

US warns against Indonesian military coup

Mike Head**19 January 2000**

The United States government has intervened aggressively to bolster the shaky coalition government of Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, warning that a military coup would lead to economic disintegration and international isolation.

Richard Holbrooke, the US Ambassador to the United Nation, issued a series of warnings from New York last Friday. "We are seeing news reports about a military coup in Indonesia," Holbrooke stated. "We would view this with the most, the greatest, possible concern. It would do Indonesia immense, perhaps irreparable, damage.

"I hope that these rumours are false. Any Indonesian Army officers or any military officer thinking of military adventurism have forgotten that we are now in the 21st century. The past cannot be repeated—the damage to Indonesia would be unbelievable."

He did not specify how Washington would respond to a coup, but spoke in terms of "immense damage to the economy" and increased pressure for an international inquiry into Indonesian military atrocities. Other US officials have indicated opposition to lifting an arms embargo on Indonesia.

In his telephone interview with American and Indonesian journalists, Holbrooke said: "I want to say clearly that the US government at every level, from the president, the secretary of state and myself, all stand to the fact that the military is risking doing massive damage to Indonesia by continuing to attempt to thwart the efforts of President Wahid, Attorney General Marzuki and other leaders."

US President Bill Clinton followed up Holbrooke's remarks the next day by sending a personal message of support to Wahid via the US Ambassador to Indonesia, Robert S. Gelbard. This week US Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers will land in Jakarta, to be followed by Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, Stanley Roth.

While the prospect of a coup was immediately dismissed by leading generals, Wahid, Peoples Consultative Assembly Speaker Amien Rais and various figures in the region, including Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, extreme tensions exist within Wahid's unstable "national unity" government, particularly between its civilian and military wings.

Earlier this month armed forces (TNI) spokesman, Major General Sudradjat, openly suggested that the military would assume power if government policies failed to resolve the communal violence in Maluku province and end the secessionist movement in Aceh. Last year he warned of a military coup if Wahid agreed to a referendum in Aceh.

In the wake of Holbrooke's broadside, Wahid has denied persistent rumours that he intends to reshuffle his cabinet and remove General Wiranto, the Coordinating Minister of Political Affairs and Security. But last weekend Japan's Kyodo news agency quoted a visiting senior Japanese politician, Taku Yamasaki, as saying that Wahid told him of plans to oust Wiranto. In addition, the English-language *Jakarta Post* cited an anonymous military source saying that Wahid would replace Wiranto as the culmination of recent military reshuffles.

Over the past few months Wahid has manoeuvred to replace several key generals. Last week Wahid requested the replacement of Sudradjat by an air force commander, Air Rear Marshal Graito Usodo and the appointment of Air Rear Marshal Ian Santoso Perdanakusumuh to head the TNI Intelligence Board.

These moves have reportedly incensed sections of the military high command, and there is media speculation that they stoked the year-long communal violence in Ambon and the Malukus to discredit the government. Since January 1999, about 2,000 people have died in fighting between Muslims and Christians in Maluku province. Local leaders and government officials

recently blamed the clashes on "provocateurs" acting in the interests of members of the Indonesian political elite. This Monday the leader of a "reconciliation" team in Maluku accused Wiranto of fomenting the sectarian strife.

Facing mounting criticism of his government's impotence in Maluku, Wahid last Saturday declared that he would move against the "evil hands" trying to create chaos in Maluku, Aceh and Indonesian Papua. He vowed to take "firm action," reversing an earlier stance of insisting that the peoples of Maluku had to resolve the conflict themselves. The day before Wahid's speech the army announced it was dispatching 600 Kostrad and other special troops to Maluku, where it already has an estimated 6,500 soldiers.

The communal and secessionist conflicts wracking the Indonesian archipelago are only one aspect of the turmoil confronting Wahid. His cabinet is an unstable amalgam of various contending factions of the Indonesian ruling elite, including the former ruling Golkar party, Wahid's National Awakening Party, Megawati Sukarnoputri's Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle, and Rais' National Mandate Party. It has not been able to resolve any of the economic and social problems left by the Suharto regime and the financial collapse triggered by the Asian meltdown in 1997.

While Holbrooke couched his remarks in terms of human rights and democracy, US Treasury Secretary Summers, speaking on the same day in Washington, revealed some of the underlying economic factors in the Indonesian crisis.

Briefing reporters ahead of a week-long trip to India, Indonesia and Japan, Summers said Indonesia was at a "particularly critical juncture. There's now been substantial repair from the depths of the Asian financial crisis but Indonesia has not yet fully shared in that recovery."

"But we believe it has the potential to do so. With a relatively new government in place, this is a major moment of opportunity for Indonesia. But very large issues of corruption and of governance remain and will need to be managed [in] going forward," he said.

Summers said he would urge Wahid's government to tackle the issues of corruption it had inherited. Through its dominance of the International Monetary Fund, the US can threaten Indonesia with the withholding of loans that it depends upon under the \$42 billion IMF

restructuring package imposed on the Suharto regime in November 1997.

In Jakarta Summers will meet Wahid on the same day that Coordinating Minister for Economy, Finance and Industry, Kwik Kian Gie, is due to sign a letter of intent with the IMF for the next loan instalment, which the IMF can still withdraw. His visit, which coincides with the delivery of the first Wahid budget on Thursday, will undoubtedly be used to ensure that the IMF's restructuring agenda is implemented and that the interests of US investors are looked after.

Summers will be in Indonesia at the conclusion of a three-day visit by a US business delegation led by Michael Gadbaw, a vice president of General Electric and chairman of the US-Indonesia Business Committee, and Ernest Z. Bower, president of the US-ASEAN Business Council. In a statement issued by the US Embassy in Jakarta last Sunday, Gadbaw said: "Our upcoming mission will underscore the solid commitment of the US private sector to Indonesia and our confidence in Indonesia's potential for economic growth."

Among the companies represented on the mission are Mobil Oil, Exxon, Ford, DaimlerChrysler, Bell Atlantic International Wireless, Edison Mission Energy, BankBoston, Enron Asia Pacific, ABB Alstom Power, Cigna International, Cargill, Oracle Corporation, United Technologies and Parsons Asia Pacific.



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