

200 schools put on fire in Aceh: 60,000 students affected

BANDA ACEH (Indonesia), May 21: Indonesia's military said on Wednesday it has sent crack troops to halt arson attacks on scores of schools in Aceh, where a major offensive against separatist rebels was in its third day.

The attacks stopped in the strife-torn Bireuen district after the marines and paramilitary police arrived, said spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Yani Basuki.

Each side has blamed the other for the arson attacks, which education officials say have hit 200 schools and left 60,000 children with nowhere to study. Basuki gave a figure of 147 schools torched.

The military ruler of Aceh, where martial law is in force, meanwhile announced curbs on the media and on civilian activists seen as sympathetic

to the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). Indonesia has launched its biggest military operation since the 1975 invasion of East Timor to try to wipe out GAM, following the breakdown of last-ditch peace talks in Tokyo last weekend. Up to 30,000 troops plus 10,000 police are confronting some 5,000 guerrillas.

Anaz Muhammad Adam, deputy head of the provincial education office, said more than 200 schools had been torched as of Wednesday. Bireuen and Pidie, both rebel strongholds, accounted for 161 of the schools.

He appealed to the government to provide tents for temporary classrooms.

"I don't know the motive but to my knowledge in every conflict in the world schools are not normally targeted," Adam said, adding that since 1999

more than 750 schools have been burned down.

The army said GAM torched the schools to try to divert troops from offensive operations to guard duties. The rebels blamed army counter-intelligence.

Public transport has stopped running between several towns.

Basuki said seven rebels were killed and 11 arrested since the operation began on Monday, with no military fatalities but some injuries.

He said he was checking a report that soldiers killed 10 people in the village of Peusangan in Bireuen on Wednesday morning.

GAM military spokesman Sofyan Dawood said in Jakarta that soldiers claimed the men were GAM members. Dawood said they were unarmed civilians.

An eyewitness who visited the village saw eight bodies being prepared for burial.

Another witness saw six other bodies, with head gunshot wounds, ready for burial in Cot Batee in Jeumpa sub-district near Bireuen.

Dawood claims rebels shot dead three marines trying to land on the island of Weh, just off the northernmost tip of Aceh.

A military source said some 300 soldiers have landed in an island in the area believed to be used as a GAM transit point in its weapons smuggling route.

Basuki said rebels may be moving weapons around by land vehicles, possibly also marked with "press."

The AFP correspondent on the road between Lhokseumawe and Bireuen in North Aceh saw troops stopping buses

and trucks checking for weapons.

The rebels have waged a 27-year battle for independence in which some 10,000 people have been killed.

Jakarta says GAM's refusal at the eleventh-hour talks in Tokyo to drop its independence demand prompted the large-scale assault.

Martial law administrator Major General Endang Suwarya, in a briefing on Tuesday, said reporters must stop quoting GAM spokesmen.

"We will bring a halt to the news from the spokesmen of GAM because they are turning the facts upside down," Suwarya said.

"Journalists are free to correct the actions of security personnel in the field. As long as that is right, we will accept it. But there should be no reports from GAM and reports that praise GAM."

Dawood said the GAM assured its "protection for all journalists in Aceh."

Suwarya said he is considering a curfew for Pidie and Bireuen and added that authorities would arrest GAM supporters, individuals or organizations.

Police on Tuesday arrested Cut Nur Asikin, an activist campaigning for an independence referendum, and said she could face charges of plotting against the state or even violating anti-terrorism laws.

Aceh police spokesman Sayed Husaini said five GAM negotiators arrested immediately after the offensive was announced on Monday, are suspects in cases of subversion and terrorism.

Police have accused GAM of involvement in bombings in Medan city and Jakarta. The rebels deny involvement.—AFP