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Background note on Indonesian news release

In July 1969 the Indonesian government announced the establishment of a permanent re-settlement camp for untried political prisoners on Buru Island. By then the first batch of 2,500 prisoners had been transported there in conditions of utmost secrecy from prisons throughout Java. Until this year, there were more than 9,800 prisoners on the island. This was significantly less than the total number - more than 10,000 - transported to Buru from July 1969.

Amnesty International received information in 1975 that the prisoners on Buru were compelled to construct new camps sufficient to house several thousand prisoners whom the authorities intended to transport to the island in 1969. It is now known that over 1,000 prisoners were transported to Buru this year in conditions of utmost secrecy.

The island of Buru is part of the Malukus and is in the most part covered with primary vegetation and jungle. The prisoners had to clear the land, build their own camps and expand the areas under cultivation. Although there are large areas under rice cultivation, the prisoner's diet consists mainly of sweet potatoes, cassava and vegetables. In periods of food shortage, the prisoners are known to have eaten snakes, mice, rats and dogs. Although the prisoners raise chickens, they sell them and the eggs to the officers. The prisoners rarely have the opportunity to eat chicken or eggs themselves. The prisoners have to work for eight or nine hours a day in the field. Many of them are intellectuals, who are unused to hard manual labour.

A large proportion of prisoners are chronically ill from diseases which do not receive even the most elementary medical treatment. They are without adequate clothes and have no soap for washing.

The decision to establish the Buru project was taken by KOPKAMTIB, the powerful state security agency, and the prosecutor general was appointed to manage the project. However the prisoners remained under military authority; and the regional military command at Ambon is in charge of all security arrangements for the project.

The creation of detention camps in Buru (there are 18 in all) added a new dimension of permanency to the process of political imprisonment in Indonesia. Instead of bringing the prisoners to trial and releasing those against whom no charges could be brought, the government had embarked on a course of long term compulsory "re-settlement" for the prisoners thus affected. These include young men who were less than 15 years old when arrested. One of the latter is a boy who was transported to the island with his father who was a political prisoner. The father died in captivity, but his son is still held on Buru.

The official motives behind the Buru project were stated in a brochure issued by Bapreru (Buru Re-Settlement Executive Authority) in December 1969. This explained that the transfer of category B prisoners to Buru was intended "not to isolate them from the public at large, but merely to provide them with a new means of living together with their families, because it will only risk their own safety if they are to be returned to their original community now". The Indonesian government considers these prisoners to have played an important role in planning and supervising the abortive coup in October 1965, although no evidence has ever been produced in order to put these people on trial.

The death rate among prisoners on Buru is high. The government officially admitted in 1975 that 143 prisoners had died. The authorities stated that these prisoners had died of ailments that they had before their transportation to Buru and not because conditions on Buru were bad. Yet the Bapreru brochure emphasized that only people under 45 years of age who were medically fit were being sent to Buru.

The Indonesian authorities have always insisted that their plans to bring the families of the Buru prisoners to the island show evidence of humanitarianism. But the prisoners themselves, and in general, their relatives, look upon the matter differently. When in December 1971, a group of Indonesian and foreign journalists were allowed to visit Buru, not a single prisoner with whom they spoke showed any desire to have his family with him. While separation from their families is one of the most intolerable aspects of their life, they realize that life on Buru is far too arduous for their wives and children.

However in July 1972, 84 wives with their children were sent to join their prisoner husbands on Buru. Further groups of wives were sent in February 1974 and in early 1975. The wives and their husbands and their children are housed in a special camp called Savana-Jaya. The wives and children have to live under the same conditions as the prisoners and have to work for their food and basic requirements. The children are allowed to attend the elementary school at Namlea.

Despite continuing efforts by the government to bring pressure on families to go to Buru, the total number of families on the island is less than 200 and this reflects the continuing refusal of the prisoners and their wives to accept the government's project at face value. Several wives have written to Amnesty International to say that they prefer not to be transported to Buru, despite government pressure. One wife said: "We are being compelled to fill in forms agreeing to go there too. I filled in a form saying 'not willing', but it seems they are going to force us to go to Buru." This woman is herself a political prisoner in Java.

According to a statement made in December 1971 by the then deputy prosecutor general, Sutrisno Hamidjojo, who was at the time in charge of the Buru project, the final stage for the Buru prisoners is the phase when they are "returned to society". "Returned to society" seems to imply rehabilitation or release, in other words, the end of detention. But the Indonesian authorities had a different concept in mind. At this final stage, said the deputy prosecutor general, "political prisoners would remain on the island but would no longer be bound by discipline, such as, for example, attending "roll-call".