

Large antiwar rallies in Indonesia and Japan

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As the US prepares to launch a war against Iraq, opposition in Asia is growing. Last weekend the largest antiwar protests to date took place in Indonesia and Japan.

Hundreds of thousands of people rallied in Surabaya, Indonesia's second largest city, on Sunday to voice their opposition to a US invasion of Iraq. The security authorities put the crowd at 700,000. Foreign news services made estimates of between 300,000 and 800,000 demonstrators.

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation, called the Surabaya rally to pray for peace. The huge crowds converged on a military parade ground in the centre of the city arriving on foot, in buses or trucks. Some had been there for several days.

NU is part of the political establishment in Indonesia and the meeting had a semi-official character. Present at the rally were former Indonesian president and NU leader Abdurrahman Wahid, Foreign Minister Hasan Wirayuda, Defence Minister Matori Abdul Jalil and Army Chief General Ryamizard Ryacudu, as well as a number of diplomats including the Iraqi ambassador.

The organisers expressed the fear that antiwar sentiment could slip out of the control of existing organisations. NU leader Hasyim Muzadi told Reuters prior to the rally: "Radicalism will get its momentum, because they could say America has conducted violence...We won't be listened to anymore."

In a similar vein, Foreign Minister Wirayuda expressed the hope that the weekend rallies would set a peaceful precedent for other antiwar activities in Indonesia and help change President Bush's policies.

In Jakarta 5,000 demonstrators gathered on the same day carrying banners declaring "No war, no blood, no killings". They marched to the US embassy where they presented staff with an open letter to President Bush. As part of their protest they lay on the ground for several minutes while a recording of gunshots, bomb

blasts and wailing sirens echoed around them.

While the rallies were organised by conservative Islamic groups, the attendance reflects a broad hostility to the war. A correspondent for the *San Jose Mercury* commented: "The heat is rising again as Washington prepares for a possible war against Iraq, and resolute disapproval of US policy is unanimous in the Islamic zone of South East Asia."

The article quoted Amir Husein, a crab dealer in Jakarta as saying: "People here think the US should seek a peaceful solution to the problem instead of using military force. I don't see it as a religious conflict, but I can't help feeling emotionally involved because I'm a Muslim. Tell me, what is your president thinking? He's planning violence against a country that has never threatened him."

J. Kristiadi, deputy director of Jakarta's Centre for International and Strategic Studies, said the public had been "very critical" of the US. "I don't think people see this as an attack on Islam, but there's a perception that America has a convenient double standard, that it feels free to use military muscle to enforce UN Security Council sanctions for Iraq, but not for Israel. I've heard people call the US a bully democracy."

In Tokyo, last Saturday 40,000 marched in opposition to the war and the Japanese government's support for the Bush administration. Smaller demonstrations took place in other cities and areas, including Osaka, Nagoya, Okinawa and Hokkaido.

The demonstrations were far larger than those held in mid-February and came after the government announced its support for a second resolution in the UN Security Council to give the green light for war. The rallies were organised by over 100 non-government organisations.

The protests reflect widespread antiwar sentiment. Despite support in the political establishment for a US attack on Iraq, a recent survey by the *Mainichi Shimbun*

newspaper showed 84 percent of respondents opposed any attack on Iraq, up from 80 percent in January.



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