Australian military readied to intervene in Indonesia

Mike Head
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The Australian government, in the midst of an election campaign, is taking steps to prepare the armed forces to act quickly if the Habibie regime in neighbouring Indonesia calls for help with unrest generated by its food crisis.

A spokesman for the Australian Defence Department confirmed to the *World Socialist Web Site* that personnel are being readied to assist the Jakarta government if requested. He refused to provide further details beyond the remarks attributed to a 'senior official' by the Sydney Morning Herald on Saturday. Later, in response to a written list of questions, the spokesman reversed himself and refused to confirm anything.

According to the newspaper report, the hours of duty and crew leave arrangements for naval ships and Hercules aircraft are being monitored in the expectation that a request may come soon from Indonesia. 'We are thinking about it [a possible request] and we are providing for it by keeping a sharp eye on our defence priorities,' the senior official was quoted as saying.

The Howard government was reported to be 'seriously concerned' about the instability produced in South East Asia by massive food shortages in Indonesia and possible political upheaval in Malaysia following the dismissal of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim.

Any military forces sent to Indonesia would go under the cover of providing food relief. Asked to clarify the rules of engagement (the procedures for using weapons) for such an operation, the Defence spokesman replied, 'we do not disclose information of this type'.

The Habibie regime could request military assistance from Australia under the defence cooperation treaty signed by Habibie's predecessor, General Suharto, with the former Keating Labor government in December 1995. That treaty was unusual in its wording, in that it committed Canberra to consider military help in the event of any threat to stability, that is, not only an external but also a domestic threat.

When widespread rioting and looting forced Suharto to resign in May, five Australian warships held scheduled exercises with the Indonesian navy just off the northern coast of Java, and were placed on standby to intervene in the name of evacuating Australian citizens. Since Suharto's replacement by Habibie, the Australian armed forces have continued to plan exercises with, and train, Indonesian military personnel.

The Defence Department's 'senior official' nominated West Java and northern Sumatra as the areas worst hit by hunger and food distribution problems. Increasing reports of strikes and hunger-related unrest have emerged from these and other regions, particularly East Java, over the past few days.

• Police were on standby to attack workers at three factories in the West Javan city of Purwakarta last Saturday, after a pay dispute at PT Indorama Synthetics, the country's largest polyester producer. The day before, a protest by some 4,000 workers led to the burning of about 30 cars and the stoning of buildings when management refused to grant a pay rise of 150,000 rupiah (about $A22) a month. The company only agreed to an increase of 25,000 rupiah (about $3.60) plus a 35,000 rupiah allowance.

• Farmers in the central Javan district of Banyumans were camping in their fields to prevent looters from snatching their crops in the dark. One farmer told the Jakarta Post thieves had cleaned out his crop one week before harvest, taking away two tonnes of unhusked grain. Another farmer said a gang had taken 22 sacks of freshly-cut unhusked rice that he had left to dry under the sun.

• In Pekel, another East Javan district, hundreds of villagers chopped down forest trees and clashed with 300 security personnel, including riot troops and airforce soldiers. The villagers were demanding ownership rights over the forest.

• Far to the east, on the rice-producing island of Lombok, east of Bali, a crowd intercepted trucks transporting rice and plundered them.

• Looting of shops erupted for two days last week in Aceh, on the northern tip of Sumatra. Two hundred buildings were damaged, including the local office of the ruling Golkar party. Hundreds of troops were mobilised, killing two youth. Defence Minister and Armed Forces chief General Wiranto

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seized upon the clashes to suspend the withdrawal of troops from the province, where they have been used for two decades to suppress separatist demands.

Students, office workers and housewives in urban centres have held demonstrations.

• About 100 students demonstrated against Habibie personally in Kendal, central Java last Thursday, demanding that his government take concrete measures to lower the prices of staple foods. As Habibie addressed a ceremony, the students chanted, 'End people's suffering'.

• A group of about 30 white collar workers marched in central Jakarta on the same day, demanding that the government suspend income taxes if it could not control spiralling inflation. They carried placards saying, 'Lower prices' and 'We should not subsidise the rich'. Another read, 'Our taxes are not for killers and kidnappers,' referring to the seizure and torture of political activists.

• The day before, about 100 housewives, many with young children, had protested at Jakarta City Hall to demand lower prices and a just distribution system for those who could not afford market prices.

Despite continued government subsidies, the price of rice has soared about fivefold to some 5,000 rupiah per kilogram. This is more than one day's pay even for those who are working, when well over a kilogram of rice is needed to feed a family.

Prices for wheat, flour, sugar and soybeans rose last week following the removal of subsidies at the behest of the International Monetary Fund. Bulog, the state food agency, had already increased the price of flour in January, followed by an 86 percent rise in July and a 46 percent hike in August. It is now expected to sell at 4,000 rupiah per kilogram.

In the slums of Jakarta the price of tofu has doubled, tempe (soy protein) has more than tripled, rice has quadrupled, chicken has tripled and meat and eggs have doubled. Altogether, consumer prices have soared almost 80 percent in the first eight months of this year.

Reports of famine are already appearing. In eastern Indonesia, local government officials reported that thousands of people on the island of Flores were eating the leaves of tamarind trees because they could no longer afford rice.

Last month the UN World Food Program said more than 7.5 million Indonesians, or 3.7 percent of the population, were likely to experience acute food shortages, with many having only one meal a day, because of drought and the economic crisis. The International Labour Organisation said 15,000 workers were losing their jobs every day, and that two-thirds of the country's 200 million people would be under the official poverty line by next year.

Both reports reflect concerns in ruling circles over the possible collapse of the military regime's control over the Indonesian masses. Despite this, the IMF has insisted that the Habibie government scrap food subsidies under the terms of its economic restructuring package.

Rice subsidies have not yet been lifted but distribution remains in the hands of Bulog, where the military commanders and their business associates are notorious for hoarding, black marketeering, smuggling and others forms of profiteering.

Plenty of rice actually exists to feed the Indonesian people, but its price is now out of reach for millions of families. Food and Horticulture Minister Saefuddin said last week there was enough rice to meet the demand for the next eight months, with 9.2 million tonnes in rice stocks, but admitted that high prices were a problem.

The Howard government's readiness to mobilise the armed forces has nothing to do with averting hunger. It reflects the interests of Australian-based big business, whose mining, industrial, construction and service industry investments in the country were valued at close to $A10 billion before the collapse of the Indonesian rupiah and the subsequent economic meltdown.

Having worked intimately with the Suharto dictatorship and its cronies for three decades, Australian business chiefs are now working to protect their interests under the regime headed by Habibie. Last Thursday night, 17 top Australian businessmen held a meeting with Habibie.

The executives told Habibie that 91 percent of Australian companies with bases in Indonesia had maintained their operations throughout the economic crisis. 'We were here with you when you were in a pleasant condition and we will remain with you during these difficult times,' Australian Industry Group director Leigh Purnell was quoted as saying.

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