



Jayapura. Hundreds of soldiers went after senior officers on Wednesday and damaged their battalion headquarters in Papua after the family of a deceased soldier was told to pay half the cost of flying his body home.

Members of the 751 Battalion, in the first such incident in the decade since the fall of former President Suharto, also fired shots into the air and beat civilian onlookers and journalists trying to cover the mutiny.

The soldiers threw stones and other objects at the office of the battalion's headquarters, and blocked the road with pieces of wood. Curious onlookers and journalists were chased away or beaten up. The camera of a local journalist was ripped from his hands and several private vehicles near the scene of the violence were vandalized, witnesses said.

The deputy commander of the battalion received a head wound, according to a source quoted by news Web site Tempointeraktif.com, but the report could not be immediately confirmed.

Army spokesman Brig. Gen. Christian Zebua said that the mutiny had been spurred by the soldiers' anger toward their commander following the death of a fellow soldier. It took five days for the body of the soldier, who died after falling ill, to be returned to his family in Nabire, also in Papua, about 380 kilometers southwest of Jayapura.

Zebua said it may have taken time to charter a plane.

The family of the soldier had paid half of the cost to transport the body, Zebua acknowledged, as the commander, identified as Lt. Col. Lambok, had only offered to cover half of the expenses.

Papua, a sprawling, underdeveloped province, relies heavily on air transportation and residents said that the cost of chartering a plane to fly the body to Nabire would have been Rp 90 million (\$8,400).

“And this morning, feeling discontented, the soldiers demanded to know why the commander only paid 50 percent of the cost, and why low-ranking soldiers still had to pay,” Zebua said.

He denied soldiers had stolen guns stored at the base. The guns used by the soldiers during the riot were not taken from battalion, Zebua said, “but every soldier does have a weapon because they are all equipped with a gun to secure the area.”

He said the head of the Cenderawasih Military Command overseeing military operations in Papua had arrived on the scene to resolve the conflict at the base, as well as between soldiers and civilians and journalists.

“If any journalist was attacked by soldiers, we will protect [journalists] and we apologize. Any soldier found guilty [of attacking journalists] will be punished,” Zebua said. He added that the responsibilities of the battalion, including security along the Indonesia-Papua New Guinea border, had not been compromised by the incident.

Witnesses said that by Wednesday evening the situation had calmed.

The incident followed brawls between soldiers and police in the Tolikara district of Papua on Monday and Tuesday.

Papua Police Chief Insp. Gen. Bagus Eko Danto said that some shots had been fired during the brawls, understood to have been triggered by an incident involving a drunk police officer.