

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — Indonesia's government ordered the International Committee of the Red Cross to shut its office in Papua province after staff members visited suspected rebels in jail, officials said Thursday.

Four staff members were pulled from the regional capital, Jayapura, in mid-March, ICRC Indonesia delegation head Vincent Nicod said, adding that talks were being held to find a resolution.

Several people were killed in a series of suspected rebel attacks ahead of April 9 general elections in the worst violence in Papua in years.

The recalled ICRC staff visited suspected separatist prisoners and rented office space without seeking proper government approval and therefore had to leave, Foreign Ministry spokesman Teuku Faizasyah said.

"We never gave permission to the ICRC to have a branch office in Papua," Faizasyah said. "We have stopped the ICRC activity in Papua."

A low-level insurgency against the central government has been waged in Papua since Indonesia took it over from the Dutch in 1963 after a vote by local leaders widely dismissed as a sham. Around 100,000 Papuans died in anti-insurgency operations under late dictator Suharto.

Although the separatist movement is tiny, it remains an extremely sensitive issue for the government.

On Wednesday, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said Indonesia needs to allow "a degree of autonomy" in Papua and that the Obama administration would raise the subject with it.

Papua, a resource-rich yet desperately poor mountainous region thousands of miles (kilometers) from Jakarta, is off limits to foreign media.