



A life of struggle

Carmel Budiardjo has spent much of her life campaigning for the freedom of political prisoners in Indonesia through her organisation Tapol.

Carmel Budiardjo is a legendary fighter and defender of human rights in Indonesia

By **LIM CHIA YING**

IN the name of upholding human rights in her adopted country Indonesia, she was constantly vilified and disparaged by Indonesian government officials.

Under President Suharto's brutal dictatorship and regime, she was even detained as a prisoner without trial for three years between 1968 and 1971, before being expelled to her birth country in England.

Yet these setbacks did not deter activist Carmel Budiardjo from forming a non-governmental organisation that helped campaign for the release of tens of thousands of political prisoners.

The NGO, founded in 1973, was named Tapol combining the two words 'tahanan politik' (which translates to political prisoners). Carmel actively led it for the next 35 years - and is still involved in its work. Its foremost mission during the initial years was to secure the freedom of prisoners she had left behind following her expulsion, most of

whom she says were held as communist suspects after an anti-communist crack-down in 1965.

That year, the army had seized power under then General Suharto and instituted a widespread, vicious witchhunt that claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands. Her late Indonesian husband Suwondo Budiardjo, a government official was sentenced for political offences from 1968 to 1978.

Carmel, 87, in an exclusive interview with Star iPad, says the political prisoners were never charged with but were all incriminated as involved parties in the G30S killings which they knew nothing about.

The G30S event also known as the Sept 30 Movement, involved the kidnapping and murder of six Indonesian generals. She says while the true perpetrators weren't identified, the Indonesian military under Suharto declared the Indonesian Communist Party responsible.

"The party had an estimated membership of several million people and enjoyed a close collaboration with



People shouting for the arrest of Suharto whose regime had brought about murders of hundreds of thousands of the Indonesian Communist Party members.

organisations like the Himpunan Sarjana Indonesia (Indonesian Scholars Organisation) which I belonged to.

“The military blamed not just the party but all its associated organisations, and carried out a nationwide massacre that resulted in a death toll numbering to hundreds of thousands of the party’s members.

“Many were taken into custody but most were never pressed with charges. Many were detained for up to ten years.

“My husband and I were both taken (into custody) too - although he was taken in much earlier - before being released then rearrested along with me in September 1968,” recalls Carmel. She says the purges were carried out to destroy the Indonesian Communist Party and pave the way for the establishment of Suharto’s ‘New Order’ that would reign supreme over the country for more than three decades.

The releases were conducted intermittently, with most only freed towards the latter part of the 70s. This was largely attributed to assistance from several

organisations which campaigned against their detention, particularly Amnesty International which regarded Indonesia as holding the biggest number of untried political prisoners in South East Asia and perhaps the world, says Carmel.

“While there aren’t figures on released political prisoners, we at Tapol are proud to be part of the bigger picture, the campaign.

“Our bulletins and press releases certainly made an impact, but we cannot gauge precisely (the impact) of our work in terms of numbers released,” says Carmel.

She points out that while the Indonesian government regards the entire campaign as a deliberate attempt to discredit it, the Indonesian government stands discredited in the eyes of the public by holding people in detention without charge of trial.

She adds that the question of being courageous does not arise because Tapol was based outside Indonesia (in the UK) which meant that her work did not involve any personal risks.



The banner ‘Suharto Wanted for Murder’ explains all about the mass murder carried out in Indonesia.

For her, Tapol's work was borne out of a sense of commitment to those still held captive, like the scores of women whom she met during her incarceration in the prison.

"They pinned high hopes on me upon hearing that I was to be released. My husband too, was also hopeful in my trail of freedom.

"Yet I can't say if my release helped him in any way because he wasn't (released) until more than five years later," says Carmel.

At 87 this year, Carmel demonstrates near impeccable memory in recollecting incidents that took place four decades ago.

She says even if the political prisoners were eventually released, subsequent governments never acknowledged the Suharto regime's responsibility for these crimes, nor was anyone held accountable. The ensuing rulers did not rehabilitate the former prisoners who, along with their offspring, friends and relatives, still experience discrimination.

"The situation of the 1965 victims



Carmel with author Putu Oka Sukanto, who has written about the 1965/66 tragedy.

has not changed and they still encounter difficulties because of allegations of their communist or left-wing sympathies.

"Those responsible including Suharto have died, and thus impunity allowed countless military officials to escape charges for the killings, torture and evictions.

"There are even occasions when

people attempt to set up a new political party, or search for the graves of alleged communists in order to give them a decent burial, and are confronted by gangs who assaulted and prevented them from continuing their efforts," relates Carmel of the still deep-rooted injustices.

Repressive authorities aside, one of the vilifications towards Tapol came in the form of the journal *Far Eastern Economic Review* in 1980, the first time in which she confronted a major, public attack against her work.

"The journal, which had a wide circulation in South East Asia, took great pains to discredit us, even asking our sponsors if they were willing to go on sponsoring my political activities.

"But a number of human rights activists and intellectuals wrote in supporting our work and this was published in our bulletin. This vilification consumed a great deal of our time, but it helped to confirm the impact of our work and gave us encouragement to continue on," she adds.

An Activist Raised

Born in Britain in 1925, Carmel graduated with an economics degree from the London School of Economics in 1946. She went to Indonesia in 1952 after marrying Suwondo in Prague where she worked at the Secretariat of the International Union of Students.

From 1955 to 1965, she worked at the Indonesian department of Foreign Affairs in Jakarta and became active with both the Indonesian Scholars Organisation and the Indonesian Communist Party.

It was then in 1965 that she was dismissed from her job in the Foreign Ministry. Three years later, the arrest came.

Carmel was placed under house arrest for several months before being made to serve a three-year term at the Bukit Duri Prison for women.

She shared a small cell with two other prisoners, in a space intended for one.

"We took turns sleeping on the floor. One lay on the stone platform dubbed 'the bed', while the other two made do



Carmel (third from left, standing) together with supporters of Tapol carrying out their campaigns.

on the floor with a thin mat," Carmel says of her experience.

"The lights were left on day and night and our only access to daylight was the occasional half-an-hour courtyard session where we could stretch our legs and enjoy some fresh air.

"Prison food consisted of two barely

edible meals a day, with some outside food brought to us by visitors that we shared amongst ourselves. Of course, we weren't allowed to receive visitors except on holidays."

Reading materials like newspapers were strictly forbidden - yet some prisoners managed to smuggle them.

It became a problem for those who fell ill, as nurse visits to the prison were only done once a week. Carmel once suffered from cold and sinus problems, and although it was not too serious, she made it look so to be able to join a small group of other prisoners for a hospital check-up.

“Getting to ride along the streets and seeing people walk about was a pleasant little excursion,” she says.

“One of our co-prisoners, a doctor, urged that we keep our spirits up and not let our captors get us down. It was our form of resistance.”

Carmel says the only time they were allowed to gather was for Sunday services with a priest, which she was eager to attend although she wasn't a Christian. (She's a Jew). With her knowledge of hymns, she started arranging them in four-part harmonies to sing at the services.

Her fellow prisoners embraced her presence like a grand guest - in her they saw an Englishwoman from whom they could learn the language. Despite the



Carmel (centre) receiving her award from Dr Benny Giay, the College of Theology director in Jayapura while witnessed by other Papuans.

rules disallowing any sort of lectures, she went ahead to teach while guarded by their well-organised warning system.

“When anyone of us sensed the approach of a prison warder, someone would strike up a song to preempt our ‘illegal’ ongoing.”

She was caught giving lessons on one occasion though, still holding a chalk while facing the blackboard having not

heard the warning. Her students had all scurried back into their cells, but fortunately the warder was lenient enough to let Carmel off without any reprimand.

These little activities made their time a little more bearable. It was also a whole new experience of huddling with women from different social backgrounds, including very young girls whom she describes as blissfully ignorant of

anything political.

She says that is no room for bitterness or depression for how she was wrongly accused and treated.

“I focus on helping the victims, because the enormity of problems facing Indonesia means that I must keep going. This, bearing in mind of the injustices that still prevail in Indonesia’s province of West Papua, even after the fall of Suharto’s authoritarian government.”

Carmel has received a string of honours, namely the Right Livelihood Award in 1995, the John Rumbiak Human Rights Defenders Award in 2008, the Order of Timor-Leste in 2009 and the Eldest Daughter of Papuan Nation in 2010.

But she scoffs at the notion that awards are a motivation.

“Yes, awards make me feel that my work is being recognised worldwide, within certain circles. But they do not lead to further motivation.

“The motivation is always understanding the problems and doing what you can with very limited resources.”



Carmel showing the Order of Timor-Leste award bestowed to her in 2009.

East Timor and West Papua

Carmel considers the invasion and illegal annexing of East Timor by Indonesia as Tapol’s biggest ever challenge.

The invasion occurred in December 1975 following the downfall of the dictatorship in Portugal that resulted in dramatic changes (East Timor was ruled by Portugal from the 16th century until

its decolonisation).

She says Indonesia’s invasion was swift and the impact catastrophic on the people of East Timor.

“We suddenly had to devote much of our limited resources to drawing attention to the situation at a time when information was very scarce.

“Our information came from church NGOs in Australia and some deeply-concerned Australian groups and individuals who took great personal risks to penetrate Indonesia’s blockade around East Timor in order to bring humanitarian aid to the beleaguered people there.

“I was very determined to focus on what the Indonesian army were doing to crush defenceless civilians in East Timor.”

She adds that President B.J. Habibie who took over after Suharto’s resignation decided to give East Timorese citizens a chance to vote for two options, either as a special autonomy within Indonesia or as a sovereign state. The Timorese voted overwhelmingly for independence from Indonesia in 1999, becoming an inde-

pendent state known as the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste in 2002.

This was why Tapol (coined originally as the British Campaign for the Release of Indonesian Political Prisoners) expanded its mandate to cover campaigning for human rights in general in Indonesia and East Timor. Later in 2007, it broadened to include the promotion of peace and democracy in Indonesia and East Timor in response to democratic changes taking place (in Indonesia).

Another challenging task was when they became aware of developments in West Papua, years after what she calls the fraudulent Act of Free Choice was enacted in 1969 at a time when Tapol had not yet been established.

“The Act of Free Choice was barely, if ever mentioned in any article by journalists writing comprehensive articles about West Papua. The Act was a total betrayal of the principle of universal suffrage and took place when the military were in total control, blasting warnings of dire consequences for those who dared oppose West Papua’s annexation.



Carmel's colleague Paul Barber holding a poster about Munir, the human rights activist who was murdered in September 2004.

“The fact that voting was said to be unanimous would surely prompt any observer to doubt the freedom of the so-called choice. The decision to limit the ‘voting’ to just over 1,000 people because it was claimed that the Papuans were too primitive and ignorant to vote cannot surely be accepted, and recognition of the Act as a pure formality to ensure Indonesia’s control of this richly-endowed territory was a violation of democracy.

“And for the UN General Assembly to simply note the results of the Act is surely the worst decision ever. Any self-respecting international organisation should never have allowed the Act to take place at all with so few international observers on the ground to monitor the ‘voting’,” she brutally condemns. She adds that there has always been a strong element of racism among many Indonesians sent to ‘administer’ the territory. For the West Papuans, their health services have done little to safeguard them against the scourge of HIV/AIDS and other lethal diseases, and their future is damned by poor education facilities.

“Our source of information was from Dutch missionary groups which still had the necessary contacts inside West Papua and reported on the situation in Dutch newspapers.

“Ensuing governments have adopted the Law on Human Rights and Law on a Human Rights Court but these have done nothing to serve the interests of the Papuan people.

“In 2001, as a way of quelling the

Papuan people's calls for independence, a Special Autonomy Law for West Papua was adopted, intending to give Papuans a greater say in political matters and share in the profits from the exploitation of their abundant natural resources.

"Yet what's deceitful is that more than ten years since the law's adoption, the provisions have hardly been implemented. Nothing has changed despite the many demonstrations in West Papua a year ago or so."

When asked to give her take on the political situation in Indonesia now, Carmel opines that the current Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's pledge to end corruption at all levels of Indonesian governance has failed to yield results.

However, media coverage of Indonesia's situation have improved significantly since the post-Suharto era, she says. There are many national and regional newspapers which appear to have a lot more freedom on how they report developments in Indonesia, but the one no-no issue they can never report freely is West



The Papuan civilians holding up their traditional flag.

Papua.

"Foreign journalists, parliamentarians worldwide, independent observers and even UN watchdogs are denied access and permission to enter the province," she says.

While UK has remained her home and workbase with her staff members,

Carmel still returns to Indonesia which she has managed to make several visits to after 1998 (when Suharto fell) to meet up with former colleagues, work with her vast network of contacts in the country as well as to East Timor for the 10th anniversary of its proclamation as an independent state.