Witnesses to 1998 riots in Indonesia speak out after minister questions mass rape history

By **Hellena Souisa**

Unrest, Conflict and War

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Chinese-Indonesian women were targeted during the riots, a report later found. *(ABC News: Illustration by Jarrod Fankhauser)*

In short:

Indonesia's culture minister has partly walked back comments where he suggested widely documented mass rapes during riots in 1998 did not occur.

A fact-finding team appointed by the government at the time found at least 52 women, mainly ethnic Chinese Indonesian, were raped.

What's next?

The government of President Prabowo Subianto plans to proceed with a controversial project to rewrite Indonesian history.

Read in Bahasa Indonesia

Witnesses to the 1998 riots in Indonesia have spoken out after a prominent minister questioned the accuracy of historical records of the event, including on mass rape.

Warning: This story contains details of sexual assault that may distress some readers.

In May 1998, riots in Indonesia's capital Jakarta and massive student protests across the country culminated in the end of Suharto's 32-year dictatorship.

Anger at the government over corruption, food shortages and mass unemployment led to the targeting of ethnic Chinese communities who were stereotyped as rich.

At least 52 women — most of whom were ethnic Chinese — were raped during the riots, a government-appointed fact finding team later found.

But in an interview last month about the government of President Prabowo Subianto's broader plan to rewrite national history, Culture Minister Fadli Zon cast doubt on records of mass rape.

Sexual assault support lines:

- 1800 Respect National Helpline: 1800 737 732
- Lifeline (24-hour crisis line): 131 114
- Full Stop Australia: 1800 385 578
- Bravehearts: counselling and support for survivors

"Are there any hard facts? We can have a debate about that," he said.

> **"Was there really mass rape? Who said so? There's never been any proof."**

However, a fact-finding team created by former President BJ Habibie in 1998 concluded that mass rapes occurred during the riots.

The team — which included the National Human Rights Commission, not-for-profit organisations, the military, and police — documented dozens of rape cases and said the real number of these sexual assaults was likely higher.

Still, Mr Zon claimed the rapes were simply "rumours".

"That's just a story. If there are facts, show them. Is it in Indonesian history books? Never," he said.

of child sexual abuse: 1800 272 831

- Child Wise: counselling provider: 1800 991 099



In response to public criticism, Fadli Zon has walked back some of his comments. *(Reuters: Zahra Matarani)*

But the National History of Indonesia, an official history book, does discuss the rapes in its chapter about the 1998 riots.

"There were also rapes of a large number of women of Chinese descent," it says.

'It really happened'

The comments from Mr Zon have prompted many, including activist Sandyawan Sumardi, to revisit memories of the riots of 1998.

Mr Sumardi was a priest at the time and vividly remembers the chaos at a major hospital in Jakarta which had called on him for help.

"Even now, when I remember those times, I still feel dizzy. It was traumatic," said Mr Sumardi, who coordinated a group of volunteers at the hospital.



People who worked at hospitals in Jakarta recalled injuries women suffered in the rapes. *(ABC News: Illustration by Jarrod Fankhauser)*

One of the most harrowing stories Mr Sumardi recalled involved a Chinese-Indonesian university student from Tarumanegara University.

"This student was raped in her boarding house during the day by two people," he said.

"Because she resisted, the perpetrator pulled out the curtain rod and stabbed her in the stomach and, tragically, in her vagina, causing profuse bleeding.

"Her face was destroyed, her mouth could barely move … then I approached her and was shocked because she recognised me," he recalled.

"She told me she had begged for mercy and prayed 'Our Father' and 'Hail Mary'… but they still raped her," he said, pausing with tears in his eyes.

"I didn't expect this feeling. I'm still angry."

Women's activist Ita Fatia Nadia, who also volunteered in 1998 helping riot victims, confirmed the scale of the violence to local media.

"There were 15 people I handled directly, and almost all of them had their genitals damaged," she told Tempo.

"For me, the mass rape is not a rumour. It really happened."



Sandyawan Sumardi was known as Father Sandy when he worked as a priest in 1998. *(Supplied: Sandyawan Sumardi)*

Report singles out Prabowo

The 1998 fact-finding team found that rapes were systematic, racially targeted and occurred at looted homes across greater Jakarta.



Prabowo Subianto (right) has been dogged by allegations of war crimes while he was a general under the Suharto regime. *(Reuters)*

The report singled out the current president, Mr Subianto, who was then a special forces commander, for his alleged role in the disappearance of political activists and contributing to the unrest.

It recommended he be court-martialled, though Mr Subianto was only dismissed from active service and never formally tried.

In 1998, the ABC covered the fact-finding team's report.



The ABC covered the report from the fact-finding team in November 1998. *(ABC News: ABC Archives)*

ABC Indonesia spoke with two people interviewed in the 1998 ABC report for this story, including Mayling Oey, a representative of the Chinese-Indonesian community.

Now an emeritus professor at the University of Indonesia, Dr Oey said the minister's comments questioning the mass rapes had hurt people.

"What the minister of culture did was very painful," she said.

"There was a lot of violence ... if he says it wasn't 'mass', perhaps because he didn't experience it himself."



Mayling Oey, 84, spoke to the ABC in 1998 (right) about the fact-finding teams report. *(Supplied/ABC News)*

Dr Oey, now 84, became emotional as she watched the 1998 ABC report.

"I didn't expect to feel this way," she said.

She paused, tears falling, before adding: "It hurts."

Marzuki Darusman, who spoke to the ABC in 1998 as head of the fact-finding team, pointed out this week that the fact-finding report was an official government document.



Marzuki Darusman featured in the ABC's 1998 report, as he was chairperson fact-finding team at the time. *(Supplied/ABC News)*

Mr Darusman said revisiting the 1998 riots would only emphasise Mr Subianto's role in the unrest.

"If [the report's findings] have to be proven as requested by the minister of culture, there must be an official accountability process," he said.

"And thus, it will highlight the role of President Prabowo Subianto in the incident."

Legal expert contradicts minister

Mr Zon has since attempted to clarify his comments about gendered violence in 1998.



Shops were looted and goods burned on the streets of Jakarta in 1998. *(Wikimedia: Public Domain)*

He said he was "certain" sexual violence occurred but questioned whether there was any legal or academic evidence the incidents qualified as "mass rape".

"So, is there any evidence of that now? There never has been," he said.

Legal expert and women's activist Nursyahbani Katjasungkana — who was also a member of the 1998 fact-finding team — rejected Mr Zon's comments.



Nursyahbani Katjasungkana said evidence of widespread rapes in 1998 was overwhelming. *(Zoom: Hellena Souisa)*

Ms Katjasungkana said the evidence of mass rapes set out in the fact-finding teams report was, in fact, legal evidence that met two international legal thresholds.

The 1998 team found the rapes met the definition of "mass" because the assaults were widespread, occurring both within greater Jakarta and in other cities.

The fact-finding team also found the sexual assaults were systematic, she said.

Ms Katjasungkana said that just because an Indonesian court had not ruled on the crimes "that doesn't mean the incident didn't happen".

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