Victims of Indonesia's 1998 violence continue to fight for justice 25 years on

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Riots swept through Jakarta and several other cities in May 1998 just before Suharto stepped down. *(Reuters: Enny Nuraheni)*

In May 1998, massive student protests and riots in Indonesia's capital Jakarta and other major cities brought to an end the 32-year Suharto regime.

Anger directed at the strongman's authoritarian government over issues like corruption, food shortages and mass unemployment had reached boiling point.

Amid the chaos, shops and homes mostly owned by Chinese Indonesians were looted and destroyed, and later in the year the authorities launched a deadly crackdown on the students that became known as the Semanggi I tragedy.

The mobs targeted ethnic Chinese communities because they were stereotyped as rich, and thought to have played a role in the national economy's collapse following the Asian financial crisis.

University of Queensland research has found at least 1,000 people were killed and 400 women of Chinese ethnic background reported being raped in Jakarta between May 13 and 15, 1998.

Twenty-five years on, victims of the violence and their families are still waiting for justice.

'Gradually our house started burning'

Liana Ang had spent the night before at her sister's place in Jakarta, but after the riots broke out on May 13 she and her brother returned to their house to retrieve some valuables.

"I came wearing long sleeves, a hat and sunglasses, so my skin and eyes wouldn't be visible and people couldn't tell I am Chinese, but we couldn't get through," she told the ABC.

"I saw the mob looting the supermarket in front of my house... then they burned buildings on either side of our shop-house, and gradually our house started burning down from the top."



More than 1,000 people are believed to have been died during the 1998 riots in Jakarta. *(Supplied: Reuters/ Supri)*

Ms Ang said she could only watch and cry as her family home burned to the ground.

"I only stopped crying when I found out that my neighbour and her two daughters were burned to death," she said.

"So I thought, 'That's it, I no longer want to live in Indonesia.'"

Ms Ang had a valid Australian visa through her work as a tour guide, and so used it to fly over in 1999.

Now living with her husband on the Gold Coast, she still firmly believes leaving Indonesia was the right decision.

"I have no regrets, even though I had to leave my wealth ... including my comfortable life in Indonesia, because I left everything to live safely," she said.

Although she said Indonesia now is different compared to 25 years ago, she is worried that anti-Chinese sentiment remained and history could repeat itself with the Chinese community again becoming victims.



Liana met her husband Greg Hill after coming to Australia. *(Supplied: Liana Ang)*

'Fire and smoke everywhere'

Elie Cung was a 19-year-old student at a university in Jakarta in 1998.

After the riots broke out, he was told to stay at his campus, but Mr Cung refused.

"My friends and I were worried about our family at home, and we thought that even if we had to die, it would be better to die together with our family," he said.

On the way to his house in West Jakarta, he witnessed the city burning.



The riots were in part sparked by Indonesia's economic struggles following the Asian financial crisis the previous year. *(Supplied: ANTARA/Zarqoni Maksum)*

"Fire and smoke everywhere," he said. "Glass on the road."

Mr Cung made it home and while his family was safe, he began to hear terrible things had happened to his neighbours.

"Apart from houses and shops that were looted and burned, many women were raped, and all targeted at us who are of Chinese descent," he said.

With a scholarship letter to study music at Melbourne University, three days later Mr Cung, his sister, and parents flew to Singapore, before he and his sister went on to Melbourne.



Elie Cung and his sister graduated from a Melbourne university in 2002. *(Supplied)*

Now 25 years later, Mr Cung has never thought of returning to Indonesia.

"I found my home in Australia, because I feel safe here," he said.

He hopes his four-year-old daughter, Alexa, will never experience similar events like those of May 1998.

"I wouldn't say I am traumatised, but surely it left a deep impact on me ... and yet I know that somehow my identity cannot be separated from Indonesia," he said.



Mr Cung does not want his daughter to experience what he went through in Indonesia in 1998. *(Supplied)*

A mother's crusade for justice

In the wake of Suharto's resignation, continuing student protests were met by a violent crackdown by the authorities on November 13, 1998.

At least 17 civilians were killed and hundreds injured near Jakarta's Atma Jaya University and Semanggi cloverleaf interchange leading to the parliament building.



Students occupied Jakarta's parliament building on May 21, 1998. *(Supplied: Kompas/Eddy Hasby)*

Among them was Maria Catarina Sumarsih's son Bernardinus Realino Norma Irmawan, or Wawan.

Wawan, a member of a humanitarian volunteer team, was shot while providing medical aid to his fellow students.

> **"Your son died because he was shot by an army standard live bullet, hitting his heart and lung on the left side of his chest," the forensic doctor who conducted Wawan's autopsy told Ms Sumarsih.**



Wawan was acting as a volunteer medic during the protests. *(Supplied: Sumarsih)*

In 2001, Indonesia's National Human Rights Commission found sufficient initial evidence of gross violations of Human Rights involving 50 military and police officers.

But the country's parliament shelved the process to prosecute them in 2007.

The perpetrators of Wawan's shooting have never been revealed, let alone brought to justice.

So every Thursday afternoon since 2007, Ms Sumarsih and other victims of human rights violations in Indonesia have demonstrated in front of the State Palace, known as the Kamisan ("Kamis" means Thursday in Indonesian).

Dressed all in black and carrying black umbrellas, they demand the government put on trial those responsible for the violations, including the events of May 13 to 15 and the Semanggi I tragedy.

So far, Ms Sumarsih has been spent 774 Thursdays in front of the palace.

Then presidential candidate Joko Widodo's promise to resolve gross Human Rights violation cases in his mission statement ahead of the 2014 presidential election gave her optimism for a resolution.

But her hopes faded when Mr Widodo appointed retired General Wiranto, a figure himself accused of being implicated in the human rights violations of 1998, as Coordinating Minister for Politics, Law and Human Rights in his cabinet.



Maria Catarina Sumarsih still prepares a special dish for Wawan's birthday each year on May 15. *(Supplied: Sumarsih)*



Maria Catarina Sumarsih's confronted President Joko Widodo over his lack of action on bringing human rights perpetrators to justice. *(Supplied: TIRTO/ Andrey Gromico)*

Ms Sumarsih still agreed to meet Mr Widodo when he asked to meet the Kamisan participants ahead of the 2019 presidential election.

"At that moment I asked, 'Mr President, are you willing to sign the State Recognition draft that we have submitted to you now?'" she told the the ABC.

But according to Ms Sumarsih, Mr Widodo declined saying he wanted to study it first.

> **"I no longer believe [the government]... and it seems that [the issue of resolving] gross violations of human rights is only used to gain votes [in elections]," she said.**



The Kamisan protesters are synonymous with black umbrellas. *(Supplied: Twitter @AksiKamisan)*

Government pursuing 'non-judicial settlements'

In January, Mr Widodo acknowledged his country's past "gross human rights violations" and earlier this month chaired a meeting on the implementation of "non-judicial resolutions".

The non-judicial settlements would include a raft measures including victims receiving compensation, and exiled residents being given the right to return.

The Coordinating Minister for Politics, Law and Human Rights, Mahfud MD said the government was not looking for perpetrators in this process.

"So the focus is on the victim, not on the perpetrator," he said.

> **"We will not look for the culprit in this non-judicial settlement, because that would be the domain of the National Commission of Human Rights and the parliament."**

But for Ms Sumarsih, the government's decision not to pursue the perpetrators shows that after 25 years, the reform agenda fought for by her son and the other students has not been fully realised.

"One of the [goals] was to uphold supremacy of law, but we saw that the government still chooses the non-judicial path and impunity," she said.

And for this reason, she said she would continue to fight, by standing in front of the palace, under a black umbrella, every Thursday afternoon.

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