

Report implicates Indonesian intelligence in murder of human rights activist

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An Indonesian government fact-finding commission handed down its final report late last month on the murder of prominent human rights activist Munir Said Thalib on September 7, 2004. While the report itself has not been released, statements from leading commission members have clearly pointed the finger at senior officials in the State Intelligence Agency (BIN).

Munir died suddenly while on Air Garuda flight GA974 from Indonesia to Holland via Singapore. He became violently ill in the course of the flight and, despite being given treatment by a doctor, died two hours before the aircraft landed in Amsterdam. After a lengthy delay, the autopsy results released last November showed that Munir died of arsenic poisoning.

Munir was the founder of two of Indonesia's best-known human rights groups—the Indonesian Human Rights Monitor (Imparsial) and the Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence (Kontras). He also served on government bodies and had a reputation in Indonesia and abroad for being objective and fearless in exposing human rights abuses.

According to Indonesian police Brigadier-General Marsudhi Hanafi, head of the fact-finding commission, the body had evidence directly implicating BIN in Munir's death. Despite BIN's refusal to cooperate, the commission had obtained an internal document outlining murder on an aircraft as one of four possible means to kill Munir. Each scenario had been assigned to a separate BIN team to carry out the murder as the opportunity arose.

So far only three people have been arrested as suspects. These are off-duty Garuda pilot and suspected BIN operative Pollycarpus Budihari Priyato and two flight attendants, Oedi Irianto and Yeti Susmiyarti, all of whom were on flight GA974. Pollycarpus was

instrumental in moving Munir from his economy class seat to a business class seat where police believe the arsenic was administered in a drink. Senior Garuda officials who falsified documents relating to Pollycarpus's presence on the flight have not been arrested.

Hanafi said that Pollycarpus did not administer the poison but was part of the plot. Police were anxious to question two other people on the flight. One was former BIN operative and special forces colonel Bambang Irawan who was on the aircraft but not on the passenger list. The other was an Indonesian chemist who lives in the Netherlands and consults for an Indonesian firm. He sat next to Munir in business class.

Apart from the internal BIN document, Pollycarpus is the main link between the murder and the intelligence agency. According to the *Jakarta Post*, former BIN secretary-general Nurhadi Djazuli told the commission that the pilot was recruited as a BIN agent on the orders of Abdullah Mahmud Hendropriyono, who was head of BIN at the time of Munir's murder.

Hendropriyono, a former armed forces (TNI) general, was implicated during the Suharto dictatorship in the murder of more than 100 men, women and children a village in Sumatran province of Lampung in February 1989. After Suharto's fall, he served in the administrations of presidents B.J. Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid and Megawati Sukarnoputri. He and other BIN officials refused to give evidence or cooperate with the fact-finding commission, which had no power to compel them to appear.

The commission discovered at least 26 calls had been made between Pollycarpus and an unknown mobile phone number before and after the murder. While the number was not publicly listed, technicians from the state telecommunications company identified it as that

of BIN deputy director and former TNI special forces officer Major-General Muchdi Purwopranjono.

Muchdi had previously denied knowing Pollycarpus. He responded to the revelation by absurdly telling the media that other people, who he did not name, often used his secret mobile phone. Muchdi could not, however, deny knowing Munir. Muchdi was removed from his post as a Kopassus commander after Munir conducted an investigation into the 1998 abduction of student activists.

In comments to the media, Hanafi said that the Munir operation was “an abuse of power in BIN. These people used BIN’s power, authority and facilities to carry out this operation.” Deputy commission chairman Asmara Nababan told Agence France Presse: “Based on everything we have obtained, the agency is believed to have played a major role in a well-planned conspiracy to murder Munir.”

The commission’s powers were strictly limited. It was only set up by presidential regulation on December 23 after a public outcry over Munir’s death. To lend the inquiry some credibility, Yudhoyono was forced to include some civil rights figures. Previously Indonesian and Dutch authorities had both delayed the release of the autopsy findings and the handing over of documents.

If it pursues the leads uncovered by the commission, the current police investigation into Munir’s murder is certain to encounter the same stonewalling from BIN. Civil rights groups have called for an independent body with wide powers to assist the police investigation. Nababan told the press that so far the police had not shown a willingness to fully investigate the case.

From the outset, Hendropriyono has publicly expressed his contempt for Munir and the murder investigation. He lobbied the national parliament against the establishment of the commission and refused to appear before it. His lawyer Syamsu Djalal, himself a former military police chief, questioned the need for a special presidential inquiry, saying: “[W]ho’s Munir anyway that a special presidential regulation had to be issued? A lot of people die, but no regulations are ever made.”

In response to revelations of BIN’s involvement, Hendropriyono told the *Jakarta Post* that he had no connection to Munir’s killing. His reason was not that BIN would never involve itself in such activities, but

rather that Munir “was too insignificant anyway”. Hendropriyono went on to use the opportunity to call for greater powers for the security forces to deal with “terrorism” as “security authorities are allowed only to arrest those suspected of launching terrorist attacks.”

Six years after the fall of Suharto, Hendropriyono’s comments reveal the extent to which the security apparatus now feels it can act with impunity. In 1998, the armed forces, which had been a brutal instrument of repression under Suharto, were compelled to take a step back. With the assistance of successive presidents, including the so-called reformers Megawati Sukarnoputri and Abdurrahman Wahid, the security forces have more and more openly flouted democratic rights, particularly in their operations against separatists in Papua and Aceh.

Munir’s killing, which took place on the eve of the installation of former general Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono as president, is a further indication that the so-called democratic reforms following the end of the Suharto junta are little more than a façade. Munir was highly critical of Yudhoyono’s role as top security minister under Megawati in launching a massive counter-insurgency operation against Acehnese separatists in May 2003.



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