

numbers! numbers! numbers!

"It is impossible to say exactly how many political prisoners there are," the Indonesian Attorney-General, Sugih Arto told a gathering of foreign journalists in Jakarta in September, 1971. "It is a floating rate, like the Japanese yen vis-a-vis the dollar."



Salemba prison in Jakarta.

And why is it impossible? "The thing is that local commanders have the power to arrest and interrogate any person under suspicion of being a threat to national security. These people can be held for an unlimited period of time. It is not always compulsory to report such security arrests to the Central Command in Jakarta," Sugih Arto said.

More recently, in October, 1972, a senior officer of the **Kopkamtib**, Command for the Restoration of Security and Order, said that the number of political prisoners being held has its "ups and downs". And why is this? "On the very day we release or sentence someone, we shall probably be arresting others." These remarks provide the setting for what many have come to call the macabre numbers game. Recently, there have been a number of official pronouncements on the question which have been confused and contradictory. We summarise below, the most important pronouncements made in the last eighteen months:

● 13th August 1971 In response to the publication of Amnesty's Memorandum to the Indonesian Government, Foreign Minister Adam Malik told journalists that there were "90,000 prisoners". On the same day, the Attorney-General said there were "50,000 'C' category detainees" all of whom would be freed by the end of the year.

● 26th August 1971 After meeting the Dutch Foreign Minister, Adam Malik said that there were "45,000" political prisoners, of whom 22,000 would be freed by the end of the year.

● 20th September 1971 In a speech to foreign journalists, when he described the number of political prisoners as a "floating rate", the Attorney-General mentioned an overall total of "about 50,000".

● October 1971 Brigadier-General Marpaung, speaking for the Minister of Defence and Security, gave these figures: 19,516 'A' and 'B' prisoners; 3,112 'C' prisoners; 14,336 'X' prisoners. Total: 36,964.

● 1st January 1972 President Suharto announced that "all 22,000 'C' prisoners" had been released.

● 4th February 1972 General Sumitro, Deputy Commander of the Command for the Restoration of Security and Order (**Kopkamtib**) told journalists that there were "2,494 'A' prisoners, 16,076 'B' prisoners, no 'C' prisoners and a handful of 'X' prisoners."

● October 1972 A spokesman of the **Kopkamtib** said: "There are 9,935 prisoners on Buru and 29,000 in the rest of Indonesia." Total: 39,000. Re-settlement sites were being sought for the 29,000.

● 14th November 1972 The Indonesian Embassy in London issued a fact sheet, originating from the Attorney-General's Office and the Department for Security and Defence; this stated that there were now "38,221 political detainees"

CONTRADICTIONS

The discrepancies in these figures are numerous. Let us concentrate only on the repeated pronouncement that all 'C' detainees have been released. A rough consensus of the figures announced during 1971 would suggest that this should have left between 20,000 and 25,000 prisoners in detention. In October, 1972 however, we are told that there were 39,000 prisoners altogether - without any breakdown according to category.

In the absence of any official explanation, we offer two of our own. Either that more than half the 'C' detainees were reclassified and are now being held as 'A' or 'B' prisoners, or that about 15,000 people have been arrested during the course of the last twelve months.

The same discrepancies appear in release announcements which were reported fairly frequently in the Indonesian press during the closing months of 1971. A typical example comes from Sumatra. In December 1971, Brig-General Jasir Hadibroto, Commander of the All-Sumatra Command, said that "all 1,718 'C' prisoners in North Sumatra have been released." A few days later, a Jakarta daily announced that of the 1,718 'C' prisoners in North Sumatra, 426 had already been released and the remainder would be freed in January 1972. But in January 1972, a Jakarta paper added to the confusion by announcing that "the first batch of 'C' prisoners had been released in the middle of January."

How are we to arrive at any reasonable estimate of the number of prisoners currently being held in detention in Indonesia? The figure of 39,000 mentioned by several sources in October and November 1972 appears to be related to classified prisoners of the 'B' categories for the **Kopkamtib** spokesman explained that, in addition to the 10,000 prisoners on Buru another 29,000 would be detained in 're-settlement camps'. We can therefore assume that this figure does not include unclassified prisoners in the 'X' category, and probably also excludes 'A' prisoners awaiting trial, said to number about 5,000.

In view of what the Attorney-General told foreign journalists in September 1971 about the broad powers of local commanders, and in view moreover of what we know about the prolonged and often unregistered detention of prisoners by local commanders, during the initial period of interrogation, an estimate of ten to fifteen thousand in 'X' category may not be an exaggeration. This plus an understandable scepticism about the official figure of 39,000 classified prisoners suggests that the lowest estimate must be 55,000 and the real figure may well be much greater. 13