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Activists march to the U.S. Embassy as they protest during the International Human Rights Day in Jakarta, Indonesia, Dec. 10, 2019. (OSV News/Willy Kurniawan, Reuters)

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Jakarta, Indonesia — August 26, 2024

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Indonesian human rights activists criticized a move to offer money to families of victims who disappeared in the 1990s as a ploy to clean up a tainted image of President-elect Prabowo Subianto, who takes office in October.

The Association of Families of the Disappeared, which fights for justice for victims of enforced disappearances during a 1997-1998 crackdown when Subianto was a top military general, described the move as "transactional politics."

During a news conference Aug. 15, the association said Subianto's party seeks to silence families of the victims from demanding legal action against him, reported the Asian church news agency ucanews.com.

The news conference was held just weeks before Pope Francis' Sept. 3-6 visit to Indonesia, as part of a longer trip to Asia. The official Vatican itinerary for the trip does not name government officials with whom Pope Francis will meet, but does indicate he will pay a courtesy visit to the current president, who is Joko Widodo, at the presidential palace.

Subianto served under former President Suharto, who ruled Indonesia from March 1968 to May 1998, when he resigned after anti-government demonstrations during an economic crisis grew into demands for political reform. During riots that May in various Indonesian cities, 1,200 people died and more than 160 women of Chinese descent were sexually assaulted. Some were gang-raped. The incidents were compiled by a volunteer team headed by Indonesian Jesuit Father Ignatius Sandyawan Sumardi.

In August 1998, some 2,000 ethnic Chinese Filipinos and rights advocates held a prayer rally at the Indonesian Embassy in Manila, Philippines, demanding that Indonesia conduct a credible and fair international investigation of the riots. Led by the Philippine Coalition Against Atrocities in Indonesia, participants in the rally also called for a full listing of the atrocities that took place and compensation to the victims.

At the time, coalition head Johnny Chang said his group held "the military government" of Suharto responsible for the rapes and "other barbaric atrocities to ethnic Chinese." Chang said the coalition considered Subianto, Suharto's son-in-law and commander of the Kopassus special forces, the mastermind of the "heinous crimes."

Subianto was dishonorably discharged in 1998 after Kopassus soldiers kidnapped and tortured political opponents of Suharto.

Of 22 activists kidnapped that year, more than a dozen remain missing. Subianto always denied wrongdoing and has never been charged, although several of his men were tried and convicted.

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Subianto also has been accused of earlier abuses in the Indonesian province of West Papua and Timor-Leste and has denied the allegations. Francis will visit Timor-Leste Sept. 9-11.

Ucanews.com reported the leadership of Subianto's nationalist Great Indonesia Movement Party decided in early August to offer 1 billion rupiah (US$63,700) to each of the families of 14 disappearance victims. It reported that some families received the money, and some have refused the offer.

Usman Hamid, executive director of Amnesty International Indonesia, said giving money to the families of the victims "cannot be used as an excuse to whitewash the state's obligation to continue to prosecute the perpetrators, punish them, and continue to seek and provide the truth about the fate of those who disappeared."

He said that the families of the missing have the right to justice, truth, restitution, and to receive guarantees so that similar human rights violations do not happen again.

"As long as the fate and whereabouts of those who have disappeared have not been clearly determined, then the crime is considered to be ongoing under international law," Hamid said.