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A soldier points a weapons at young men in the back of a truck

Photo: The CIA said Indonesia was responsible for "one of the worst mass murders in the 20th century". (AP: file photo)

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Indonesia plans to revive a "truth and reconciliation" commission to bring closure over past human rights violations, including the killing of hundreds of thousands of people in 1965, a senior minister has said.

Key points:

- Indonesia previously launched a similar commission in 2004, but it was soon scrapped
- 12 cases would be reviewed, including the massacre of some 500,000 people in 1965
- Some relatives of those killed say they do not believe justice will be served

A similar commission began work in 2004 to look into abuses such as those during the three-decade rule of authoritarian ruler Suharto, whose fall in 1998 began a transition to democracy in the world's fourth-most-populous country.

But that commission was scrapped after a Constitutional Court ruled against its provision that not all cases would have to be tried in a court.

New chief security minister Mahfud MD said that a law was being drafted to revive the commission with a provision that the parliament would decide whether any case should go to trial.

"The principle remains that human rights abuses need to be tried in court," he said.

Where there was insufficient evidence, there could still be reconciliation, he said. Among 12 cases that would be reviewed would be the 1965 anti-communist pogrom, he said.

Historians and activists say at least 500,000 people were killed from late 1965 after then-general Suharto took power following an abortive communist coup. A million or more people were jailed under suspicion of being communists.

Declassified documents from the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) from the time said "there never was — and never will be — a reliable figure of the numbers dead" but "vast numbers were killed".

"In terms of the numbers killed, the anti-PKI [communist] massacres in Indonesia rank as one of

the worst mass murders of the 20th century, along with the Soviet purges of the 1930s, the Nazi mass murders during the Second World War, and the Maoist bloodbath of the early 1950s," the document said.

"In this regard, the Indonesian coup is certainly one of the most significant events of the 20th century, far more significant than many other events that have received much greater publicity."

Declassified diplomatic cables from the time noted that Western embassies in Jakarta knew about the massacres unfolding across Indonesia, which detailed brutal scenes of dozens of bodies floating down rivers among other killing methods.

In 2016, a non-binding international tribunal at The Hague determined that Australia, the US, and the UK were complicit in facilitating the Indonesian massacres.

'I've been lied to for 21 years'



Protesting students throw stones at Indonesian riot police.

Photo: Thousands of students demonstrated against the Indonesian government in 1998, prompting democratic reform. (Reuters, file)

Other cases to be investigated include conflict in West Papua in 2001 that left four killed and five missing, and the shooting of students in 1998 amid riots that brought about Suharto's fall.

It remains unclear if the commission's remit will be expanded to include investigations into alleged military atrocities committed against East Timorese during Indonesia's occupation of the country, or recent allegations of brutality against protesters in the Indonesian provinces of West Papua and Papua.

"What's most important is that the law needs to bring closure. Don't let this drag," said Mr Mahfud, a former top judge who joined President Joko Widodo's cabinet in October.

Hadi Sutjipto, coordinator for a group of victims of the 1965 pogrom or their families, welcomed the move as a step to reconciliation.

"Many of the older victims have died or are starting to die. They don't harbour any vengeance, they just want their names to be restored," he said.

But retired civil servant Maria Catarina Sumarsih, whose son Wawan was shot dead in late 1998 while helping a wounded student, said justice mattered more than reconciliation.

"I don't think the perpetrators would want to show up to the truth and reconciliation commission to say that they committed violations, that they shot Wawan, for instance," Ms Sumarsih said on Friday.

"I don't trust the government, I've been lied to for 21 years."

ABC/Reuters