

Chinese Indonesian prays at a Jakarta temple.



REUTERS

Since 1998, Indonesia has been one of the world's most conflict-ridden nations. At the same time, Indonesian media have gained their freedom after 32 years of oppression. Covering conflicts of SARA (Suku = ethnicity, Agama = religion, Ras = race and Antargolongan = group), taboo under the New Order era, is no longer forbidden. Such issues now make headline news, introducing a degree of division of which people were previously unaware.

Lacking adequate education, many people get easily provoked or angered by what they consume in the news, and take action. These actions include mobilising *jihad* armies to areas of conflict, attacking press institutions and terrorising or intimidating journalists.

RACIAL, ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS CONFLICT  
Indonesia has had more than its share of

## Softening the Story

### How Indonesian journalists are changing the way they cover conflict

Racial, ethnic and religious conflict in Indonesia has been frequent, and brutal – and often aggravated by the media. **Sirikit Syah** tells how Peace Journalism and its



adherents are helping to 'soften', and deepen, the way such conflicts are reported...

conflict – mostly between indigenous people and government over separatist struggles. But racial and religious conflicts have dominated the media for the last three years – not surprising in a country whose 200 million people split into more than 300 different groups and, although 80% Muslim, also has a variety of religions. During that time such conflicts have happened in the Moluccas, Central Sulawesi, West Kalimantan, and Central Kalimantan.

Since its independence in 1945 (first from the Dutch, then the Japanese), Indonesia's primarily political conflicts had racial and religious elements, but were not conflicts based on religion or race. The more recent escalation of racial and religious conflicts could be linked to the independence of East Timor, the freedom of the press and the new, unfortunately weak, government under former President Abdurrahman Wahid.

The conflicts in West Kalimantan

'rapists'

(Pontianak) and Central Kalimantan (Sampit) are clearly racial – between Dayak, Malay and Madura tribes. The conflicts were mostly initiated by a criminal act followed by group revenge (*vendetta*), but many experts blamed the previous government for social and economical gaps and lack of education. In Central Sulawesi (Poso), the conflict is between Muslims and Christians, initiated by actors from another conflict area (South Moluccas). Conflict in the Moluccas (especially South Moluccas and Ambon) is said to be a mixture of both race and religion. There are elements of tribal friction aggravated by jealousy over economic achievements (the Ambonise/Mollucas versus BBM, or Bugis, Bhoton, Makasar), and of religious friction between Muslims and Christians – even among Ambonise/Moluccas themselves.

In covering these conflicts, some Indonesian media tend to take sides. In the Moluccas/Ambon conflicts this has been very clear. *Republika*, for instance, a daily pub-

- *Suara Pembaruan* maintained it was not a conflict between Muslims and Christians; reported that the situation was under control; relied on perspective of local officials; message directed to Muslims and the press.
- During the Moluccas conflict, media often used language as sources directed or suggested. Here is a list of common terminology used: Red Group vs White Group, genocide, massacre, holocaust, the most brutal war, systematic rapes, burned alive, sadistic, cutting of the body, eat the body and drink the blood.

#### THE PEACE JOURNALISM MOVEMENT

People have accused the press of contributing to the escalation of conflicts. In 2000, many workshops, discussions and seminars for journalists on Peace Journalism – journalism that focuses less on the war-mongering and more on the people and prospects for peacemaking – were held, sponsored by foundations and institutions such as USAID,

lished in Jakarta, became the Islamic voice in those conflicts, along with the explicitly Muslim Media Dakwah (Islamic Media). *Republika's* mission was expressed through the choice of sources being interviewed, the main pictures on the front page and the language used. At some points it even provoked Muslims in Java to launch a *jihad* to the conflict regions.

On the other hand, *Kompas* and *Suara Pembaruan*, newspapers also published in Jakarta and Christian-owned, proved to be moderate, even peaceable, in their coverage of such conflict. In addition to covering both sides, they tended to choose words carefully and did not readily headline 'conflict news'. Some considered this, however, to be hiding the facts; our media standards vary dramatically.

The organisation Kabar Kabar Kebencian (Hatred News) monitored the coverage of the South Moluccas conflict, and found these results:

- Both Media Dakwah and *Republika* narrated the conflict from the perspective of suffering Muslims/Muslim fatalities, focusing on the 'violence and sadism' of Christians; they used Islamic sources; they directed their messages to Muslims.
- *Kompas* framed the conflict as being initiated among local politicians; its coverage was critical of government; queried lack of foreign intervention; sources mainly from government elite; message aimed at government.

The Asia Foundation and the British Council. They were held in Jakarta, Bandung, Semarang, Surabaya and some other major cities in Indonesia. More than 100 journalists have participated in these seminars and workshops – and they are starting to make a difference.

A few months after the workshops, conflict between the Dayak and Madura tribes erupted in Sampit (Central Kalimantan).

Despite the number of casualties – hundreds of people were killed – and the sadistic nature of the killings, the Indonesian media chose to play a 'softener' role. The majority of coverage was in feature format – mapping the conflicts, exposing people's voices instead of elites, exposing refugee suffering, investigating the backgrounds of conflict, covering both sides and giving space to citizens' small but significant reconciliation efforts. The media in general, and particularly in Sampit, pursued the standards of Peace Journalism and tended to support any effort towards peace and reconciliation. Instead of the usual sadistic/violent pictures of headless bodies, images of refugees dominated the local media.

Though still small and in its early days, the Peace Journalism movement in Indonesia is growing and having an impact on the coverage of racial and religious conflicts. If only journalists could cover our *political* conflicts with such sanity.

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