

Interviews and documents show ...

US orchestrated Suharto's 1965-66 slaughter in Indonesia

Part 2: Washington called for military government

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Documents from the US State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) indicate that, having seized power on October 1, 1965, Indonesia's General Suharto and other army generals—acting on the urgings of US leaders—used military and Muslim death squads to massacre of hundreds of thousands of workers, students and peasants.

In its introduction to the documents, the *Sydney Morning Herald* on July 10 said the secret records show “the US and Australia knew what was happening—but continued to back the army in its bloody takeover”. In fact, the archives show that the role of the US administration and its junior partners in the Australian government was far from passive.

To begin with, the material demonstrates that US officials had longstanding and intimate ties with the military commanders; insisted that Suharto's junta exterminate the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI); and called for the establishment of a military dictatorship.

Many of the cables—sent from Jakarta to Washington between October 1965 and February 1966—were written by the US Ambassador Marshall Green and were addressed to Secretary of State Dean Rusk and his aides. Green had arrived in Jakarta just before the coup, selected for the post by the Democratic Party administration of President Lyndon Johnson on the basis of definite experience. During Green's earlier term as charge d'affaires in South Korea, General Park Chung Hee had carried out a coup, initiating nearly three decades of US-backed military rule. Green was later posted to Australia in the lead-up to the dismissal of the Whitlam Labor government in November 1975.

The involvement of Green and fellow senior US officials in the 1965-66 slaughter has already been partially documented. Indeed, in 1990 Green and other retired US diplomats and CIA officers admitted that they had provided the Indonesian generals with execution lists of the names of thousands of national, regional and local leaders of the PKI. A report by States News Service, published in the *Washington Post* of May 21, 1990, quoted Green confirming his role, saying: “I know we had a lot more information [about the PKI] than the Indonesians themselves... The US-supplied information was superior to anything they had.”

The death lists had been drawn up after 1962 at the instigation of the CIA's then Far East division chief, William Colby, who later became CIA director. It was a practice that was not confined to Indonesia. Colby gave an interview in 1990 comparing the intelligence-gathering on the PKI to the infamous Phoenix Program that he directed in Vietnam, in which 20,000 members and supporters of the National Liberation Front were targeted for assassination.

According to Marian Wilkinson, the author of the *Sydney Morning Herald* report, the latest documents include former “Top Secret” and “Secret” US records on the massacres, collected by a Washington

researcher, John Kelly, for a lapsed documentary project. These have been added to recently declassified documents, as well as records on the US killing lists obtained in 1990 by a US lawyer, Kathy Kadane.

None of the new material covers the period of preparations for Suharto's coup, but it shows that just four days after the coup, Green was already expressing the wish that the military should exploit the killing of six generals on September 30, 1965 to accuse the PKI of plotting a takeover and to seize control of Indonesia.

Despite describing the involvement of the PKI leadership as “not certain,” Green sent a message to Washington on October 5, 1965 emphasising that the army had to move decisively: “Whatever the background ... army in control, and it has important instruments of power such as press, radio and TV. It also has a cause in murder of six top leaders if army chooses to use it and it has already begun to do so ... Muslim groups and others (except communists and their stooges) are lined up behind army...”

“Army now has opportunity to move against PKI if it acts quickly ... Momentum is now at peak with discovery of bodies of murdered army leaders. In short, it's now or never ...”

Green indicated that Washington's long-held hopes that the military would remove Indonesian President Sukarno were finally coming to fruition: “Despite all its shortcomings, we believe odds are that army will act to pin blame for recent events on PKI and its allies. Much remains in doubt, but it seems almost certain that agony of ridding Indonesia of effects of Sukarno ... has begun.”

He advised Washington to: “Avoid overt involvement as power struggle unfolds ... However, indicate clearly to key people in army such as Nasution and Suharto our desire to be of assistance where we can ... Maintain and if possible extend our contact with military ... Spread the story of PKI's guilt, treachery and brutality (this priority effort is perhaps most-needed immediate assistance we can give army if we can find way to do it without identifying it as solely or largely US effort).”

Two days later, Green warned Washington that he was worried that the military might not go far enough. “Extent army determination to stand up to Sukarno still not (repeat) not clear,” he wrote. However, he reported encouraging signs of military action specifically targeted against the working class: “Army has begun extensive sweeps in Jakarta lower-class suburbs to round up communist para-military elements active in Sept 30 violence.”

The next day, October 8, Green was more optimistic. “Communists are now on the run for the first time in many years in Indonesia,” he cabled. He was most of all encouraged that: “PKI organisational apparatus has been disrupted and party documents dispersed. This capped today with

burning of PKI headquarters in Jakarta.”

By October 13, Green was able to report that the purge was progressing: “Anti-communists continue [to] make most of their present ascendancy. Today’s tally included closing of communist universities, banning of leftist student organisations and still more attacks on PKI premises... Youth groups sacked second PKI bookstore.”

Two days later, Green reported on discussions with military commanders and Muslim political leaders: “Army and Muslim sources have discussed with [embassy officers] strategy they hope army will follow. They hope army will proceed in step-by-step campaign not only against PKI but against whole communist/Sukarno clique.”

On the same day, he was eager to pass on confidential reports that mass executions had begun. “Army has already executed 74 communists seized in connection with coup attempt, despite efforts by Subandrio [Sukarno’s foreign minister] to stop executions.”

Green was determined to ensure that the anti-communist killings intensified. He asked for a cable to be relayed to the US Information Agency, stressing the need for more anti-PKI agitation. “In all media, by implication as well as by repetition of bald facts, link this horror and tragedy with Peking and its brand of communism; associate diabolical murder and mutilation of the generals with similar methods used against village headmen in Vietnam.”

On October 18, Green gave a graphic report of army-backed Muslim youth groups carrying out anti-communist and anti-Chinese pogroms in Sumatra, where many industrial and oil projects were located. “Muslims have begun attacking Chinese-communist elements in Medan and other North Sumatran cities. Merchandise burned, homes sacked and Chinese beaten. [US] Consulate has noted many fires in Medan and Belawan Chinese districts. Muslims apparently not distinguishing between Chicoms [Chinese communists] and Indonesian citizens.”

Two days later Green cabled with approval that: “Some thousands of PKI cadres have reportedly been arrested in Jakarta ... several hundred of them have been executed.” But he insisted that the military had to go further to fulfill what he described as “this crucial assignment”: “Thus far, however, basic PKI organisational potential would appear to be largely intact and capable of recovering quickly in a purely organisational sense if its status were recognised by the government and army attacks were stopped...”

“Army has nevertheless been working hard at destroying PKI and I, for one, have increasing respect for its determination and organisation in carrying out this crucial assignment.”

In another cable on the same day, October 20, Green detailed the activities of joint army-Muslim death squads in the working class districts of Jakarta. In a secret visit to the US Embassy, a Muslim youth leader told of: “... army sweeps continuing in kampongs and other locations Jakarta area ... Muslim youth ‘assistants’ are accompanying troops. Source said ‘some’ killings had resulted from these sweeps.”

On October 23 Green again expressed concern that the army was weakening its drive. But four days later he said he was encouraged by what senior army officers had told the US defence attaché, Colonel Willis Ethel, during a game of golf. “We are soon likely to hear reports about executions, including executions of public figures on whose behalf Sukarno is likely to make pleas for leniency.”

The Embassy’s close links to the military were confirmed by a CIA cable the same day with information from the commander of the East Java Military reporting that “he will begin a mass suppression and round-up of the PKI ...”

Few of the documents appear to relate to instructions sent from Washington to Green and his team—orders that may be even more revealing than the telegraphic traffic the other way. On October 29, however, one cable from the State Department—marked “Action”—made it clear that the Johnson administration wanted a military dictatorship

established, and was ready to support it financially and militarily.

The message noted that Washington was developing its policy on Indonesia and wanted a military-run government: “Sooner or later ... it will become increasingly clear to army leaders that they are only force capable of creating order in Indonesia, and that they must take initiative to form a military or civilian-military provisional government, with or without Sukarno.”

It urged the Embassy to make this known to the army: “The next few days, weeks or months may offer unprecedented opportunities for us to begin to influence people and events ... Small arms and equipment may be needed to deal with the PKI ... As events develop, the army may find itself in major military campaigns against PKI, and we must be ready for that contingency ... We shall, of course, want to consult with the British, Australians, and others as well.”

On the same day, Green dispatched a favourable report of military officers and Muslim extremists taking matters into their own hands. “Muslim fervour in Atjeh [province] has apparently put all but few PKI out of action. Atjehese has decapitated [sic] PKI and placed their heads on stakes along the road.”

From another Sumatran province, Riau, a US Embassy official highlighted army-Muslim terror directed against trade union members in the vital Caltex oil operations: “Muslims with army consent have sacked communist premises in city and closed their buildings in countryside. Army has raided PKI leaders’ houses and informed Caltex management it plans on Oct 29 to arrest key leaders of communist oil workers’ union Perbum, which forms core of PKI structure that province.”

By November 4, after a month of bloodletting, Green expressed satisfaction with the army’s role. “Army is doing a first-class job here of moving against communists, and by all current indications is the emerging authority in Indonesia ... In the immediate offing there is the problem of pacifying and establishing a firm control over communist redoubt areas, particularly in Central Java, and of combating PKI sabotage and terror. There is likely to be bloodshed involving Muslims and Christian youth groups, as well as military and others. Need for medical and other assistance likely to be very real and urgent.”

Eyewitness accounts indicate that in Java most of the killing was carried out by Muslim groups, in particular, Ansor, the youth wing of the Nahdlatul Ulama (Muslim Scholars League).

On November 12, Green reported confidential news from Jakarta’s police information chief that: “from 50 to 100 PKI members are being killed every night in East and Central Java by civilian anti-communist groups with blessing of army”. A similar report came from Ted Heavner, the US Consul in the port city of Surabaya, who wrote of the army making use of its “Muslim manpower”.

Four days later the US Consul in Medan reported that Muslim leaders had informed his officers of planned massacres. He described their killing as “indiscriminate” and their attitude as “bloodthirsty”. “This terror is not (repeat) not discriminating very carefully between PKI leaders and ordinary PKI members with no ideological bond to the party. [Source] suggests that army itself is officially adopting extreme measures against PKI with plans to put many thousands in concentration camps.”

By the new year, both the CIA and Green’s staff were assembling casualty estimates. The CIA reported: “The slaughter of PKI members and sympathisers in North Sumatra, East and Central Java and Bali is continuing.” Green’s deputy noted intelligence from a friendly power that: “As a result of ... calculations by his embassy as well as [confidential], a total of about 400,000 killed as a result of the Sept 30 affair had been agreed.” Nevertheless, the cable said there could be many more dead.

Another year of killings and repression ensued, before the efforts of the US and its allies in London and Canberra were fully rewarded when Sukarno, in March 1967, formally relinquished the presidency to Suharto, paving the way for the latter to declare a “New Order” regime.



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