Brave Sleuth For Truth In Jakarta

Indonesia Riots

By Nicole Gaouette, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

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JAKARTA, INDONESIA

They noticed the grenade after lunch.

It lay just inside the courtyard, a tiny space crammed with boxes, cars, volunteers on break, and two warbling songbirds in cages.

The Rev. Sandyawan Sumardi, who runs the Jakarta Social Institute, an advocacy group for urban poor, didn't think it was real. Dusty green, it looked like a tiny pineapple - a toy left by a neighborhood kid.

But as he cradled it in his palm, he felt its heft and saw the gleaming pin. He put it down gently and went to phone the police, who later told him the grenade was Army-issue ordnance.

"It was a warning," the Jesuit says with a quiet smile.

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Indonesia without its long-time ruler, Suharto, is beginning to see more freedoms, but reports of military rivalries and political intrigue ricochet through Jakarta daily.

In this climate, Fr. Sandyawan and his team are probing an incendiary theory: that the violent May 14 riots were instigated and coordinated by groups with possible ties to the military.

"I've been anxious that all conflicts between the elites harm the grass roots," he says. "My anxiety came true."

The riots hit hard the poor people he serves, prompting him to hunt down reports that the mass looting was deliberately instigated.

The 1,188 now estimated to have died May 14 were mostly poor Jakartans caught in fires that witnesses say were set. The respected National Human Rights Commission has noted the involvement of "organized groups" in a report on the riots.

Sandyawan's volunteers think they've found more evidence. Witnesses have told them they recognized provocateurs they knew to be members of Army intelligence. If that proves to be true, it would lend credence to theories that the military provoked riots as a way to pressure former President Suharto to resign, perhaps to replace him with a military man. (Suharto was able to have his vice president, B.J. Habibie, take power.)

Organized riots?

While the riots have been attributed to a mass explosion of frustration over the economy and the deaths of six anti-Suharto protesters, Sandyawan

argues "the effort to create a riot was done [in an] organized [fashion], systematically and professionally."

Indonesia's uprising against President Suharto has many heroes, from student protesters to Cabinet technocrats who refused to serve him any longer. Sandyawan and his team are among many who have risked retribution for seeking justice.

His institute's workers tell of being followed, harassed, of their relatives being thrown in jail. Reed-thin, with a gentle air and dark curly hair, Sandyawan doesn't look the part of a revolutionary, but he has faced a variety of charges, including public declaration of hostility against the government and contempt of those in authority. He is not permitted to leave Indonesia.

Sitting around a table near the institute's entrance, Sandyawan and one of his investigators, lawyer Antonio Pragasto, dismiss the risks of activism as they sip glasses of sweet, hot tea. "We're open about what we do," says Mr. Pragasto. "Violence can only be faced by nonviolence."

Sandyawan responds, "As a human being, I get afraid." Then, with a firmness grounded in his faith, he adds, "But the only proper reaction is to submerge myself in prayer, and surrender to the God of love."

A few of the Institute's 126 volunteers wander through the large ground-floor room as the two men talk. Funded by donations, the operation is strictly no-frills, with worn wicker chairs and a bare stone floor. A wall-mounted whiteboard documents their progress under headings like logistik, litigasi, and investigasi.

On another wall, a rough oil painting depicts their clientele. The canvas shows a garbage-strewn dirt path hemmed in by rickety wooden shacks and women bent over buckets of laundry. A sleek modern building looms in the

background, a monument to Jakarta's wealthy, its pristine white curves a sharp contrast to the slums below.

The scene is an almost exact reproduction of one of the neighborhoods Pragasto and the institute's lead investigator, Palupi, visit in the course of their job. (Many Indonesians go by only one name.)

Usually, the institute clothes and feeds street children, and offers health care and legal aid to the poor, work Sandyawan calls "the expression of God's bright love."

But on an outing last week, Pragasto and Ms. Palupi looked for people who lost relatives in the citywide rioting and for witnesses to the events. For hours they explored a poor east Jakarta neighborhood, not far from a shopping center where 202 people died after it was set ablaze.

Palupi led the way through a maze of streets and passageways, some no wider than her shoulders. As they passed, barefoot children stared and chickens scattered. In the 90 degree heat, the air was thick with the odor of open sewage.

In home after home, the two sat on damp floors to ask questions and explain their goal. Palupi, a former sociology professor, methodically took notes. Each visit yielded parents who lost a child to the fire. Some listened dully, but in one home a mother, Ruminah, was animated by anger.

Her young son had snuck away from the house to go to the shopping center with friends when the looting began. As people hauled off TVs they could never afford, Gunawan and his school friends were on the fourth floor doing something that tempts children the world over: jumping up and down on mattresses in the bed department.

A mother's reason to find truth

Ruminah's voice was steady as she told her story, but her hands were clenched. She had sent one of Gunawan's older brothers to search for him, but he arrived to find the plaza in flames. She went to the police, only to be told he was probably dead, like most of the looters.

When her older sons found Gunawan at a local hospital the next day, they were only able to identify him by his basketball shorts. "He was just a child," she said, holding up his yellow-and-pink teddy bear. "He never caused problems, he wouldn't take anything. I don't want him to be dismissed as a looter."

Her anger runs all the deeper because of the story her son Budhi tells.

The afternoon of the riots he left work to go to the plaza with friends. Watching from across the road, unaware his younger brother was inside, he saw a red Colt truck pull up. It carried about 30 men, who he thought were there for free booty. "They looked just like us," he remembers.

As they piled out of the truck, he saw each man carried a plastic bag full of liquid or a plastic jug. As Budhi approached the plaza entrance, he saw them pile clothing on the floor, pour liquid, set the piles on fire, and return to their truck empty-handed.

"They were only there 20, 30 minutes," he said. "It was just like they were on a timetable."

Sandyawan's investigators have collected similar accounts from witnesses throughout Jakarta and they argue that a pattern is clear: The riots were begun, directed by provocateurs.

Today, they plan to take witnesses and relatives who lost family to the National Human Rights Commission to tell their stories and ask for an inquiry.

Ruminah intends to go. She sees the process as cathartic. "Palupi and [Pragasto] came and they listened to me. The police and officials simply call my son a looter," she says. "I want to know what really happened."

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