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Split over spoils of Aceh's riches fuels Indonesia violence

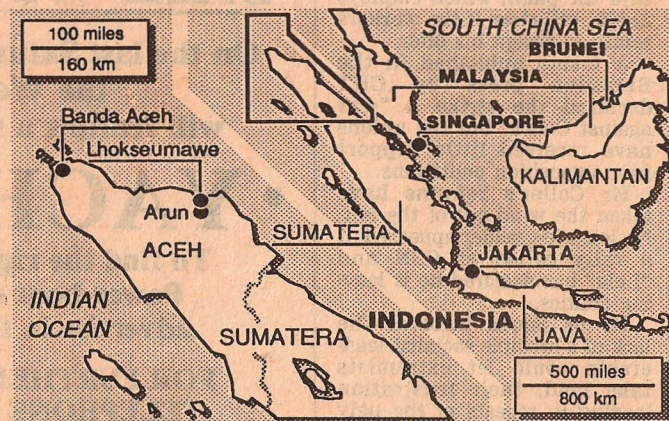
Anti-Jakarta sentiments grow as Java is seen as the beneficiary of western province's wealth, writes **Claire Bolderson**

A RECENT wave of killings in Indonesia's westernmost province of Aceh has highlighted a growing sense of economic injustice among locals in the region, the heart of Indonesia's flourishing natural gas industry.

In the past four months, attacks on soldiers and policemen in Aceh have left more than 30 dead. At least that many civilians have also been killed in a campaign that local analysts say is directed largely against members of the security forces and migrant workers from Java.

The Indonesian Government says the killings are the work of "common criminals". They say there is no political motive behind the attacks which are concentrated in an area around the province's industrial zone at Lhokseumawe.

But a group claiming responsibility for the killings puts it differently. In a letter sent



recently to Acehnese newspapers, but not published because Indonesia's press is strictly controlled, the group says it is fighting for the independence of Aceh from "the barbaric colonialism of Java".

The letter says Java, Indonesia's most densely-populated island and the seat of govern-

ment, "endlessly violates the rights of the people of Aceh" and "trivialises and crushes the Islamic religion".

Aceh is a staunchly Islamic province with a long history of opposition to outside forces last expressed by the Free Aceh Movement which in 1977 declared the province indepen-

dent from Indonesia. The movement had little popular support and was quickly suppressed but observers believe there are similar anti-Jakarta sentiments behind the recent wave of killings.

Aceh is one of Indonesia's richest provinces, home to large coal and mineral deposits, extensive forests, oil reserves and the huge liquefied natural gas (LNG) complex at Arun.

But the people of Aceh say they are not the ones benefiting from their province's wealth. Locals say they cannot get jobs in the high-tech, capital intensive industries that have developed on Aceh's eastern coast in the last 15 years.

They complain that skilled staff are brought in from Java to fill management positions at the LNG plant and the nearby fertiliser factories, and point to sophisticated purpose-built accommodation provided for foreign staff at the gas complex

as an example of the unfair distribution of the riches of their province.

Their claims are backed in part by the provincial government and the authorities in Jakarta who have this year awarded Aceh the biggest development budget of the provinces.

Last month, Mr Ibrahim Hasan, Aceh's governor, after a meeting with President Suharto, admitted that the recent attacks were related to "social jealousy" triggered by the "widening gap between rich and poor" in the province.

He added that the President had said local residents of Aceh should be given more training to work in new industrial projects in the region. Lack of training and good education is, according to economists in the province, one of the main reasons why Acehnese tend to lose out when it comes to skilled and managerial jobs.

But it is not just the wealthy industrial sector that is attracting resentment. Farmers moved by the Government from over-populated Java to transmigration sites in Aceh have been amongst the main targets of the violence.

Although their living conditions do not differ greatly from those of the Acehnese, the trans-migrants are believed to have unfair advantages. As one local put it: "They come here and are given land, a house, food and seedlings and they get capital from the Government to work the same land that we work with nothing."

One site near Lhokseumawe was abandoned recently after the head of the village was shot dead. The 400 families there packed their belongings and moved back to Java.

Analysts believe the attacks are being directed by a group of ex-soldiers more than 40 of whom were recently dismissed from the region's armed forces

for disciplinary offences. Some, who took with them weapons and a knowledge of local command posts, became active in the growing and selling of cannabis, a traditional crop in Aceh. When the police and army launched an anti-cannabis sweep last year, the former soldiers decided to fight back.

Now, observers say, the disgruntled soldiers have joined a handful of pro-independence Acehnese and are using local economic woes to stir up the trouble. As one local put it: "The ex-soldiers had arms but no cause and the true Free Aceh separatists had a cause but no arms. They both saw the potential and there has been a kind of fusion."

The response from Jakarta has been to send in more troops, most of them from outside Aceh, including Java. Their imposition of road blocks and searches has done little to win back the support and confidence of the Acehnese people.