

Human Rights First Mourns the Passing of Prominent Indonesian Defender

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Human Rights First was saddened to learn of the passing of Indonesian human rights defender Munir. On early Tuesday, September 7, the 38-year-old activist died of unknown causes after falling ill on a flight to the Netherlands, where he planned to continue his studies. Munir came to prominence as an outspoken critic of the military in the chaotic years surrounding President Suharto's fall from power. Munir and the organizations he helped to build went on to play an important role in many of the major human rights issues in the country, combining fearless advocacy and meticulous research. When Munir was named by Asiaweek as one of 20 leaders for the new millennium, a fellow activist told the magazine, "Those who are brave enough to speak out in the face of death inspire the courage of others. This is the most important contribution Munir has made in the struggle to uncover violent acts by the state."



Photo: Monika Schlicher 2000

Originally from East Java, Munir worked in various positions at the Legal Aid Foundation before founding the Commission for Disappearances and Victims of Violence (Komisi untuk Orang Hilang dan Korban Kekerasan, or KontraS) in 1998. KontraS played an important role in the struggle for accountability after the disappearance of pro-democracy activists during the transition. The organization was also at the forefront of human rights investigations into state violence in East Timor, Ambon, and Aceh. Munir had recently helped found a new NGO, Imparsial, and was serving as its Executive Director.

Munir also served on the Commission to Investigate Human Rights Violations in East Timor (KPP-HAM), created by the National Human Rights Commission after the violence in 1999. He played an important role in uncovering evidence of military responsibility for the violence and recommending action against high-ranking officers. Unfortunately, despite this groundbreaking report, the resultant trials have been seriously flawed and the few convictions of military personnel of have since been overturned due to the continued influence of the military on Indonesian political life. More recently Munir was closely involved in the debate surrounding draft laws on the role of the military and on a truth and reconciliation commission.

Munir was even praised by those he took to task. On Tuesday, presidential candidate and retired general Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono told an audience, "Sometimes his criticism made many ears redden. He criticized the Indonesian military and, often, me. But we need a person like Munir to remind us if we stray away from democracy."

Munir's work helped expose major human rights violations and advanced accountability during a turbulent time in Indonesia's transition to democracy. His untimely death leaves a legacy through the organizations he built and the young activists he inspired. Human Rights First offers its condolences to Munir's family, and to the Indonesian human rights community for its loss