the possibility of establishing a museum or erecting more statues in Jakarta to memorialise the events of May 1998. Meanwhile, victims and their families asked only for the stigma to be lifted from their loved ones who perished in fires (many of whom are often dismissed as looters), and for the city government to assist with their cemetery fees. Speaking on behalf of Ahok, city representative

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Ruyati Darwin, the mother of a young teacher who died in one of the worst shopping mall fires in Klender, East Jakarta, and a regular at the weekly vigil, added one more thing to the requests made by the victims and their loved ones: 'I would like to thank the governor, and I hope that everything granted to us as the victims will become a wonderful source of peace for our children and grandchildren, but there is still one more thing: We still have hope that what we have struggled for over the past 17 years — justice — can be achieved.'

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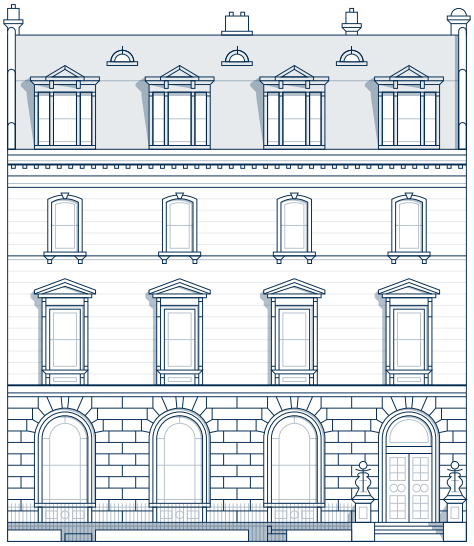
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