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Indonesia: Sexual Violence in May 1998 in Indonesia is Not a Rumour, Reject the State's Distortion and Erasure of New Order Crimes

Jakarta, Indonesia, 12 June 2025 – The Civil Society Coalition Against Impunity, comprising a wide range of civil society organizations and individuals, strongly condemns the recent statement by the Indonesian Minister of Culture, Fadli Zon, regarding the May 1998 Tragedy. In a YouTube interview titled *"Real Talk: Debat Panas!! Fadli Zon vs Uni Lubis Soal Revisi Buku Sejarah,"* broadcast by IDN Times on June 10, 2025, Fadli Zon denied the occurrence of sexual violence during the 1998 riots, claiming reports of mass rapes were "rumours" and not historical fact.

Such remarks are dangerous. They represent a blatant manipulation of history, a denial of victims' suffering, and a serious attack on decades of efforts to uncover the truth. These statements reflect a broader agenda to rewrite Indonesia's history by silencing accounts of gross human rights violations, particularly those targeting women of Chinese descent.

This denial directly undermines the work of the Joint Fact-Finding Team (TGPF) and the National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM), both of which documented and verified incidents of sexual violence during the May 1998 unrest. Commissioned by then-President B.J. Habibie, the TGPF included representatives from the government, civil society, and independent institutions. Their final report, published on 23 October 1998, outlined verified cases of rape, sexual assault, and harassment in Jakarta, Medan, and Surabaya. Survivors' testimonies were corroborated by witnesses, doctors, psychologists, and family members.

The report also revealed patterns of ethnic targeting, where Chinese-Indonesian women were systematically singled out. Many rapes were gang assaults, often carried out in public or in front of family members. These crimes caused lasting trauma, not only on individuals but also for communities and the nation's collective memory.

Despite these findings, no perpetrators have been held accountable. For over two decades, survivors and families have been denied justice, reparations, and recognition. The Attorney General's Office lack of follow-through on Komnas HAM's recommendations reinforces a culture of impunity.

Minister Fadli Zon's statement not only trivialises victims' experiences but also erases the very foundations upon which Komnas Perempuan, Indonesia's National Commission on Violence Against Women, was established via Presidential Decree No. 181/1998. Komnas Perempuan and many survivors have worked tirelessly to preserve the memory of this tragedy, including the establishment of the 1998 Tragedy Memorial in Pondok Rangon.

The Minister's role in revising official history textbooks, combined with his recent appointment as Chair of *Dewan Gelar, Tanda Jasa, dan Tanda Kehormatan* or the National Honors Council (GTK), points to a dangerous effort to politically rehabilitate New Order figures, including Suharto. Fadli Zon has previously advocated for Suharto to be named a national hero, despite his administration's documented legacy of human rights abuses and systemic corruption.

In response, the Coalition urge:

1. A formal retraction and public apology from Fadli Zon for denying the occurrence of sexual violence in May 1998.
2. The immediate dismissal of Fadli Zon from his position as Chair of the GTK.
3. A halt to the Ministry of Culture's current historical revision project, which risks erasing gross human rights violations from public memory.
4. Full protection and institutional recognition of the findings from TGPF, Komnas HAM, and Komnas Perempuan.
5. A participatory and victim-centered approach to writing national history, one that includes the voices of survivors and affirms their dignity.
6. The activation of ad hoc prosecutors by the Attorney General to pursue unresolved cases of gross human rights violations, as mandated by Law No. 26/2000.
7. A rejection of all political rehabilitation efforts for figures involved in past state crimes, especially the proposed hero status for Suharto.
8. A national commitment to truth, justice, and reparation for survivors of the May 1998 violence and other historical abuses.
9. The inclusion of these narratives in formal education, memorialisation processes, and state acknowledgements to ensure non-recurrence.

10. Continued vigilance and engagement from civil society, academics, the media, and survivors' communities to safeguard historical truth and resist misleading revisions.

The path to justice begins with truth. Denying survivors' pain is an act of violence. The State must listen, acknowledge, and act.

Civil Society Coalition Against Impunity

To read the release in Indonesia, please visit KontraS website: Rilis Pers Koalisi Masyarakat Sipil Melawan Impunitas Merespon Pernyataan Fadli Zon.pdf

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