

Indonesian inquiry unearths conspiracy to murder civil rights activist

John Roberts
2 April 2005

Despite its limited character, the official investigation into the murder of Indonesian human rights activist Munir Said Thalib last year has exposed evidence indicating a high-level conspiracy in what has all the hallmarks of a politically-motivated assassination.

Last September 7, Munir died in agony from a massive dose of arsenic on Flight 974 from Singapore to Amsterdam, three hours from its destination. The flight, operated by Indonesia's state-owned national airline Garuda, originated in Jakarta.

A series of unexplained delays and bureaucratic wrangling held up the release of the Dutch autopsy report for two months. Public outrage over the death compelled Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to appoint a 12-man fact-finding commission, including human rights activists, to investigate the murder.

An interim commission report released last month implicated at least five Garuda officials and employees in the crime. Garuda pilot Pollycarpus Budharia Priyanto was charged on March 18 with premeditated murder after five days of interrogation and faces a possible death penalty.

Along with Pollycarpus, the airline's former president director Indra Setiawan, security head Ramelgia Anwar, the secretary to the chief pilot Rohainil Aini and vice president for human resources Daan Ahmad have been named. All deny any involvement.

The commission also found "strong indications" that two as-yet unnamed members of the State Intelligence Agency (BIN) were involved in the conspiracy.

Police believe that the poison was administered to Munir in his in-flight meal. Despite never having met Munir, Pollycarpus made a number of phone calls to him before both men joined the flight in Jakarta. The Garuda pilot swapped seats with Munir, taking Munir's economy class seat 40G and placing Munir in business class seat 3K, where he was given his deadly meal.

The reasons for Pollycarpus's trip appear to be bogus. At first, Garuda officials claimed that the pilot was being sent to Singapore to check on in-flight service for training purposes. The reason was then changed to checking the landing gear of a Boeing 747—normally the job of Singapore-based mechanics and engineers. Pollycarpus did not fly Boeings but European Airbus 330 aircraft. Moreover, he left Singapore on the first flight back to Jakarta the following morning.

Garuda head Setiawan issued a letter on August 11, 2004, appointing Pollycarpus as an aviation security officer. Police found that Pollycarpus was not qualified for the position. It was also the first time that the airline's president director had ever been directly involved in such an appointment.

Another letter dated September 4, authorising Pollycarpus's trip, was signed by airline security head Anwar. According to police, however, the document was written on September 15 and signed on September 17—10 days after the murder. On March 23, the fact-finding commission told police that airline vice-president Daan Ahmad had probably drawn up this letter.

The paper trail included a letter by Garuda secretary Aini authorising Pollycarpus's flight arrangements although she had no authority to do so. Under police questioning, she admitted that all three letters were doctored.

What is known about Pollycarpus, who was born in Papua, indicates that at the very least he has been on the fringes of the murky world of Indonesian security forces. Munir's civil rights associates claim that the pilot has connections with BIN and flew missions in Papua and East Timor.

A *Sydney Morning Herald* report noted that Pollycarpus was in East Timor around the time of the 1999 violence against pro-independence reporters and met notorious pro-Jakarta militia leader Eurico Guterres. Pollycarpus has

hired Guterres's lawyer, Suhardi Sumomulyono, to represent him.

An article by Canada's West Papua Network reported that an Indonesian journalist Muhammad Rusmadi recognised Pollycarpus. The pilot had offered to take him to meet separatist GAM (Free Aceh Movement) rebels during fierce fighting around the town of Lhokseumawe in Aceh late in 2003. Rusmadi refused the offer.

The lack of any direct motive on the part of Pollycarpus or Garuda officials strongly suggests a broader conspiracy. Apart from never having met Munir, the pilot had no other direct connection to him. No one has indicated why top Garuda executives would want Munir dead.

The Indonesian military, on the other hand, had every reason for killing Munir. The activist had been a marked man for some time. As well as threats and attacks on his office, at least one previous attempt had been made to kill him using a bomb. He had a reputation inside Indonesia and internationally for investigating human rights abuses by the security forces.

Munir first came to prominence in 1998 for exposing the Suharto regime's abuses and was in the forefront of detailing the military's crimes in East Timor, Papua and Aceh. He founded two civil rights groups, the Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence (Kontras) in 1998 and the Indonesian Human Rights Monitor (Imparsial).

At the time of his death, friends believe Munir was preparing a report on corruption in relation to the military's operations and civic programs in Aceh. There is no indication that he was investigating Garuda or any of its operations.

The fact-finding commission has already tentatively pointed the finger at BIN, whose head at the time of Munir's murder was former general Ahmad Hendropriyono. Hendropriyono, an officer in the notorious Kopassus special forces, was a commander in South Sumatra in February 1989 when troops stormed a village in Lampung Province, killing more than 100 men, women and children.

Current BIN director Syamsir Siregar has insisted that there is no legal proof of BIN involvement in the Munir murder. But as Imparsial director Rachland Nashidik, a member of the fact-finding commission, commented to the media: "Garuda doesn't have any reason to murder Munir. The question is: who has the power to use Garuda for their own benefit?... Let's hope the investigation doesn't stop with (Pollycarpus's) arrest."

The indications are that the inquiry will be limited. Civil rights activist and friend of Munir, Smita Notosusanto, resigned from the fact-finding team because the terms of reference were too narrow. The commission has no power to interview government officials, including BIN officers.

Munir's widow Suciwati has criticised the Indonesian inquiry. In Geneva on March 23, she appealed to the UN High Commission on Human Rights to put pressure on the Indonesian government for a full and open inquiry. The appeal brought an immediate rebuke from Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda, who declared that the affair was a domestic matter.

Indonesian authorities appear to be dragging their feet in obtaining crucial evidence from the Netherlands, including police interviews with passengers and crew from Munir's flight. The Indonesian attorney general's office is yet to reassure the Dutch government that the death penalty will not be applied to anyone convicted over the murder.

If BIN or the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) were involved, it is one more indication of a return to the brutal methods of the Suharto junta. While the generals were compelled to take a step back after Suharto's fall from power in 1998, there have been no fundamental changes to the TNI in the past seven years. In fact, helped by the complicity of so-called reformers like Megawati Sukarnoputri, the TNI has been asserting its interests in an increasingly aggressive fashion.

Under Megawati's presidency, for instance, Kopassus carried out the blatant murder of Papuan leader Theys Eluay in November 2001. Local Kopassus soldiers were convicted of the murder but received light sentences and no senior officers were investigated. The TNI is certainly capable of orchestrating the murder of a civil rights activist who had exposed its corrupt and brutal practices.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact