

Sharp divisions in Jakarta over foreign presence in Aceh

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In the aftermath of the tsunami disaster, divisions have opened up in Indonesian ruling circles over the policy to be pursued in the hard-hit province of Aceh in northern Sumatra. As of yesterday, officials lifted the death toll to a staggering 228,000. At least 500,000 people are homeless, the province's limited infrastructure has been shattered and the threat of widespread disease remains.

The political differences in Jakarta have nothing to do with the plight of survivors. Sections of the military are in favour of intensifying the war against the separatist rebels of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and are distinctly nervous about the presence of foreign troops, aid workers and journalists. The administration of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, however, is under pressure from the major powers, particularly the US, to modify its stance and engage in peace talks with GAM leaders.

On January 12, Vice President Jusuf Kalla announced that the military forces from 30 countries engaged in emergency relief work in Aceh would have to leave by no later than March 26. Kalla stated that he wanted the winding down of operations to start by February 26. The sooner foreign troops were gone the better, he declared.

Kalla was joined by other senior figures, including Indonesian armed forces (TNI) chief Endriartono Sutarto, cabinet secretary Sudi Silalahi and Welfare Minister Alwi Shihab. All have called for an early exit of foreigners and for restrictions to be placed on their movement. Endriartono called for "the foreign presence" to be limited to the capital Banda Aceh and the west coast town of Meulaboh, except with military permission.

These statements were certainly a calculated appeal to Indonesian nationalism. Given the widespread opposition to the illegal US-led occupation of Iraq, it is hardly surprising that many people are rightly suspicious about the Bush administration's motives in sending troops to Aceh. Washington has long had designs on the Strait of Malacca adjacent to Sumatra—one of the world's key

strategic shipping lanes. Aceh itself has significant gas and oil reserves.

Anti-US hostility has been further fuelled by the initial indifference of Bush and other world leaders to the tragedy. An article in the *New York Times* on January 12 noted "a groundswell of opinion" in Indonesia complaining that the price of foreign aid was the surrender of national sovereignty. The newspaper referred to a text message being widely circulated in the capital that posed the question: "After Iraq, will Indonesia be the next US target?"

The motivation of Kalla and the military in imposing restrictions on aid operations was quite different. The TNI has waged a vicious war for nearly three decades aimed at destroying GAM and terrorising the local population. After a lull in the conflict following the fall of Suharto in 1998, President Megawati Sukarnoputri imposed a state of emergency on the province in May 2003 and authorised a full-scale offensive by 50,000 troops and paramilitary police.

At least 2,000 people have been killed in Aceh over the past 20 months. There were widespread reports of atrocities against the civilian population by Indonesian security forces before all foreigners and journalists were banned from the province under martial law regulations. Despite the restrictions, there have been continuing reports of arbitrary arrests, torture, extra-judicial killings and other abuses by Indonesian troops, which Jakarta clearly wants to keep hidden from the world.

Following Kalla's announcement, however, there was an abrupt shift in policy. On January 16, following a meeting with US Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz, Defence Minister Juwono Sudarsono issued a statement that undercut Kalla's remarks. He explained that March 26 was not "a deadline" for foreign military personnel to leave, but rather "a benchmark" for the Indonesian government to improve its relief efforts and

take over the major burden of the operation.

Clearly, pressure had been exerted behind the scenes. For more than a year, the US, Australia and other powers have turned a blind eye, and thus condoned, the TNI's latest campaign of repression in Aceh. In the wake of the tsunami, however, the conflict threatens to cut across Washington's plans to use the tragedy to pursue its interests in the region. As a result, the US is now pushing Jakarta to reach a deal with GAM.

On his return to the US, Wolfowitz told the PBS "NewsHour" program: "We have a chance to give some meaning to that (tsunami) tragedy by moving to a better future, including particularly trying to move toward a political resolution of that problem in Aceh." He then warned: "If the (Indonesian) military gets in the way of that, then the military should be pushed to get out of the way."

Sections of the military, however, are not willing to halt the war. Resource-rich provinces such as Aceh and West Papua have long been lucrative sources of income for the TNI leadership. Only about one-third of the military's operating costs come from the defence budget. The rest comes from an extensive network of business operations, legal and illegal, including the extortion of "protection money" from resource project operators.

Despite the devastation in Aceh, the army has continued its operations against GAM, claiming that rebels have threatened relief supplies. As if to answer Wolfowitz, army chief General Ryamizard Ryacudu announced on January 20 that the military "had no choice but to kill at least 120 GAM rebels and seize their weapons". A report on the *Borneo Bulletin* website stated that of the 35,000 troops currently in Aceh, 15,000 are being used to support relief operations and 20,000 are on "security" operations.

Comments by State Intelligence Agency (BIN) chief Syamsir Siregar to a parliamentary committee on January 20 indicated the thinking within military circles. He said the families of many GAM fighters had been wiped out and that GAM units "are now experiencing a shortage of logistics and manpower". The implication was that now was a good time for the TNI to go on the offensive.

There are also signs that the military is exploiting the relief camps to increase their control over the local population. The *New York Times* on January 18 noted the concerns of displaced Acehnese at being put into 24 resettlement centres under the eye of the military.

"[T]he notion of large numbers of people in close quarters guarded by soldiers raises sour memories—and some real fear," the newspaper wrote. "In various phases

of the long-running civil conflict, the government has herded people into relocation camps, often after houses were destroyed by the army. Under the banner of security, the government used the camps to keep separatist rebels from mixing with local populations."

Like Defence Minister Sudarsono, other sections of the Indonesian ruling elite, including the military, need a closer alliance with Washington. In the course of his visit to Jakarta, Wolfowitz held out the prospect of renewed ties between the American and Indonesian armed forces, broken off following TNI atrocities in East Timor in 1991 and again in 1999.

Still floundering economically after the 1997-98 Asian economic crisis, Indonesia is also desperate for financial assistance and foreign investment. Yudhoyono told foreign investors on January 17 that the government required \$US145 billion for a massive upgrading of the country's infrastructure, as well as \$US4 billion to replace Aceh's destroyed facilities. Of this, \$10 billion would have to come from foreign donors and \$80 billion from foreign investors.

Foreign investors have been pushing Jakarta for further economic restructuring, including an end to rampant corruption and more openness in the country's legal and financial systems. Reining in the military is viewed as a necessary precondition. State Minister for National Development Planning Sri Mulyani Indrawati recently told an economic conference that the relief operations in Aceh were regarded as a test case for the Yudhoyono regime. "They want to see how we manage the situation, whether with confidence or confusion," she said.

The Yudhoyono administration obviously understood the message from Wolfowitz: without moves to end the conflict in Aceh, US economic and military assistance would not be forthcoming. A high-ranking group of ministers is due to fly out of Jakarta for Finland today for discussions with exiled GAM leaders. There is no doubt, however, that military commanders will resist any deal that threatens the TNI's influence and interests in Aceh.



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