

US threats over Timor militias raise political tensions in Indonesia

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Mounting international insistence that Indonesia comply with the September 8 UN Security Council resolution to disarm and disband the militia groups operating in West Timor is heightening instability within the government of President Abdurrahman Wahid.

After meetings with Wahid on September 18, US Defence Secretary William Cohen threatened that failure to deal with the militias would "have consequences for Jakarta's relations with the international community, and could jeopardise continued economic assistance to Indonesia". The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, which have provided extensive loans to Indonesia since the 1997-98 Asian economic crisis, have joined the US in warning that financial support could be cut off.

An international donors' meeting is scheduled for Tokyo on October 17, at which Indonesia is hoping to obtain \$US4.8 billion to finance its upcoming budget. Jemal-ud-din Kassum, World Bank Vice-President for East Asia, commented: "For a number of donors, there is a clear recognition that progress in this area [militia disarmament] is essential and I think the Indonesian authorities are aware of that".

The UN resolution followed the September 6 murder of UN aid workers in the West Timorese town of Atambua by militiamen and some members of the Indonesian army. The militia blamed the UN for the gruesome killing of militia leader Oliver Moruk by unknown assassins the night before.

Bowing to international pressure, the Indonesian government gave the militias the choice of handing over their weapons or being forcibly disarmed. Several thousand troops and riot police were flown into West Timor to replace local army units that have close ties and sympathies with the militias. Yesterday heavily armed Indonesian troops carried out weapons searches in militia centres.

The Indonesian military (TNI) sponsored the formation of the militias among pro-Jakarta layers in East Timor during 1998-99, as part of its efforts to intimidate the East Timorese population into supporting continued Indonesian rule over the half-island. Following the UN-sponsored referendum,

the militia, backed by the military, went on a rampage then fled to West Timor after an Australian-led military intervention.

Last Sunday Wahid made a desperate appeal to the military to enforce the disarmament of the militias on the grounds that if they did not, it would be utilised as another justification to deploy foreign troops into West Timor. "There are rumours that 800 US marines are ready to be sent to Atambua to help guard the UN people. We have to show the world that Indonesia is serious about solving the problems," he said.

Coinciding with Cohen's visit, the US had dispatched four warships with 600 marines to East Timor, ostensibly to assist with humanitarian work but clearly intended to add further pressure on the Wahid government. The ships are presently on route to Singapore.

The Indonesian military commander in West Timor, General Kiki Syahnakri, commented on the presence of US troops in the region, declaring: "We should take care that Irian Jaya (West Papua) does not become a foreign target like East Timor. The US is worried that Indonesia will become an important country. The US fears losing the power they currently enjoy".

With both the government and the military command promising that the militias will be dealt with, the prospect of a confrontation looms large. Last weekend, a standoff developed between police and followers of militia leader Eurico Gutteres after he was prevented from meeting with Vice-President Megawati Sukarnoputri, in Atambua to preside over the weapons handover. The militia allegedly threatened two UN staff sent to observe the proceedings.

Most of the weapons handed in have been homemade. Only 50 of the military-style automatic rifles the militia are known to possess were handed over. The head of the UN authority in East Timor, Sergio de Mello, described the handover as "pathetic," declaring, "I do not believe that the militia will voluntarily surrender their weapons".

In a move aimed at putting more pressure on Indonesia, the UN has authorised its 8,000-strong military force in East

Timor to shoot suspected militia on sight if they are found crossing into East Timor. On September 26, New Zealand troops fired on a group of 15 armed men just inside the border, killing one. Portuguese paratroopers were involved in another clash on Wednesday.

As in the case of East Timor, the aims of the US, Australia and other major powers in Indonesian West Timor are not humanitarian. Under the UN banner, they are exploiting the activities of the militia to further their own economic and strategic interests in the region and to force the Indonesia government to carry out a program of economic restructuring.

The UN's call for the disbanding of the militia is connected to a broader agenda of ending the military's extensive involvement in the Indonesian economy and political affairs. For decades the US, Australia and other powers backed the Suharto dictatorship and its brutal policies as a bastion against Soviet and Chinese influence and encouraged its invasion of East Timor in 1975 for the same reasons.

But with the end of the Cold War, the US increasingly regarded the Suharto regime's control over major sectors of the economy as a barrier to international investment. The Clinton administration exploited the Asian financial crisis to advance its demands for free market policies and the end of national economic controls in Indonesia. When Suharto proved resistant, the US actively worked for his removal and the establishment of a government that would implement the IMF's program.

According to a recent statement by IMF senior official Stanley Fisher, the economic restructuring of Indonesia is now at a "crucial stage". Large state-owned companies and numbers of bankrupt Indonesian firms are being prepared for sale, most of which will ultimately fall into the hands of major transnationals. Also looming are IMF prescribed cutbacks to subsidies on fuel and reductions in other spending which is certain to fuel further social unrest as the levels of unemployment and poverty continue to grow.

The aggressive UN and US demands over West Timor and the militia have provoked growing opposition within Indonesia, and not just among the military, which is concerned to preserve its own position. A number of leading political figures have made public statements criticising the UN role in Timor and tentatively advancing a call for the government to defy threats to cut off financial assistance.

Defence Minister Mohammad Mahfud and MPR speaker Amien Rais have both accused foreign powers of organising the murder of Oliver Moruk on September 5 in West Timor to provoke the militia into attacking the UN and justify intervention. Rais told a seminar on Tuesday: "I don't have written evidence. But logically, everyone knows that Atambua is part of an international plot. Atambua, Papua

and Aceh are parts of our national body. The international community wants to attack us until our body lies bleeding."

He declared that Indonesia should answer any economic sanctions by the US by closing down the operations of US companies, such as at the world's largest gold mine in Freeport, Irian Jaya.

Sections of the Indonesian political establishment, including Rais, who openly supported the IMF's policies in the past, are becoming concerned at their potential for provoking widespread social unrest and fueling separatist demands in provinces like Aceh and West Papua. They are increasingly looking to the military as the only guarantee of stability.

During the MPR parliamentary session in August, the Suharto-era Golkar party and the main "reform" party, the PDI-P, came together to revamp the armed forces and to limit the ability of the courts to prosecute them for human rights abuses. Golkar and the PDI-P reached a deal with Wahid to hand over the day-to-day running of the cabinet to PDI-P leader and vice-president Megawati Sukarnoputri. Parliament has set in motion investigations that could lead to his impeachment and removal.

The role being canvassed for Megawati was spelt out last week at a joint meeting by Kwik Kian Gie, a PDI-P leader and until recently the coordinating economics minister, and Fuad Bawazier, a Golkar legislator and the finance minister in the last cabinet headed by Suharto. The two came together to open up discussion on the implications of Indonesia withdrawing from the IMF program.

Kwik bluntly stated: "We have two options. One is to go along with the IMF. The second is to stop and suffer, but have our sovereignty in our hands. What we need is a charismatic leader who can ensure the people accept the consequences."

Megawati is one of the few political figures with such a profile. She owes much of her popular support to the reputation of her father—the first Indonesian president Sukarno—who was a master at manipulating the sentiments of the masses with anti-imperialist demagogic and empty promises to help the poor. While Megawati is a pale imitation of her father, it is certainly possible that sections of the ruling class will attempt to use her to channel social discontent in a nationalist direction.



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