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NEWS & ISSUES

Baasyir due to leave jail soon

Paras Indonesia - May 24, 2006

Radical cleric Abu Bakar Baasyir, who has always denied accusations of leading regional terrorism network Jemaah Islamiyah, is due to be released from jail next month after serving 29 months for

his role in the Bali nightclub bombings that killed 202 people.

Following is a brief look at Baasyir's time in and out of jail over the past 28 years.

Baasyir was first jailed by the regime of former dictator Suharto in 1978, sentenced to nine years for subversion for links to two Islamic militia groups — Komando Jihad and Darul Islam — accused of seeking to establish an Islamic state. He was also convicted of distributing "inflammatory" literature calling for jihad against enemies of Islam. He was given an early release in 1982 and fled to Malaysia in 1985 to escape further imprisonment. It was while in Malaysia that he allegedly co-founded Jemaah Islamiyah.

He returned to Indonesia following the May 1998 resignation of Suharto and resumed his role as head of the al-Mukmin Islamic Boarding School in the Ngruki neighborhood of Solo, Central Java. In August 2000, Baasyir co-founded the Indonesian Mujahidin Council (MMI), which wants secular Indonesia to adopt strict Islamic law. A week after the October 2002 Bali bombings, he was arrested on charges of treason and authorizing a series of church bombings on Christmas Eve 2000.

The cleric went on trial at Central Jakarta District Court in April 2003, charged with treason, authorizing bombings, immigration offenses and falsifying identity documents. He was accused of founding Jemaah Islamiyah to destroy Indonesia's religious harmony in order to overthrow the government and establish an Islamic state. Prosecutors recommended a sentence of 15 years in jail, although they could have demanded life. In September 2003 he was sentenced to four years in jail for treason and falsification of documents, but acquitted of being the leader of Jemaah Islamiyah and of ordering the assassination of then president Megawati Sukarnoputri.

Jakarta High Court in November 2003 overturned Baasyir's treason conviction, but upheld his guilty verdict on the lesser charges of falsification of documents and immigration offenses, and cut his sentence to three years. The Supreme Court in March 2004 further cut his sentence to 18 months.

Baasyir was released from Jakarta's Salemba jail in April 2004 and immediately rearrested on terrorism charges, including conspiracy, plotting attacks and ties to Jemaah Islamiyah. He was put on trial at South Jakarta District Court in November 2004, this time accused of inciting his followers to carry out the Bali bombings and the August 2003 blast at Jakarta's JW Marriott Hotel. Prosecutors also said he visited a Jemaah Islamiyah military training camp in the southern Philippines and passed on an edict from Osama bin Laden calling for killings of Americans and their allies.

In March 2005, Baasyir was sentenced to 30 months in jail for involvement in a "sinister conspiracy" that led to the Bali bombings. He was cleared of the other charges. Prosecutors had recommended a sentence of eight years. Western governments strongly criticized the verdict as too lenient. Baasyir's lawyers also complained, claiming the verdict was baseless and merely an effort to save face for the police and the prosecution, which had presented a very weak case.

Baasyir's sentence was controversially reduced by a hefty 4 months and 15 days as part of annual remissions granted to "well-behaved" prisoners on August 17, Indonesian Independence Day. Remissions are also granted to prisoners at the end of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadhan, which last year finished in November, but the cleric was denied a further sentence cut at that time. His supporters accused Australia of putting pressure on Indonesia to keep him in jail.

Baasyir has always denied any wrongdoing and claimed his trials were held at the behest of the US and its allies because they oppose his campaign for Islamic law in Indonesia.

Impending release

Baasyir's lawyer Achmad Michdan on Tuesday (23/5/06) said the cleric would be due for release from East Jakarta's Cipinang jail on June 14. He said prison officials had confirmed the release date.

He said Baasyir will immediately return to his home at the school in Ngruki. He played down concerns among MMI followers that Baasyir may face

further detention and incarceration. "In our opinion, even if he's questioned it's unnecessary to detain him again," he was quoted as saying by detikcom online news portal.

Although Baasyir will soon complete his sentence, his lawyers are still hoping the Supreme Court will agree to a judicial review of his case and overturn the guilty verdict.

As part of the appeal process, death-row Bali bomber Amrozi in April testified at Cilacap District Court in Central Java that Baasyir was not involved in the attack. Amrozi, smiling and laughing as usual, claimed that he and others had been tortured into implicating Baasyir in the bombings.

Baasyir's lawyers said they would submit Amrozi's testimony to the Supreme Court in the hope of having the cleric absolved and released. So far the Supreme Court is yet to make a decision. As for Amrozi, he's expected to go before the firing squad within a year, along with fellow bombers Imam Samudra and Mukhlas.

The US, Australia and Singapore have accused Baasyir of being Jemaah Islamiyah's spiritual leader. The US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control recently declared Baasyir a Specially Designated Global Terrorist and said any bank accounts or other financial assets held by him in the US would be frozen. It's unlikely he's keeping any money in the US.

Baasyir's supporters won't believe their leader is free until they see it. They fear that a May 16 meeting between US President George W. Bush and Australian Prime Minister John Howard, in which Indonesia's "important role" in war on terror was lauded, could put pressure on the government to re-arrest Baasyir. "Their statement will later be directed toward Abu Bakar Baasyir, who will soon be free. Their aim is to pressure the Indonesian government in order to find a way to once more entrap Abu Bakar Baasyir," Ngruki director Wahyuddin was quoted as saying by detikcom on May 17.

He accused Indonesian police of exceeding their authority in combating terrorism because some suspected terrorists were recently shot dead

before being proven guilty of any crime. Police on April 29 raided a terrorist hideout in Wonosobo, Central Java province, killing two militants and arresting two others. The two dead were key associates of the country's most wanted terror suspect, Malaysian fugitive Noordin Mohammad Top, who yet again escaped capture.

"I do not reject that action be taken against the perpetrators of terrorism, but our police's action, such as in Wonosobo, has exceeded the proportional and professional limits," said Wahyuddin.

He claimed Bush's agenda is to "continue to weaken Indonesia" by making an enemy of Muslims. "Bush in no way upholds peace; rather, he is a person who is always looking for an enemy. If he said Indonesia is the key to eradicating terrorism, the key is actually in Bush's hands. He is the one who can unlock and lock world terrorism," he said. "It's only natural that we suspect ulterior motives. Why is it that every time Baasyir is about to be released from prison there are always incidents that undermine the situation and then there are cornering statements. Who is behind all of these incidents?" he asked.

Wahyuddin urged President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's government to reject all foreign intervention and not unconditionally believe all assessments of the country. He said Indonesia should be more like Iran by being determined "not to be oppressed by a superpower regardless of the risks".

He said it would be to the country's advantage to seek more balanced international relations by forging closer ties with Russia or China.

Justice and Human Rights Minister Hamid Awaluddin has rejected rumors that Indonesia will be pressured into keeping Baasyir in jail. "If the law says he should be released, he will be released. Indonesia is a sovereign country. Therefore there should not be any intervention from the outside," he was quoted as saying by the Associated Press.

Australia presently seems more preoccupied with ongoing civil unrest in East Timor and a planned meeting between Yudhoyono and Australian Prime Minister John Howard, rather than hindering

Baasyir's impending release.

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer on Wednesday declined to confirm reports that Howard and Yudhoyono would meet over June 28-29 in Bali.

"I'm not confirming any dates and I don't think that the meeting is likely to take place in Bali by the way; it's likely to take place in Indonesia and not in Jakarta. And secondly, let me say that I think it is very likely, but still not certain, that there will be a meeting in the next few weeks between President Yudhoyono and John Howard." Downer told 2UE Radio that Indonesia would not be alarmed if Australian troops were to enter East Timor to help restore order. Following is the relevant transcript of the interview: 2UE: Are the Indonesians a little nervous about our renewed interest in East Timor and concerned that we have ships ready to go, and so on? Downer: They haven't said so and I met, as you might recall, with the Indonesian Foreign Minister on Monday a week ago, and we had some discussion about the situation in East Timor then and I did remind him, because I assumed he would have already known, that we had been making preparations just in case. But he seemed perfectly comfortable with that.

2UE: They're kind of relaxed about that?

Downer: I think so. I mean, who else is going to be able to provide stability if there has to be some outside assistance.

2UE: Not them.

Downer: You're right, not them. They know that.

2UE: One last question, is the Prime Minister going to meet the Indonesian President fairly soon, has that been lined up? Downer: It's being lined up and it's likely to happen in the next month or so.

New group vows to stay true to Pancasila, Constitution

Jakarta Post - May 24, 2006

Hundreds of people from various organizations gathered Tuesday at the North Sumatra provincial council building in Medan to announce the formation of the Anti-Communist Community Group.

In its founding declaration, the group promised to remain committed to the consistent implementation of the state ideology Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution.

The idea for the group was first proposed by an organization of people who were active in fighting the perceived communist threat following the 1966 coup attempt blamed on the now-defunct Indonesian Communist Party, and later gained support among provincial leaders. The new group rejects communist, liberal and capitalist ideologies.

Members of the group showed their support by signing a 10-meter-long banner that read "Foundation of anti-communist community".

The head of the province's Arief Rachman Hakim Ampera Fighters Group, Amril, said the new community was created to check an increase in perceived communist-related activities, such as the recent destruction of the Pelda Sujono heroes' monument in Simalungun regency.

"These actions are against Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution. We fear that if don't act, there will be more anarchy here. We are gathered today to ensure we stay alert for any acts of anarchy committed under the guise of democracy, human rights or justice," Amril said. (JP/Apriadi Gunawan)

Group plotting to restore West Java kingdom

Jakarta Post - May 24, 2006

Multa Fidrus and Theresia Sufa, Tangerang — Three Tangerang men were arrested Monday for planning to set up an independent state in West Java.

"State" paraphernalia and documents were found by police at the movement's Tangerang base, a modest house in Jayanti district.

The three men, identified as Syahron, Badri and Suhaedi, belong to the Sunda Nusantara Community Communications Forum (FKMSN). Sunda was the name of a kingdom in West Java. About 15 percent of the Indonesian population today speak Sundanese.

Police seized a red-and-white flag bearing five stars, a number of documents, a kujang (traditional dagger) and stamps and stickers that were ready for distribution.

Tangerang Police chief of detectives Adj. Comr. Adex Yudiswan said neighbors were concerned about the nature of the group's activities. He said the movement planned to establish a new state, which they called Sunda Nusantara.

A suspect, Syahron, said the forum wanted to "get history straight" because Sunda Nusantara was an independent state, long before Indonesia existed. "Sunda Nusantara needs to be revived because history has been glossed over," he said.

He said Indonesia may have declared its independence in 1945, but long before that the people, from Sabang to Merauke — the eastern and western extremities of the nation — were part of the United State of Sunda Nusantara.

"We don't want to establish a state within a state. We want to revive a state that was buried. Therefore, the FKMSN does not acknowledge the Republic of Indonesia, nor the Pancasila, which embodies the basic principles of Indonesia as an independent state," he said Syahron said the forum was established in 2001 by a man called Achmad Sujai, who leads the movement from its headquarters in Bogor, West Java.

The forum has chapters in Bandung, Garut, Cirebon, Sukabumi, Lebak, Karawang, Cianjur, Bekasi and Jakarta. Each chapter has a chairman who is assigned to recruit followers. "In Tangerang, we have recruited as many as 700 followers, mostly locals," Syahron said.

Separately, the head of Jayanti district administration, Ari Novi Purnama, said officials had been observing the group since January. "The movement is very dangerous and could cause the nation to fall apart. Their presence is a threat," he said.

He said the administration was suspicious of the forum on a number of counts. "First, they established a base in Pabuaran village, Jayanti, which is far from the capital. Most Pabuaran residents are poor and uneducated," he said.

Tangerang police summoned Syahron and several members of the group for questioning early last month but they were released due to lack of evidence.

Bogor Police also raided a house Tuesday on Jl. Pendidikan in Babakan, Bogor, which is believed to be the forum's Bogor base. They arrested a man identified as Muhamad Husain, who said he was merely an employee of the so-termed Sunda Kingdom Council.

Bogor Police chief of detectives Adj. Comr. Iwan said the raid was conducted in response to information from Tangerang Police. Muhamad is still being questioned by police.

A Jl. Pendidikan resident, Pipin, said she had been completely unaware of what was being discussed in the all-night meetings held at the house. "They frequently held meetings from dusk until dawn. I thought they were just a bunch of people talking business"

ACEH

GAM won't field governor candidates, source says

Jakarta Post - May 30, 2006

Tiarma Siboro, Jakarta — An internal rift has forced the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) to drop its ambition to field gubernatorial candidates in the upcoming direct elections, a reliable source says.

The bickering broke out during a close-door conference in Banda Aceh last week after some GAM leaders insisted on a coalition with existing Indonesian political parties — something that GAM's top leaders have flatly rejected.

"The latest development in Banda Aceh is that (designated GAM prime minister) Malik Mahmood has decided GAM will not field its own candidates. Everyone can run for the elections but nobody may

claim to represent GAM," a GAM leader who attended the meeting told The Jakarta Post.

During the meeting from May 22 through 24, leaders voted for former GAM guerrilla leader Tgk. Naziruddin and Aceh activist Muhammad Nazar as GAM's governor and deputy governor candidates respectively.

Naziruddin is a former GAM rebel soldier who led guerrillas in the Batee Illiek area, while Nazar is an executive of the GAM-affiliated Aceh Referendum Information Center (SIRA).

Naziruddin and Nazar defeated seven other candidate pairs in the vote. However, according to the source, many other candidates would not admit defeat, insisting GAM leaders join politicians from existing political parties to ensure GAM won more of the popular vote.

The source said some factions had pushed for veteran United Development Party (PPP) leader Hasbi Abdullah to pair with Muhammad Nazar. However, top GAM leaders such as Mahmood had balked at any moves to join existing political parties.

To end the bickering that was threatening GAM's integrity, Mahmood decided that GAM would not field candidates for the gubernatorial election, the source said.

Other GAM leaders against coalitions with existing political parties are top executives in exile Zaini Abdullah, Bakhtiar Abdullah, and Sofyan Dawood.

As part of the Helsinki peace deal signed with the government last August, GAM demanded, and won, the right to become a political party in its own right and field independent candidates in all of Aceh's regional elections. This right is expected to be passed into law when the House of Representatives finishes its deliberations on the Aceh governance bill later this year.

Mohammed Nur Djuli, a member of GAM's negotiating team during last year's Helsinki talks, played down the reports of internal conflicts at the conference. "I can confirm that Naziruddin and Muhammad Nazar won the recent candidate

selection," Nur Djuli told The Jakarta Post by phone from Malaysia.

More than 80 GAM representatives from the United States, Norway, Denmark, Canada, Australia, and Sweden attended GAM's conference. They joined other GAM members from North Sumatra, Java and 17 other areas in the archipelago.

In related development, Aceh Governor Mustafa Abubakar said he had not set a schedule for local elections because the Aceh governance bill had not been passed by the House. "We (the Aceh administration) are now registering voters and hoping that the process can be completed by October," Mustafa said.

About 2.7 million Acehnese will be eligible to elect governors, regents and mayors when the regional elections take place.

Other parties have also selected their candidates for the gubernatorial elections. They are Malik Raden-Sayed Fuad Zakaria, for the Golkar Party; Tamlicha Ali-Mukhliah Mukhtar (Reform Star Party); Iskandar Husein-Thantawi Ishak (Crescent Star Party); and Mustafa Abubakar-Humam Hamid (National Mandate Party and the PPP).

Malik Mahmud: We have to be realistic

Jakarta Post - May 28, 2006

Kanis Dursin, Banda Aceh — Following the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the government and the Free Aceh Movement in Helsinki last Aug. 15, several GAM leaders who had lived overseas for decades began to head back to the formerly conflict-torn province.

One GAM heavyweight who recently returned is Malik Mahmud, the prime minister in the GAM hierarchy. Since his return Apr. 19, Malik Mahmud has been touring the province, especially visiting areas hit hardest by the Dec. 26, 2004 tsunami.

"People's responses (to our visits) have been tremendous," Malik Mahmud said to The Jakarta Post

during an exclusive interview in his office in Banda Aceh recently.

Malik Mahmud, who is visiting Aceh for the first time after living overseas for more than 30 years, told the Post that the people of Aceh do not want to settle for anything less than what is specified in the Helsinki agreement.

"They are highly politicized. They know exactly what their rights are according to the Helsinki agreement and they told us to fulfill all the points stated in the agreement," he said.

During the 30-minute interview, which was also attended by GAM spokesman Bakhtiar Abdullah and National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) member Hasballah M. Saad, Malik Mahmud talked about the implementation of the Helsinki agreement, reasons why GAM dropped its demand for independence, and preparations for the upcoming gubernatorial and regental elections in Aceh. The following is an excerpt from the interview:

How do you assess the implementation of the MOU?

As far as GAM is concerned, we have implemented the most crucial part of the MOU, which is handing in our arms. We have done that without any major breach.

However, other articles in the MOU, such as the RUU (Aceh Governing Bill), are still of concern because the deadlines have been missed. The bill was supposed to be endorsed by the end of March, but the process has been delayed and we don't know when it will be passed.

Another point of concern is how much of the substance of the RUU is in conformity with the MOU. These are the concerns of GAM and of all the Acehnese people.

Recently I have been traveling to several places in Aceh, to townships as well as kampong areas. You know people in kampong areas are already politicized, they brought up this issue.

Is there any article in the bill that does not conform to the MOU?

I'm not supposed to comment at the moment. There are people in our team who are involved in the

bill deliberation. I don't want to create polemics. We have a team and I think they are looking into all these issues.

Many people out there are still wondering why the Helsinki talks proceeded smoothly.

Well, we did have several meetings before the Helsinki talks. The meetings with the Indonesian government started in 2000. Of course we have given credit to the initiatives of the Henry Dunant Center. As you know, we did reach several agreements (in previous talks) such as on a humanitarian pause and Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, but there were just always problems. In one instance, we were about to sign (an agreement), but problems suddenly popped up.

For our part, we are very honest in seeking peace for Aceh as we believe that the end of any conflict is peace. But how to achieve that peace is subject to negotiation.

What were the issues that bogged down previous talks but that you managed to resolve in the Helsinki negotiations?

Aceh had been in a conflict situation, but with the tsunami (that killed more than 100,000 people) we saw that indeed the people in Aceh really needed peace. We took this opportunity to pursue peace negotiations.

Also, at that time the international community came in throngs to Aceh to give humanitarian assistance and help reconstruct Aceh. There was a very strong voice in the international community that this was the time to continue negotiations. They were very supportive. I presume they also monitored the progress of the previous negotiations that collapsed, but this time, everyone was very sympathetic with Aceh. While helping tsunami victims, they urged and supported this peace initiative.

In the MOU, GAM agreed to drop its demand for independence. Can you explain why you made that concession?

First of all, we have to understand why Aceh wanted independence. The policy of previous governments was that they didn't want Aceh to get

independence and at the same time they imposed a system that was not acceptable to Acehnese, and this caused many problems.

Under the new government, we saw that this had changed. They were more flexible on that point and of course we have responded (accordingly). If Aceh can get what it wants peacefully without separating itself from Indonesia, why should we go to war? So, that is what I said at the time, that we had the right people at the right time and the right place to achieve peace.

What compromises did the government make during the Helsinki talks?

Well, we demanded (and the government agreed) that there would be local political parties in Aceh so that the Acehnese can form their own parties to implement their aspirations without any interference from parties outside Aceh. For so long, the Acehnese have not had their political rights and because of that there were a lot of problems... we had economic problems, social problems and of course the conflict.

But under the agreement, we saw that we could get back our rights, even though we would still be part of Indonesia. I think there are only five or six points in the agreement that state that Aceh still belongs to Indonesia, while other points state that the Acehnese are in charge of the province. So, we feel that we got our rights back.

Some suggest that the MOU was a face-saving act on the part of GAM, since the movement lost many members in previous wars and lost its base of support in the tsunami.

Well, we have to be realistic. We have to take into account the reality on the ground. If that (peace agreement) is a solution that's good for both parties, of course with dignity on both sides, why not! This is for the sake of peace, for the sake of future progress. So, there is nothing wrong with that and I think any other country in the world would do the same thing. And also when we come to that kind of situation we have to be very, very decisive and brave to face reality. And that is what we did.

How has the reintegration of former GAM members

proceeded?

First, the word (re)integration is not correct, I think. GAM members are ordinary people of Aceh. They come from among kampong people in Aceh. So, when there was this ceasefire they just went back to their villages or families. Of course, life has changed for them. Before they were thinking of war, but suddenly the situation changed. When there is peace of course they have to think about how to go back to their normal lives with their families.

They have responsibilities for their families and frankly they are now jobless. Like anybody else, when you are jobless and you have families, you have a problem. The situation is worsened by the fact that economically Aceh is still below subsistence level. So it is very difficult for our people (former GAM members) to get suitable jobs. This is one of our concerns and I think it should be the concern of the government too. The government must think of concrete measures to resolve the problem because this is not the problem of Aceh alone, but a national problem. Of course there are some international communities who have helped us, but their assistance is only the minimum. Nevertheless, we thank them for that, whatever they did. We have to find some other means for our fighters to go back to their families and get suitable jobs.

Have all GAM members come down from the mountains?

Yes.

Have there been any reports of conflict between former GAM members and local people when they returned?

No. As I said, GAM belongs to the people and so the people are part of us. So, there is no conflict. As you see, this is the first time I have come back to Aceh after 30 years, and just two days ago I went around the regions of West Aceh — townships as well as rural areas — and believe me it was the first time in my life I went there. The response from people in those regions, both in kampongs and in townships where there were many rich people, was tremendous. I did not have any fear or concerns about safety. On many occasions I had to stand up just to say hello to

them.

That reflects (the good) relationship between people in the rural areas and townships with GAM in Aceh.

What particular part of Aceh did you visit?

We went to Meulaboh, Tapak Tuan and other areas of western Aceh and we received a very warm welcome from them. Many people cried and were thankful for the (Helsinki) agreement and peace. However, they were very concerned about their future. And, amazingly, people in those rural areas understand about this RUU.

They told us that we have to achieve the Helsinki agreement 100 percent. So they are very conscious about their rights, and this is really amazing. That is why I said earlier that we had lost all of our privileges or rights, but now the rights have come back. Anyway, the journey was good and of course I emphasized (to the people that we will get what we agreed to in Helsinki) and I think the government will cooperate in this endeavor because this is good not only for the Acehnese but also for all of Indonesia.

The MOU also stipulated that former GAM members would be recruited as TNI (Indonesian Military) members. Has there been any move toward that process?

I think there is no move in that direction yet from either side. Well, we understand that's because of emotional things. For the moment, I think, we don't want to talk much about this because people are still emotional. For example, people in kampongs are very traumatized by people in uniform. So, I think, at this moment let them relax (laughs).

What preparations are you making for the elections?

We are thinking about fielding our candidates. But we have not decided who they are. I think in the coming weeks or months, they will come up.

Do you think GAM can win the elections?

Well, I think if you had followed me in my travels and witnessed how the people received me — well,

I'm a GAM member. The people came to us crying, telling us they really hoped that this time peace would be sustainable so that they can improve their lives. This is very important, they understand and they know what their rights are and what they want. They brought this matter to us. So, we will try our best to deliver something that they had lost for a very long time.

Some observers doubt that you will win the elections. Are you ready to accept defeat?

(Laughs) Whatever the people's choice is, they have all the rights. So, whether we are defeated or not it's up to the people. For us, what we have and what we will deliver to the people will remain the same.

But the final decision should be in the hands of the people themselves. (Bakhtiar Abdullah interrupts: It's better to die fighting than to die standing (laughs). The fight will be in the political field. Of course, the fight is in the political sphere.

Under the current circumstances, can a fair election be held in Aceh?

I don't know yet. I'm very pessimistic about this (laughs). But, anyway, we hope for the best.

Do you have candidates for the gubernatorial post?

We are talking about it now, but we have not yet decided.

Are you running for the post?

(Laughs) I think not yet. You know, even if I run (and win) I cannot implement our policies fully. Perhaps in the 2009 legislative elections I can run. If we win the 2009 legislative elections in Aceh, we can implement our policies. At this moment, if I were in the parliament, perhaps we would have only one or two members, while the others would go against me (laughs). Anyway, that is the way it should be. We need to be patient. As I said earlier our fellow Indonesians should see that achievements in Aceh are also the achievements of Indonesia. Whatever is good for Aceh is also good for Indonesia.

What will you do if you lose the elections?

If the current conditions are right, I mean if democracy is at work here, we will become the opposition. That is natural. The gubernatorial and regental elections will also fill the gaps in the present local government. Under the current situation, we (GAM) cannot implement our policies because the old system is still here.

If you win the elections, what will be your highest-priority programs?

Our programs focus on improving the living standard of the poor because the poor constitute the majority of the people in Aceh.

How will you improve their living standard? I think we can do something about that. I'm confident of that.

How do you see the relationship between GAM and TNI if you are in power

Probably there will be problems. But I, GAM members and TNI are all human beings. I think we need a human approach especially in countries like Indonesia. We have to reflect on why the conflict happened, and where we are now and what is the best future for all.

This in fact shows that in general we need to improve ourselves. I think with this common understanding — for the betterment of a future Indonesia — why don't we sit down and think about the conflict and rectify our mistakes. Indonesia has a very, very great future if only we can plan well. I think Indonesia will become one of the biggest economies in the world.

Are you staying in Aceh for good?

At the moment, not yet because you know there are a lot of things that I need to do outside Aceh. Of course, now there are more things to be done in Aceh itself. I have decided that I will divide my time between Aceh, Europe and the United States. Of course, I think Aceh is still the final destination for me.

When do you think you can come with your family and stay here?

Well, I think after all the points in the MOU are implemented. Then, I will spend more time and

energy here in Aceh.

What is your message for GAM members who remain overseas?

They can stay outside. Many GAM members staying outside the country have children. They are now being educated overseas. That is an advantage. I think in the future Aceh needs young, better-educated Acehnese.

Now we have families in all the Scandinavian countries — other parts of Europe, also America and some in Australia. In ten years' time, they will produce well-educated Acehnese. You know education overseas has a different, better environment and I hope that they will go back to Aceh one day.

How many children do you have?

I have four children of my own and two adopted children. They are all grown up and have families of their own.

Where are they living?

In Sweden and Singapore.

Aceh rights cases suggested via truth commission

Tempo Interactive - May 24, 2006

Fanny Febiana and Aguslia Hidayah, Jakarta — Muladi, Governor of the National Resilience Institute (Lemhanas), has suggested that Aceh human rights cases could be resolved through the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation (KKR).

If the cases are to be resolved through the human rights court, there is concern that this could open old wounds.

"Aceh is already settled. The peace is here, and old wounds shouldn't be opened again," said Muladi after the 41st anniversary of Lemhanas at Jakarta, yesterday (23/5). If the KKR decree is inadequate, Muladi suggested that it be improved soon.

He said that human rights violation cases can be resolved in two ways. First, settling matters through the KKR. This will be taken if those involved admit committing acts of human rights violations. The victims will receive compensation and the accused will receive amnesties.

However, if the accused do not admit guilt and there is no evidence, the case must be resolved through a second way, at a human rights court. If those accused are put in trial by the KKR and found guilty but are unwilling to admit to their acts, they will be taken to the human rights court.

According to Muladi, the retroactive principle may be implemented in the human rights violation cases that took place prior to State Decree No.26/2000 being put into effect by the ad hoc court.

However, implementing this principle must meet several conditions, such as crimes against humanity be proven systematically, be aimed towards civilians and be the obligation of the state's policies. Last but not least, they have to be approved by the House of Representatives (DPR).

Muladi said trials at the human rights court that can be held retroactively must meet these standards. This is because it is a common occurrence during an army conflict. In addition, the victims were from both sides.

Indonesian Military (TNI) Commander, Marshal Djoko Suyanto, said he felt that the retroactive principle must be very carefully considered. "Was it only TNI personnel who committed human rights violations there? This must be analyzed," said Djoko.

He confirmed that human rights violations were not only committed by TNI personnel. "But this doesn't mean I don't agree with the retroactive principle," he said.

Djoko said that attention should be paid to how far the principle can be implemented. "Don't just put it into effect as regards one side only," he said.

Djoko went on to ask whether Indonesia would apply the retroactive principle going back thousands of

years or fifty years. "Is the principle contained in Indonesian law?" he asked.

GAM establishes political party

Jakarta Post - May 24, 2006

Nani Afrida, Banda Aceh — The Free Aceh Movement (GAM) formally announced the establishment of a new political party Tuesday and appointed two independent candidates to take part in the next direct gubernatorial elections in Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam.

The decision came at the end of a three-day meeting which focused on discussing the political programs of the former separatist group. However, GAM representatives would not divulge the name of the party nor the identities of the candidates.

"We cannot announce our independent candidates because we are still waiting for the results of the bill deliberation," Zaini Abdullah, formerly GAM's foreign minister in exile, told the media about the ongoing deliberation of the Aceh governance bill in the House of Representatives.

Speculation about the identities of the candidates centers on Hasbi Abdullah and Muhammad Nazar of the Aceh Referendum Information Center (SIRA).

The meeting was attended by about 100 GAM figures, including former top executives in exile Malik Mahmood Al Haytar and Bakhtiar Abdullah, who returned to Aceh earlier this year after many years abroad.

Other foreign representatives came from the United States, Norway, Malaysia, Denmark, Canada, Australia and Sweden. They joined members from North Sumatra, Java and 17 other areas in the archipelago.

The meeting also decided the GAM would only nominate its independent candidates in the upcoming regional elections and not through a coalition with other parties.

"As soon as the Aceh administration bill is

approved in line with the Helsinki agreement, we will disclose the names of our candidates," said Sofyan Dawood, a spokesman of the Aceh Administration Transfer Commission.

"The most important thing here is that the main points were discussed in the framework for the establishment of the local political party," Malik Mahmood said.

WEST PAPUA

Aus-Indon security pact a return to form

Green Left Weekly - May 31, 2006

Rohan Pearce — While not many details about the "security treaty" being negotiated between Canberra and Jakarta have been made public, the Howard government has indicated that it will include an Australian commitment to Indonesia's "territorial integrity" — in particular, opposition to self-determination for West Papua, including the right of West Papuans to secede from Indonesia and establish an independent state.

On ABC TV's May 21 Insiders program, Barry Cassidy asked foreign affairs minister Alexander Downer about reports that Jakarta had asked for "a clear written statement that your government rejects Papuan independence claims. Have they asked for such a statement and would it be the right thing for Australia to do?" Downer responded that "we've been working with the Indonesians on putting together some sort of framework agreement on security cooperation, and a component of that... should be a mutual recognition of each other's territorial integrity".

Downer told Cassidy the agreement would "of course" include a "recognition of Papua's integration into Indonesia. And we would be very happy with a provision... where Australia formally recognises Indonesia's territorial integrity."

The treaty is Canberra's latest attempt to patch up its relations with the Indonesian elite in the wake of the 1999 Australian military intervention in East Timor and, more recently, the granting of asylum to West Papuan refugees fleeing repression by the Indonesian military. Despite a shift in

Australian policy to accept an independent East Timor, not much, it seems, has changed since the salad days of the Canberra-Jakarta alliance — when Australia, along with the United States, supported the bloody rise to power of the dictator General Suharto in 1965 and, eight years later, backed Indonesia's brutal invasion and occupation of East Timor.

Joe Collins, a spokesperson for the Australia West Papua Association, said there is "too much secrecy about this proposed security treaty... While West Papuans are continuing to be killed, Australia should not be negotiating a security agreement which will restore military relations with Indonesia in any form." A Newspoll published on April 19 found that 76.7% of Australians support self-determination for West Papua.

At one level, Canberra's attitude towards West Papua represents the crudest kind of imperialist logic: An all-too familiar equation of trading a supposed commitment to human and democratic rights away for corporate profit — in the form of the Freeport goldmine, which is 40% owned by Rio Tinto.

More broadly, the concern of the "political realists" and cynical "pragmatists" responsible for devising Australian foreign policy is to maintain the sometimes fragile-seeming stability of the Indonesian state as an important bulwark of capitalism in South-East Asia, and securing the direct economic interests of Australian capital in Indonesia (Australia's 11th-largest export market; in 2003 Indonesia was the 15th largest investment destination for Australia).

Self-determination for West Papua is portrayed as an impossibility, in much the same way as the "integration" of East Timor into the Indonesian republic was described by Gareth Evans — former Labor government foreign minister and now, ironically, a member of the UN Advisory Committee on Genocide Prevention — as "irreversible".

In a March 8 address to the US-Indonesia Society in Washington DC, Australia's ambassador to the US, Dennis Richardson (the former director-general of ASIO), said: "First, I must declare my hand. In Australia, some commentators talk critically about the so-called 'Indonesia lobby'. Ostensibly, this

is a group of people, primarily government officials, academics and some in business, who conspire together to pervert Australia's true national interests for those of Indonesia." He proudly declared himself a member of the so-called "Indonesia lobby".

"There is no need for any concept of conspiracy when the interests of two parties are mistakenly thought to be coterminous", Scott Burchill, senior lecturer in international relations at Deakin University's School of International and Political Studies, replied to Richardson in a March 15 article in the Melbourne Age. "The Jakarta lobby has argued for good relations with the regime in Jakarta — especially its vicious and unaccountable military — regardless of the appalling crimes it was committing in Aceh, East Timor or West Papua. For Richardson and his ilk, however, terrorism is only ever perpetrated by Islamists and never the state, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary."

Burchill is spot-on except on one point — his claim that it is a mistake to think that the interests of the two parties in the Canberra-Jakarta alliance are concordant. The apologetics by the "Jakarta lobby" for Australian backing of Indonesian state repression reflect the near-consensus of elite opinion that maintaining the alliance, in which Australia is the dominant partner, between the two nations is in Australia's "national interests" — i.e., the interests of Australian capital.

A May 25 editorial in the Australian Financial Review reflected this: "The government is right to endorse Indonesia's territorial integrity because that is the only way to have a productive relationship with our giant Asian neighbour on everything from regional trade to disease control. "In imperialist nations like Australia, "national interest" is almost inevitably antipathetic to human rights and real democracy.

Unfortunately, but predictably, the Australian Labor Party is backing the federal government's rapprochement with the Indonesian regime. In an April 4 doorstep interview, Labor's foreign affairs spokesperson, Kevin Rudd, said that the "temperature in the [Canberra-Jakarta] relationship at the moment is not good. We need to get it back to normal and I would urge both our

friends in Jakarta as well as the government in Canberra to get back to the diplomatic negotiating table as quickly as possible." On April 2 Rudd said, "Whatever the points of view within the Australian community are on that subject, both the Liberal Party and the Labor Party have a view that West Papua is part of the Indonesian republic, but we want West Papua to have effective autonomy. You can have West Papua as part of the Indonesian republic, which we all support." At the moment, "effective autonomy" seems, at most, a distant prospect. In August, a protest of tens of thousands of people called by the Papuan Customary Law Council symbolically handed back Jakarta's 2001 Autonomy Law and the Papuan People's Assembly created by the law. The introduction of the Autonomy Law neither ended human rights abuses in the province nor eliminated Papuans' poverty (officially the province is Indonesia's second wealthiest, however the poverty rate is double the national average).

Amnesty International's 2006 World Report cited reports of arbitrary arrests, torture and ill-treatment of West Papuans by Indonesian security forces. For the 12th consecutive year, Amnesty reported, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture's request to conduct research in Indonesia was not granted.

In September 2005, Amnesty condemned the acquittal of two senior Indonesian police officers over the killing of three Papuan students and the torture of more than 100 others. It described the case as a "worrying illustration of Indonesia's security forces again being allowed to escape justice". The case related to December 2000 raids on student dormitories in West Papua. One student was shot during the raids and two others died as a result of torture. Those detained and tortured included pregnant women and children as young as seven.

The verdict "means that not a single member of Indonesia's security forces has been convicted of these horrific crimes after nearly five years of investigations and legal proceedings. The verdict also denied victims any compensation", commented Natalie Hill, Amnesty's Asia-Pacific program deputy director, on September 8, the day the verdict was announced. More recently — on May 15 — two West Papuans were shot dead by police during a protest outside the Wamena court.

Nor have the human rights abuses suffered by West Papuans stopped at Indonesia's borders. On May 24 the Australian immigration department announced that a visa would not be granted to the final West Papuan in the Christmas Island detention centre, David Wainggai. The 42 other West Papuans were granted visas in March.

The failure to grant Wainggai a visa was condemned by Green Senator Kerry Nettle, who said that he had "one of the strongest cases for asylum, being the son of one of the most prominent leaders of the West Papuan Independence movement, Thomas Wainggai, who died whilst languishing on a life sentence in an Indonesian prison after raising the West Papuan flag. He has been rejected on the basis of a flimsy technicality which [immigration minister Amanda Vanstone] must know will not stand up to much scrutiny. Mr Wainggai is now doomed to remain alone on Christmas Island whilst he waits for his case to be appealed at the refugee review tribunal." As Burchill put it in his Age article, "As the 43 asylum seekers on Christmas Island have clearly demonstrated, John Howard and Alexander Downer are more committed to West Papua's retention within the Republic of Indonesia than those unfortunate enough to live in the territory seem to be".

Australia denies refugee status to Papuan asylum seeker

Associated Press - May 24, 2006

Sydney — Australia on Wednesday denied refugee status to the last member of a group of 43 asylum seekers from the restive Indonesian province of Papua.

Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone said the man's application was rejected because he was eligible to live in another country and had not exhausted avenues to seek asylum elsewhere.

His was the final case reviewed by Australian officials who granted temporary asylum to 42 other Papuans in March, prompting a diplomatic row with Indonesia.

"We believe this person has the right to re-enter and live in a third country," Vanstone told reporters in Adelaide, but refused to identify the asylum seeker or the country.

However, media reports identified the man as the 29-year-old son of a prominent pro-independence movement leader in Papua. His mother is believed to be a Japanese citizen living in Jakarta.

Indonesia reacted furiously to Australia's decision to grant asylum to the 36 adults and seven children who arrived from Papua by boat in January, and claimed they faced persecution if they returned. Jakarta withdrew its ambassador from Canberra over the controversy, rekindling memories of strained relations in 1999 when Australia supported East Timor's ballot for independence.

Seeking a decision on the case, lawyers for the 43rd asylum seeker told the Federal Magistrates Court earlier this month that Australia was using the man as a pawn to improve its standing with Indonesia.

PORNOGRAPHY & MORALITY

Pass porn bill into law: Ulemas

Jakarta Post - May 29, 2006

Ponorogo — The Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) has issued an edict demanding the government and House of Representatives pass a controversial pornography bill into law.

"We ulemas agree Indonesia must have an antipornography law... With us, there is no negotiation on this point," said Ma'ruf Amin, chairman of the MUI's fatwa commission.

The controversial bill, now being deliberated by the House of Representatives and government officials, has received its strongest support from some Muslim groups. The bill's opponents say its vague definition of pornography threatens freedom of expression and pluralism.

"We ulemas want strict punishment for violators of the future antipornography law," Amin said, adding

that a moral police should be established once the bill became law.

Nightclub protest leads to brawl

Jakarta Post - May 29, 2006

Tangerang — The Tangerang Saviors Front (FPT), a paramilitary group, became involved in a brawl with locals late Saturday night after protesting the presence of nightclubs in the Pinangsia commercial complex in Karawaci, Tangerang.

The FPT demanded the clubs be closed, in accordance with a controversial local bylaw banning prostitution and the sale of alcoholic drinks.

Led by Tubagus Mahdi, some 150 members of the group gathered outside the clubs to demand their closure, when motorcycle taxi drivers, club employees and local youths attacked the front members. The attack drove off the group, two of whose members were injured in the incident.

Tangerang Police detained five members of the FPT, including group leader Mahdi. They were questioned for five hours before being released. The police's intelligence unit head, Comr. Elisius, said the protest by the FPT was illegal. "They did not have a permit for last night's rally," he said. —
Antara

Legislators ready to start anew on porn bill

Jakarta Post - May 27, 2006

M. Taufiqurrahman, Jakarta — The House special committee on the pornography bill will rework its draft to focus on curbing the prevalence of obscene materials, a development that brings the heated discussion about its contents back to square one.

The decision was made after committee members

agreed that the current draft denied people's basic rights and also was rife with inconsistencies, lawmaker Eva Kusuma Sundari told The Jakarta Post on Friday.

"Proponents of the bill have repeatedly said that it was to protect women and children, but there was no mention in the bill about laws that protect women and children as its legal consideration," Eva said, adding the revamping of the draft would amount to drawing up a new bill.

She said that after taking into account the noisy demonstrations for and against the bill, committee members also agreed to focus on measures to curb the production and distribution of pornographic materials, instead of restricting individual behavior.

The member of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) faction, a staunch opponent of the current bill, said the bill was drafted in 1999 before there was a greater protection of basic rights enshrined in the amended Constitution.

She said passing the current bill into law would only heighten tensions between the opposing sides. "We don't want a law that will tax us with grave social costs in the future." Various groups have united to protest the bill, arguing it will stifle the country's cultural diversity and suppress minority groups if it becomes law. "Preparation of the new draft alone will take at least three months," Eva said.

Special committee chairman Balkan Kaplale of the Democratic Party insisted the deliberation of the bill would be completed by mid-June, with only a plenary session necessary for its endorsement.

Similar inconsistent statements and actions by Balkan have annoyed fellow committee members, who accuse him of incompetence. Some of the members, mostly from the PDI-P faction, earlier demanded Balkan be replaced.

Lawmaker Hilman Rasyad Syihab of the Prosperous Justice Party, the bill's strongest political supporter, described the changes as an amendment, not an overhaul. However, Hilman agreed the amendment would focus on provisions designed to

curb production and distribution of porn.

Balkan, contacted separately by the Post, did not consider the changed draft to be out of the ordinary. "There has indeed been an amendment in the bill, but it was only one among many stages that a law has to go through before being approved," he said in a telephone interview from Samarinda, East Kalimantan.

HUMAN RIGHTS/LAW

NGOs press for bill on discrimination

Jakarta Post - May 29, 2006

M. Taufiqurrahman, Jakarta — A coalition of non-governmental organizations demanded Sunday the House of Representatives draft a regulation that would outlaw all types of discrimination.

The Committee for the Eradication of Discrimination from Indonesia said in a statement the House special committee tasked with deliberating the bill on the eradication of ethnic and racial discrimination must make provisions outlawing other forms of discrimination.

"On top of ethnicity and race, people should not be discriminated against because of their gender, religion, political convictions, physical handicaps, status of birth, nationality and wealth," the coalition said in a statement made available to The Jakarta Post.

The coalition said such a broad definition would annul the bulk of prevailing laws and regulations that maintained discriminatory practices in their provisions.

"There are numerous bylaws that keep discrimination against certain groups in place," it said. The coalition also cited a number of violent acts committed against organizations and individuals with controversial political and religious views as a reason for an all-encompassing provision.

The bill on the eradication of racial and ethnic discrimination, currently being deliberated by a special committee, is a leftover from the previous

seating period.

As the bill's title suggests, it seeks only to outlaw racial and ethnic discrimination. It was proposed by the House and is being discussed simultaneously with one relating to civil registration and has caused some debate.

A number of groups have alleged the bill, once passed into law, would favor small and minority groups in the country.

Ethnic Chinese groups have said they believe a new anti-discrimination law is unnecessary, but that they would like to see the end of what they regard as unfair treatment of ethnic Chinese by the government.

Other groups, such as the National Commission for Human Rights (Komnas HAM) and the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) said the bill, once it took effect, would only give rise to redundancy and legal confusion, as the Indonesian government had already ratified numerous United Nations conventions against discrimination.

In spite of the controversy, deputy chairman of the House special committee Mufid A. Busairi of the National Awakening Party said lawmakers would press ahead with their deliberation of the bill.

"A law on anti-discrimination is necessary to bring an end to all the types of discriminatory practice which we see in society committed by both sides, the majority and minority groups," he told the Post.

Soeharto victims denied access to his sickbed

Jakarta Post - May 27, 2006

Jakarta — Unlike Soeharto's many VIP guests whose hospital visits have been covered by television stations, the 20 people attempting to visit the ailing former dictator Friday morning might have gone unnoticed if not for the floral display they carried.

The 20 people, many of whom were victimized by the

policies of Soeharto's 32-year authoritarian government, arrived in five cars to deliver the floral display, which carried the message: "Get well soon and continue the legal process against Soeharto." They were accompanied by members of the Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence (Kontras).

Suciwati, the wife of late Kontras founder Munir, and Sumarsih, the mother of one of the students killed in the 1998 Semanggi shootings, along with their floral gift, were stopped by guards as soon as they stepped out of the elevator on the fifth floor of Pertamina Hospital in South Jakarta where Soeharto is being treated.

Hospital director Adji Suprajitno said Suciwati had not received permission to visit Soeharto. "Groups are not allowed to visit him," he said. The director added that anyone who wanted to see the former president had to obtain permission beforehand.

Suciwati spoke to reporters after rejoining the other visitors in the hospital lobby. "The guards let us write down our names on the guest list. We are the family members of victims of violations during the Soeharto regime."

She then left the floral display with receptionists on the first floor. She said all of the members of the group had lost loved ones in the Semanggi shootings in 1998 and 1999, the Tanjung Priok tragedy in 1984 and the Trisakti shootings in 1998.

Also on Friday, Social Affairs Minister Bachtiar Chamsyah, who arrived at the hospital not long after the visit by Suciwati, was welcomed by Soeharto's eldest daughter Siti "Tutut" Hardiyanti Rukmana. Bachtiar said Soeharto was sleeping when he arrived.

Previously, Soeharto's family rejected a visit by members of the Tritura Defenders Front, who demanded that Soeharto be prosecuted for his actions while in office.

Meanwhile, doctors on Friday said Soeharto's condition was improving. They said his intestinal bleeding had stopped and his red blood count had risen to 10.6 grams per deciliter of blood.

Mardjo Soebianto, who leads the former ruler's medical team, said Soeharto was receiving 80 percent of the targeted 2,000 calories a day. "We are supplying nutrition through an intravenous feeding tube and a tube in his stomach," he said. "He is also now able to eat soft foods."

A Chinese-Indonesian history of discrimination

Jakarta Post - May 26, 2006

M. Taufiqurrahman, Jakarta — For more than 40 years, Hariyanto has been judged by his ethnicity.

During the anti-communist pogrom in the mid-1960s, the native of Tanah Abang was accused of being a communist simply because he was a Chinese Indonesian. Even today, his religion, Taoism, is constantly confused with Confucianism and his ID card says he is a Buddhist.

Years of official discrimination against Chinese-Indonesian citizens prompted Hariyanto and thousands of others to put Buddhism, one of the five religions then recognized by the government, on their ID cards.

While it may just be an imprint on a piece of paper, its consequences are serious. "We all have to disguise what faiths we practice because we fear that government officials will meddle in our religious affairs," Hariyanto told The Jakarta Post.

When he went to worship — the sign on the Taoist temple's main gate also stated it was a Buddhist institution. Despite this insult, ethnic Chinese like Hariyanto are so used to discrimination that they accept it as the norm.

"I personally don't care anymore whether or not the government recognizes Taoism or Confucianism as religions. These are our beliefs, not theirs," Hariyanto said. "I don't want to talk too much about the discrimination or else I will be accused of being a communist once again," he said.

A member of the Army-sponsored Student Action Front during the 1960s, Hariyanto was labeled a

communist because he was reluctant to join a campaign to crush the Indonesian Communist Party.

After the fall of the New Order regime, the government officially recognized Confucianism as an established religions in the country, aside from Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism and Buddhism. However, this acceptance has not filtered down to the lower levels of bureaucracy.

Unfortunately for Hariyanto, Taoism, an offshoot of Confucianism, was not recognized. Most people here confuse Confucianism and Taoism because both are beliefs originally from mainland China. However, Taoist texts reject many of the basic assumptions of Confucianism.

During his presidency, Abdurrahman "Gus Dur" Wahid tried to end discrimination against ethnic Chinese by officially recognizing their beliefs and culture. However, despite the policy change, most ethnic Chinese say little has changed.

Daniel Lesmana, who lives in Palmerah in West Jakarta, says that being a Chinese Confucian means he is often extorted by government officials. The 45-year-old said that even if he wanted to state his real religion on his ID card, the process would be slow, costly and uncertain.

"Issuing ID cards and other documents to Chinese people has become a way for government officials to make money. That is why it is difficult to change their attitudes to us," he told the Post.

Daniel feels Chinese Indonesians here are being unfairly singled out by officials in the country, unlike Indonesian Arabs or Muslims from other ethnic groups.

Communities here are often targeted by officialdom in random ID card sweeps, especially when alleged wrongdoing by Chinese Indonesians is exposed in the media.

This happened earlier this month in Makassar, South Sulawesi, where tensions in the area were high following the death of a housemaid who worked for a Chinese family.

LABOUR ISSUES

Workers demand release of friends

Jakarta Post - May 31, 2006

Jakarta — Some 300 people from several labor organizations staged a rally Tuesday in front of Jakarta Police Headquarters, demanding the release of eight workers who were detained following an ugly demonstration on May 3.

Rally coordinator Ilham Syah said the eight were not guilty of damaging public property as charged.

"We have evidence and people who can bear witness to the fact that our friends, who are now being detained by city police, were caught on the bus, on their way home from the rally. They were not involved in any kind of violence, "Police could just place them under house arrest instead of detaining them for questioning," Ilham said.

Speaking to the protesters, the head of the city police's general crime unit, Sr. Comr. M. Djaelani, said, "We have records of the eight committing violent acts".

He said police were through with questioning the eight workers and it was now up to the Jakarta Prosecutor's Office. Although they were unsatisfied by Djaelani's explanation, the protesters left peacefully.

Officials under fire over labor funds

Jakarta Post - May 27, 2006

Ridwan Max Sijabat, Jakarta — A labor union has accused senior officials at the Manpower and Transmigration Ministry of misusing Rp 30 billion (about US\$3.3 million) in funds earmarked for the severance pay of workers with oil and gas companies.

The funds that are unaccounted for have left thousands of dismissed workers without the severance pay they are entitled to, the Federation

of Workers Unions in the Chemical, Energy, Oil and Gas Mining and Public Works Sector (FSP-KEP) reported.

The union claims that part of the funds have been used to finance the construction of three hospitals for workers in North Sumatra, Riau and Papua and to purchase two luxury cars for two senior officials at the ministry.

"We found irregularities in the provision of Rp 30 billion of the funds for the three labor hospitals and in the purchase of luxury cars," union chairman Sahat Butar-butar told The Jakarta Post on Wednesday.

He added that the union was still completing a comprehensive report that it intended to file with the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK).

Sahat also said that workers had no representation in managing the funds and they had not received a report on how the funds were managed.

Based on a joint ministerial decree issued by the manpower minister and the mining and energy minister, subcontractors in the oil and gas mining sector have since 1995 been required to put aside 8.33 percent of their contracts' value for severance payments for all dismissed workers.

The scheme was initially carried out by state-owned insurance firm Astek and the Severance Pay Scheme Foundation (YDTP).

The foundation was liquidated in 2000 and a government team was appointed by the manpower minister to manage the foundation's assets and funds totaling Rp 155 billion. The reason for the closure of the foundation was not made public.

The team is led by Muzni Tambusai, the director general for industrial relations at the ministry. Following YDTP's liquidation, subcontractors have set up a severance payment scheme for their own workers.

Sahat also claimed that the funds belonged to workers and had to be paid to potential recipients.

"The absence of transparency in the funds' management has raised allegations that the

government officials in the team have personal interests in holding on to the funds," he said.

Muzni dismissed the accusations, saying the funds did not belong to workers because they had been collected from subcontractors that won projects from Pertamina and its partner companies in the oil and gas mining sector.

"Of course, the funds collected from subcontractors were aimed at providing severance pay for contract workers after their terms expired," he said, citing about 38,000 dismissed workers who had participated in the scheme but had not received their severance pay.

Muzni also acknowledged that his team had paid Rp 30 billion to establish three hospitals for workers in Medan, Pekanbaru and Sorong but claimed it was taken from the interest on the funds.

"Suspensions could arise over possible irregularities in the deal but we made it in accordance with the rules of the game," he said without giving any details about the hospitals.

YOGYAKARTA EARTHQUAKE

647,000 Indonesians displaced by quake

Associated Press - May 31, 2006

Chris Brummitt, Bantul — US Marines joined an international effort to deliver aid and medical care to nearly 650,000 Indonesians displaced by a devastating earthquake, as hopes faded of finding more survivors.

Two US Marine cargo planes carrying a mobile field hospital landed Tuesday in Yogyakarta, closest to the quake area in central Java, after cracks in the airport runway were patched.

A disaster assistance response team from the US Agency for International Development is being readied and the amphibious assault ship USS Essex, which has extensive medical facilities, is en route to the area, White House deputy press secretary Dana Perino said.

The United States also increased its aid

contribution to \$5 million.

The United Nations said at least 21 other countries have joined the effort to help those left homeless by Saturday's magnitude-6.3 quake, which killed more than 5,800 people. An estimated 647,000 people were displaced by the quake, nearly a third of them homeless and the rest staying with relatives, said Bambang Priyohadi, a senior provincial government official.

The government said Wednesday the temblor destroyed more than 135,000 homes, reducing them to piles of bricks, tiles and wood in less than a minute. Priyohadi based the displaced figure on the number of homes destroyed and a family index of 4.8 people per house.

The main hospital in hardest-hit Bantul district was still overwhelmed, with 400 patients for just over 100 beds, and doctors complained of a lack of supplies.

"We are short of splints, gauze, even beds," said Dr. Hidayat, the hospital's earthquake emergency coordinator, adding that 90 percent of the victims had bone fractures. "The minute we get fresh splits, they are gone."

But conditions improved at several other hospitals, where parking lots and hallways that had been filled with hundreds of victims in the days after the quake were clear, with most patients now being treated in beds.

Workers removed a tent outside Yogyakarta's largest hospital, Sardjito, that had been used to shelter the injured.

The UN's top humanitarian official said the aid effort was going well, and there had been major improvements in coordination among aid organizations and nations since the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami that killed 131,000 people in Indonesia's Aceh province alone.

"We are now reaching more and more victims," Jan Egeland told The Associated Press in Brussels, Belgium. "I am getting reports that we are making enormous progress." The government's Social Affairs Ministry said the official death toll rose Wednesday to 5,846.

Most survivors were still living in improvised shacks or group shelters erected in rice fields. Groups of families cooked together, each contributing scavenged food.

Despite government promises of aid, shortages of food and fresh water remained a pressing concern, and thousands of people used cardboard boxes to beg for cash and supplies from passing drivers.

The head of a Malaysia search and rescue team said hope had faded of finding more survivors or bodies, and his group had turned to clearing rubble from streets instead.

"The collapsed homes were all so small that anyone who was trapped would have been extracted by their family members," Abdul Aziz Ahmad said, adding his team found only one body Monday.

A 44-member team of Chinese doctors, search and rescue workers and seismologists also arrived with five tons of supplies, including a field hospital, China's official Xinhua News Agency reported. Thailand said it would send 48 military medical personnel, medicine and equipment. Teams from Malaysia, Singapore, Norway and other nations already are working in the area.

The Asian Development Bank announced a total of \$60 million in grants and low-interest loans to rebuild the earthquake zone.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who has temporarily moved his office to Yogyakarta and spent a night sleeping in a tent with survivors, vowed to fight corruption in delivering aid money. "I am ordering that not even one dollar will be misused," he said.

The quake was the fourth destructive temblor to hit Indonesia in the past 17 months, including the one that triggered the Dec. 26, 2004, Indian Ocean tsunami.

Government defends quake relief effort

Agence France Presse - May 31, 2006

Yogyakarta — Indonesian officials defended the earthquake relief operation under way in central Java, amid complaints from local residents that aid has been slow to arrive.

"The situation is getting better and better, especially in the area of distribution," said Major General Bambang Darmono, the coordinating officer on the ground for the national disaster management agency BAKORNAS. "Every area has been reached by the distribution effort," he told AFP.

Meanwhile, the death toll from the earthquake that rocked Indonesia's main island of Java at the weekend has risen to at least 5,846, the social affairs ministry said. As many as 200,000 were left homeless by Saturday's 6.3-magnitude quake on Indonesia's main island.

International humanitarian aid and foreign medical teams have begun pouring into the disaster zone, but desperate local residents have criticized the relief effort, saying the Jakarta government has been too slow to react.

Darmono rejected that claim, telling AFP: "I know there are a lot of people complaining, but it doesn't mean there is no activity. "We are still in an emergency phase, so we are still continuing with our efforts — delivering food, and also evacuating people if there are victims in the area," he said.

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has urged local officials to work with regional and national authorities, as well as international aid agencies, to deliver aid to those in need as quickly as possible.

Another official with BAKORNAS, who gave his name as Tabrani, said officials were working hard to "optimize the distribution" of aid supplies. "The issue is not the food stuffs, but how we could distribute it in a quicker manner," he said.

Ibrahima Kone, a technical officer for the World Health Organization (WHO), said international aid agencies were still working to record a proper tally of the tonnes of aid coming into the area. "At the end of today, or tomorrow morning at most, we should have a better view of what we have received, and how we are going to dispatch it," he

said.

"Usually, for two or three days after an emergency, it takes two or three days for the system to get ready to deal with this huge amount of aid." The United Nations on Tuesday gave a relatively upbeat assessment of the aid effort on the ground but admitted that problems remained.

"I think the situation is under control," said Elizabeth Byrs, a spokeswoman for the UN's humanitarian coordination office in Geneva. "So now the problem is logistics, rain, storage, congestion of airports — all the usual problems we meet when there is a disaster of this size."

Coordination woes hold up quake aid

Jakarta Post - May 31, 2006

Ridwan Max Sijabat/Tony Hotland, Jakarta — The government is insisting on classifying Saturday's deadly earthquake in Yogyakarta and Central Java as a local disaster, despite calls for it to be declared a national disaster and complaints about poorly coordinated aid efforts.

Vice President Jusuf Kalla said here Tuesday it was not a national disaster because its scale and impact were not as great as the 2004 tsunami in Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam, and the provincial administrations in the two provinces could handle it properly.

Kalla, also chairman of the National Disaster Management and Refugee Coordination Board (Bakornas PBP), said the government allocated Rp 1 trillion (US\$107.5 million) from the 2006 state budget for emergency relief and to carry out reconstruction.

In Yogyakarta, several religious figures and social activists argued it qualified for the higher status because it caused a huge number of fatalities and widespread physical damage to houses, schools, houses of worship and infrastructure.

Among those at the gathering were the chairman of the country's second largest Muslim organization Muhammadiyah, Din Syamsuddin, the chairman of the local office of the Indonesian Ulemas Council (MUI) Sumadi and journalist Rosyad Sholeh.

They faulted the government for acting too slowly in dealing with the emergency situation, in which more than 5,300 people lost their lives.

The chief of Bakornas PBP's relief section, Sugeng Trioetomo, said the central government believed the two provincial administrations were capable of handling the disaster.

"There are no special criteria on disasters classified as national disasters and those (considered) local disasters, but the Yogya quake is termed a local disaster because it could be handled by the local administrations," he said.

He said all international institutions who wanted to help the victims should coordinate with the field post command team, led by the commander of the Diponegoro Military Command overseeing the two provinces, Maj. Gen. Sunarso.

Although the details have yet to be officially announced by Bakornas, Sugeng said confusion over aid delivery should be overcome once donors knew the point of contact was the commander.

Foreign aid began flowing into the country only a day after the disaster, but foreign delegations complain of confusion about distributing the aid.

"I would say that the biggest problem is coordination," said European Commission delegation head Jean Breteche. "Everybody wants to help, which is good, but it is more efficient if it is well coordinated." He acknowledged the difficulty of coordination.

"When you have 50 or more NGOs, donors, with their own equipment, it is not easy to coordinate because they want to start quickly." Malik Aliun, a local spokesman for the Saudi Arabian government's charity institution, said Riyadh was committed to supplying humanitarian and medical aid totaling \$5 million, but could not proceed due to a lack of information from the Indonesian government on where to land.

Some international organizations have praised the initial aid efforts. "The government and army have done a lot since the earthquake struck, and the cooperation between the humanitarian community and the Indonesian authorities was very good, and very efficient," UN humanitarian coordination office spokeswoman Elisabeth Byrs was quoted as saying by AFP in Geneva.

Social worker Iman Prasodjo said coordination in the handling of natural disasters would remain a problem unless the current bureaucratic system of Bakornas PBP was changed.

"The structure of the coordinating board and its task force has to be revamped, and all government personnel should be replaced by professionals and trained workers to allow them to handle natural disasters and refugees professionally," he said.

Survivors of quake resort to desperate measures

Jakarta Post - May 30, 2006

Sri Wahyuni and Blontank Poer,
Bantul/Jakarta/Klaten Homeless survivors of Saturday's earthquake resorted to desperate measures Monday amid a dearth of assistance, with some camping out in a cattle shed and others begging for food from passersby.

As the death toll from the quake in Yogyakarta and Central Java passed 5,130 Monday, rescue workers continued the desperate search for people among the rubble.

It was similarly grim for the survivors, who were forced to take cover wherever they could amid a continuing downpour. They complained they were neglected amid the slow coordination of assistance.

They gathered together their few remaining morsels of food to be cooked and shared in communal meals.

"Without any assistance, our food supplies will run out within the next two days," said Singgir Kartana, a resident of Samen hamlet, Bambanglipuro

district, in devastated Bantul regency.

Plastic tents dot the roads in the area, where more than 3,000 died and many saw their homes razed in the earthquake, which measured 5.9 on the Richter scale according to the Meteorology and Geophysics Agency.

Residents battled the driving rain to build a bigger shelter to accommodate more people. "Yesterday we lived in a very simple tent before moving to a cow shed due to the heavy rain," Singgir said, adding that about 450 houses in the hamlet were leveled by the quake.

Even residents whose homes withstood the disaster are staying outside. "I prefer not to return to my house. I'm still traumatized," said Mrs. Wiji, 70, who was buried under rubble together with her daughter Kiri, 18, before being rescued.

She is one of about 100 residents now living in an open makeshift shelter in nearby rice fields. Their anxiety increased when Mt. Merapi, the volcano lying north of the quake's epicenter and restless for many weeks, showed heightened activity Monday.

Bantul Regent Idham Samawi apologized for slow assistance, attributing it to limited personnel. He promised each district would get 5.5 tons of rice, 300 boxes of instant noodles and 100 boxes of bottled water.

In their desperation, some of the survivors, including children, begged for food from passersby.

Hospitals overwhelmed by five times their normal patient load appealed for more medical staff and supplies to treat the thousands of injured who overflowed from their wards, raising fears of the spread of disease amid an acute lack of facilities.

Vice President Jusuf Kalla, speaking after a Cabinet meeting late Sunday, said a three-month state of emergency would be in effect in the quake-hit areas, with the government aiming to complete reconstruction within a year.

Kalla, who heads the National Disaster Management

Agency, said Monday the government expected half of the total budget for the emergency relief and reconstruction process would come from foreign aid. The current budget estimate is Rp 1 trillion (about US\$107.5 million) for a one-year period.

"We will give Rp 100,000 for utilities and another Rp 100,000 for clothes monthly for each household. We will give 12 kilograms of rice per person each month and Rp 3,000 each day for other food," said Kalla.

The government would provide about Rp 30 million to those whose homes were severely damaged, and Rp 10 million for those with minor structural damage. Payments would be made in two installments.

More international rescuers landed in the devastated region, including a 20-strong search and rescue team from Taiwan and an 87-member Malaysian rescue team which headed out of Bantul in a convoy.

Despite the dire need for help, some residents are being told to follow bureaucratic measures to receive assistance.

"I went to the district office but was asked to make a proposal," complained Sunardi, a resident of Jetis hamlet in Canan village, Wedi district in Klaten regency.

"We don't know how to do that." Locals have taken to stopping passing aid convoys for donations. "We're cooking everything with a lot of water so there is enough to go around."

Secretary of Gantriwarno district in Klaten, Kukuh Riyadi, said the regency's disaster mitigation unit told district and village officials to require the provision of a letter from district officials.

"The procedures are set by the regency administration, but it has got us into trouble when dealing with residents," said Kukuh, adding his office so far relied wholly on assistance from individuals and institutions.

[With additional reporting by Slamet Susanto in Yogyakarta and Suherdjoko in Bantul.]

Race to help survivors as quake toll tops 5,400

Agence France Presse - May 30, 2006

Ian Timberlake, Bantul — Desperate Indonesian quake survivors were still waiting for aid despite pledges help would come fast, as the rising activity of a nearby volcano fuelled fears of an eruption.

The death toll from Saturday's quake in Central Java province rose past 5,400, but the most urgent task was to get help to 200,000 rain-soaked victims, many of whom huddled under makeshift tents for a third night. Hopes appeared all but lost of finding any more survivors in the ruins after Saturday's 6.3-magnitude temblor.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono visited survivors camping out near the damaged Prambanan Hindu temple complex and pledged that food and medical aid would reach them soon "We are giving priority to the victims — those who are injured, the sick, those who need surgery and also refugees who lost their homes and other belongings," he told reporters at the compound, a UNESCO heritage site.

"We are prioritising the medical treatments to save as many lives as possible," the president added later as he toured a makeshift camp in hard-hit Klaten district east of ancient Yogyakarta city.

The Indonesian army deployed at least 2,000 soldiers to assist with relief efforts, Army Chief General Joko Santoso said.

Australia ordered more than 80 disaster experts and medical personnel to the worst hit areas around Yogyakarta, in what Foreign Minister Alexander Downer characterised as part of "a hugely expanded emergency response".

The UN's World Food Programme (WFP) expected to ferry in more than 40 tons of supplies on Tuesday, including seven tons of emergency rations and four portable warehouses to store food, spokesman Barry

Came told AFP. Shipments also included tents, blankets, portable water treatment units and generators as aid flowed in from around the world.

The UN set up a coordination centre at Yogyakarta airport to organise the flow of help. But some victims grumbled relief was too slow and too meagre.

In Klaten and throughout badly-damaged Bantul district, beggars held cardboard boxes daubed with the words, "Asking for aid". "If we don't, how do we get money?" asked Budi, 18, whose box was empty as he waited for donations with a handful of other young men.

"Yesterday we got 40,000 rupiah (4.35 US dollars)," which villagers spent on cooking oil and food, said Wawan, 28, adding that government aid of three packets of instant noodles per family was not enough.

But the beggars slowed relief efforts as they put chairs, oil drums and stones in the road to slow drivers and ask for money. A stream of aid trucks was caught in a major traffic jam on the main highway, stretching some 10 kilometres (six miles), the Detikcom online news service reported.

Hospitals were anxiously waiting for more medical staff and supplies to treat the thousands of injured who overflowed from their wards, raising fears of the spread of disease in the wet and poor sanitary conditions.

Indonesia has struggled to cope with the scale of the disaster, as Yudhoyono acknowledged Monday. The social affairs ministry said 5,427 were confirmed to have died in the quake with some 20,000 injured. The Red Cross said 200,000 were homeless.

Adding to concerns was increased volcanic activity at Mount Merapi, to the north of Yogyakarta, which belched heat clouds and sent trails of lava running down its slopes, heightening fears of an eruption. Plumes of smoke rose some 900 metres (3,000 feet) into the air — nearly double the height of the previous day — and the area remained on high alert.

Scientists have warned that although the magma

flow which forms a dome at the peak appeared to be weakening, the structure may collapse and spew out millions of cubic metres of rock and lava.

"Theoretically as well as statistically, there is a very large possibility that tectonic activities trigger or increase volcanic activities," Syamsulrizal, who works at Indonesia's national vulcanology office, told AFP.

The quake was Indonesia's third major disaster in 18 months, following the tsunami that killed 168,000 in Sumatra and another quake that killed more than 600 people in Nias last year.

Quake-proof construction standards 'ignored'

Jakarta Post - May 30, 2006

Jakarta — In the wake of the tragedy in Yogyakarta, in which thousands died in collapsed houses and buildings, experts warned that earthquake-resistant construction standards must be strengthened to prevent future disasters.

"The number of victims in Bantul and Yogyakarta could have been minimized had they built quake-proof houses," said Surono, a geophysicist at the Volcanology and Geological Disaster Mitigation Center.

As of Monday afternoon the government put the death toll from Saturday's temblor at 5,200 in Yogyakarta and neighboring areas in Central Java. About two-thirds of the deaths occurred in the coastal Bantul regency, south of Yogyakarta.

Surono said Monday the proximity of population centers to the quake's epicenter contributed to the high death toll. Yogyakarta is about 37 kilometers from the epicenter, which was 33 kilometers beneath the sea. Quake-resistant construction would at least have given people time to get out of houses and buildings before they collapsed, Surono told The Jakarta Post.

Wayan Sengara, an expert from the Department of Civil Engineering at Bandung Institute of

Technology, said most houses in Yogyakarta sustained some structural damage in the earthquake, such as collapsed or cracked walls. But many of the more strongly constructed hotels in the city only suffered light damage, like broken windows.

A government decree issued in the 1970s and revised in 2002 requires local governments to follow quake-proof construction standards, which vary according to the different levels of seismic activity in their respective regions.

"Quake-proof construction increases the cost of a building by about 10 to 15 percent," Wayan said. This extra cost is one reason the standards are often ignored, Wayan said, along with the government's failure to educate the public about the importance of quake-resistant construction. And though there are agencies to supervise building standards, it is thought contractors often get around these standards through bribes.

An expert in structural and earthquake technology at the Public Works Ministry, Suwandojo Siddiq, said pictures of 200 damaged houses in Yogyakarta showed they were all constructed from concrete, while more traditional building materials such as woven bamboo would be harmless in an earthquake.

However, given that concrete is now the preferred building material for houses, he said the best way to make houses quake-resistant was by using steel reinforcements. "People build houses differently in Sumatra, Java and Kalimantan," Suwandojo said, adding quake-proof construction techniques should be adjusted to different areas of the country.

The director of construction at the Public Works Ministry, Antonius Budiono, said officials from the department traveled to the regions each year to monitor construction standards in different areas of the country and inspect buildings. "Buildings should be checked every five years," he said.

Antonius said the Jakarta government had done the best job of enforcing construction standards. In 1996 a magnitude 6.0 earthquake resulted in minimal damage to high-rise buildings in the capital.

Death toll rises, rescue efforts go on

Jakarta Post - May 29, 2006

Jakarta — The death toll from Saturday's earthquake had reached more than 4,600 as of late Sunday, as rescue workers continued to search for survivors.

Hospitals and medical staff remained overwhelmed as patients continued to stream in. Around 200,000 people are thought to have been left homeless by the quake, which hit 5.9 on the Richter scale, according to the Meteorology and Geophysics Agency.

On a visit to Gontor Islamic school in Ponorogo, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono said he would work from Yogyakarta with Cabinet ministers so he could "directly supervise the evacuation process", said his spokesman, Andi Mallarangeng.

A late night Cabinet meeting with Vice President Jusuf Kalla revealed the government is setting aside Rp 1 trillion (about US\$ 107.5 billion) for one year, including Rp 300 billion for a three month emergency relief phase, and the rest for reconstruction and rehabilitation. Electricity, telecommunications, and fuel supplies are yet to be restored to all quake-affected areas.

State Minister for State Enterprises Sugiharto said state power firm PT PLN would have restored electricity in Central Java's Klaten regency, Yogyakarta's metropolitan area and Bantul regency by Sunday, Antara reported.

Saturday's quake knocked out lines carrying 400 megawatts of power to the area, with Yogyakarta's metropolitan area regaining electricity by the day's end, but Klaten and Bantul still left in the dark. PLN will bring in power directly from its West and Central Java grids.

Sugiharto also said state telecommunications firm PT Telkom had fixed 82 of the 112 telephone line towers damaged during the quake.

State oil and gas company PT Pertamina spokesperson M. Harun said Yogyakarta's 60,700-kiloliter daily fuel requirements were being met by supplies from the nearby cities of Cilacap, Solo, Cepu and Madiun.

Yogyakarta's Adisucipto Airport is limited to humanitarian aid operations as repairs are still underway. Reuters reported medical supplies and body bags were arriving at the airport.

From Bantul, south of the provincial capital, Agence France-Presse reported thousands of troops and emergency rescue teams had joined volunteers who were clawing at debris with their bare hands, but power blackouts and heavy rain at dusk were hampering rescue efforts.

The stench of decomposing bodies filled the air as soldiers used a backhoe to dig through the rubble in one neighborhood that was completely leveled by the temblor.

Yuni, in her 40s, searched frantically for her uncle, who lived with a maid at a house that had collapsed, AFP reported.

Aid workers warned dwindling supplies of food and water and a lack of housing could pose long-term challenges.

In order to cater to the demand for blood, the Surabaya branch of the Indonesian Red Cross was keeping its donation services open 24 hours, the branch head said.

UN Children's Fund spokesman John Budd told Reuters the number of people left homeless by the disaster was still vague.

Deadly quake strikes Yogya

Jakarta Post - May 28, 2006

Yogyakarta — Nothing remains of Cabean hamlet in Sumbermulyo village, Bantul regency. The only sign that it was a thriving community of farmers is the mosque, which now serves as a mortuary.

The simple wooden homes of the hamlet lay scattered across the ground, alongside the bodies of their owners.

"We've run out of cloth to cover the dead," said resident Warjianto who, along with other survivors, was left with the painful task of removing the bodies of 37 fellow villagers. One of them was his son, Trimulyadi, who died beneath the rubble of their home.

For weeks, residents of Yogyakarta had looked skyward for signs of danger, little realizing that peril would come not from the rumbling Mt. Merapi but from the ground beneath their feet.

In less than a minute, an early morning earthquake measuring 5.9 on the Richter scale brought down thousands of houses and buildings, many poorly constructed, turning them into tombs for thousands of people.

The 5.9 reading was provided by the national Meteorology and Geophysics Agency (BMG); other sources measure the quake at 6.2.

A number of hamlets and small villages in Bantul were left in near total ruin; the regency suffered the worst of the earthquake damage.

In the immediate aftermath of the quake, the air was filled with panic and desperation. Mobs of residents fled on foot and motorcycles for higher ground, fearing a tsunami like the one that swept through Aceh in December 2004.

"We had to force our way into the infirmary where the medicine is kept because the keys were lost, but in any event that stock has now run out," Bantul Regent Idham Samawi said.

The confirmed death toll has passed 2,900, including at least 2,000 deaths in Bantul. These figures are expected to rise. Quoting local officials, Antara reported at least 3,800 buildings were destroyed.

Hospitals in the royal city of Yogyakarta quickly filled with the dead and injured. Many patients were laid outside, not only because the wards were full, but also because of the fear caused by the numerous aftershocks that reverberated throughout

the city over the course of the day.

The usually busy Jl. Malioboro in the tourism heart of Yogyakarta was mostly deserted.

Governor Hamengkubuwono IX tried to calm residents and made an urgent national appeal for help. "We're setting up emergency aid stations and clinics. Victims are lying in open areas," he said.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono arrived in Surakarta, Central Java, on Saturday afternoon, accompanied by Health Minister Siti Fadillah Supari, and immediately made his way to Yogyakarta by car.

Upon his arrival he was mobbed by weeping, sometimes hysterical residents. "Please stay calm, we are doing all we can," he said in response to the pleas. The President will remain in the area for the next few days to help organize relief efforts.

Such was the strength of the quake that struck around 5:55 a.m. that it was felt as far away as Malang, East Java, some 340 kilometers east of Yogyakarta.

"It felt like a big truck passing by," Malang resident Adi Supriyanto told the Post. However, there were no reports of damage in the city.

In Surakarta, the nearest large city to Yogyakarta, several buildings were damaged, including a four-story hospital and the Solo Square mall.

At the Waluyo senior citizens hospital in the city, patients rushed out of the building when the earth began to move. Once outside, nurses began administering oxygen to the patients.

By dusk, aid was beginning to trickle into Yogyakarta through Semarang and Surakarta — the two closest cities with functioning airports. Repairs on the badly damaged runway at Adi Sucipto airport in Yogyakarta were set to commence Saturday night.

The Indonesian Military and the Indonesian Red Cross were among the first to send in rescue teams and assistance. Among the supplies were hundreds

of body bags.

For Warjianto, the resident of Cabean hamlet, there is little time for grief as he sifts through the remains of his home, trying to salvage what he can from the disaster. "I want to cry, but there's no point. This is fate."

A look at deadly earthquakes in Indonesia

Associated Press - May 27, 2006

A look at some deadly earthquakes in Indonesia since 2000:

- May 27, 2006: A magnitude-6.2 quake flattens homes and hotels near the ancient central city of Yogyakarta, killing more than 3,000 and injuring thousands more in the nation's worst disaster since the 2004 tsunami.
- March 28, 2005: A magnitude-8.7 quake strikes Nias and Simeulue islands off the western coast of Sumatra, killing about 900 people and flattening thousands of houses and bridges.
- Dec. 26, 2004: A magnitude-9 earthquake ruptures the sea floor off Sumatra island, triggering a tsunami that hits a dozen countries, including Indonesia, where at least 131,029 are killed and tens of thousands remain missing. The Indonesian province of Aceh is closest to the quake's epicenter and suffers most.
- Nov. 26, 2004: A magnitude-6.4 earthquake rocks Indonesia's West Papua, near Nabire, killing about 30 people and causing dozens of buildings and homes to collapse.
- Nov. 12, 2004: A magnitude-6 quake strikes off the eastern coast of Alor island, about 1,000 miles east of the capital, Jakarta. At least 27 people are killed and hundreds of buildings are damaged.
- Feb. 6-7, 2004: A magnitude-6.9 quake on Feb. 6 and a magnitude-7.1 aftershock the following day kill 34 and devastate Nabire in remote Papua province.

- June 4, 2000: A magnitude-7.9 quake hits Bengkulu province, killing at least 117 people and injuring about 1,900.

- May 4, 2000: A magnitude-7.5 earthquake shakes Sulawesi province, killing at least 35 people and injuring at least 148.

CORRUPTION/COLLUSION/NEPOTISM

Sutiyoso fuming over budget graft allegations

Jakarta Post - May 31, 2006

Jakarta — Governor Sutiyoso arrived back in the city Tuesday, from a day trip to Yogyakarta, to face allegations the administration misappropriated Rp 1.56 trillion (US\$166 million) from the 2005 provincial budget.

"I'm asking the council not to make any statements that will cause a stir. I'm afraid the public will think we really have embezzled the money," he said.

Sutiyoso said, as far as he knew, the city administration's financial situation had been examined by a number of auditors, including the Supreme Audit Body (Bapeka), the Development Finance Comptroller (BPKP) and the city audit agency (Bawasda).

The Democratic Party made the charges during a plenary session Monday, without putting forward any evidence to back up the graft allegations.

The party only specified the sectors in which the alleged corruption occurred.

It estimated that misappropriated funds for infrastructure — the hardest-hit sector — totaled Rp 868.9 billion, while Rp 292 billion was embezzled from the budgets for health and education.

In the law and public order sector, the money embezzled was estimated to be Rp 208 billion, while, in the least affected sector — population and manpower — misappropriated funds were estimated to reach Rp 13 billion.

Sutiyoso's response was similar to Deputy Governor Fauzi Bowo's. The two were adamant the Democratic Party's findings were way off the mark.

"The figures don't make any sense," he said. "If administration officials were proven to have embezzled that amount of money, I would hang them myself on the flag pole in front of my office," Sutiyoso said.

When asked if the allegations were politically related to next year's gubernatorial election, the governor declined to comment. "I don't know anything about that," he said.

The governor is scheduled to attend the session on June 6 to clarify the allegations.

Representing Sutiyoso at Monday's plenary session, Fauzi Bowo challenged the council to prove the allegations.

Last month, the city audit agency reported that about Rp 7 billion of the provincial budget had been embezzled, though no real action was taken in response.

The council's deputy chairman, Ilal Ferhard, said if the allegations were proven valid he would refer the case to the provincial prosecutor's office.

'Soeharto, one of the biggest embezzlers ever'

Jakarta Post - May 26, 2006

While former president Soeharto's life hangs in the balance in the hospital, controversy over whether or not the government should proceed with the graft charges against him has set in. The public at large cannot accept the fact that the Attorney General's Office has decided to withdraw lawsuits against Soeharto. The Jakarta Post asked people their views on the issue.

Sutarman, 50, is a tower crane operator at a construction site at the Hotel Indonesia traffic circle in Central Jakarta: I do not agree with the charges being dropped because he was responsible

for the largest number of human rights violations in the world and is still one of the biggest embezzlers ever.

We, the ordinary people, have suffered so much and of course cannot except the fact that he will not stand trial. All the Indonesian people know what his crimes are. That is why he must be tried and cannot be released, ever.

If he still makes any claims about his ailing health in order to evade trial, we must consider whether anyone can possibly be ill for eight years. This just goes to show that the Yudhoyono administration is powerless as were the previous administrations.

Heidi Laksana, 24, is a college student. She lives in Kwitang, Central Jakarta: I completely disagree with the Attorney General's Office's decision. The government does have the right to feel compassion, but must at least seize all his assets and return them to the state for the benefit of the people.

I think that seizing his assets will bring clarity to people because we know how Soeharto and his cronies stashed away money for themselves. This would be preferable to sending him to prison. It is unlikely that he would receive the same treatment as other prisoners. Soeharto would get privileges in prison, if he ever was imprisoned.

This just shows that Soeharto still has power because of the government's reluctance to try him. A small-time crook in Indonesia can be severely punished, but why is it that someone who is clearly guilty cannot be dealt with.

SBY supports regulation to protect public officials

Jakarta Post - May 24, 2006

Mataram/Jakarta — President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono said Tuesday a "common language" was essential in the fight against corruption as public officials remain fearful of facing prosecution for erroneous policy decisions.

Yudhoyono and governors from across the country said the absence of a regulation protecting state officials left them liable to prosecution on unfounded corruption charges when their policies failed. The government and legislators have expressed support for legislation to protect officials.

Crackdowns by law enforcers' and anticorruption bodies have discouraged many officials from handling development projects, governors said.

Yudhoyono, addressing the national meeting of governors, called on law enforcers, auditors and the central bank governor to "speak the same language" in dealing with corruption. "We'll ensure that only those who really do wrong who would be prosecuted. Come and consult with us in Jakarta, but don't let development stall in your area," the President told the governors.

He said many governors were too afraid to disburse development funds and law enforcers needed to be able to differentiate crimes from pure policy mistakes.

"I want the attorney general, the Bank Indonesia governor and the National Police to come up with a common understanding of corruption," he said.

Critics say the plan, which was made public by Vice President Jusuf Kalla last week, would only worsen corruption in the bureaucracy and would be detrimental to the Yudhoyono administration's much applauded anti-corruption drive.

Gorontalo governor Fadel Muhammad said the regulation was vital for all state officials to protect them from overzealous law enforcers who could arrest graft suspects based on a single-source report.

"We need the regulation to give us a sense of security in doing our job," he was quoted as saying by Antara newswire. "It's an open secret that many officials are in trouble only because law enforcers act on one source of information." The governors hoped law enforcers would verify information about alleged corruption by local government officials with supervisory institutions, such as the Regional Supervision Agency.

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Mining group objects to new forest guidelines

Jakarta Post - May 31, 2006

Jakarta — The debate over whether to protect the country's forests or promote investment in the mining sector has reemerged, with mining firms now up in arms over Forestry Ministry guidelines that they claim are hampering their operations.

Association of Indonesian Coal Producers chairman Jeffrey Mulyono said the guidelines — issued through Forestry Minister Regulation No. 14/2006 — only caused unnecessary problems for mining firms, and could deter future investment in the sector.

Jeffrey, who also chairs the Indonesian Mining Association, slammed the requirement that a mining firm intending to operate in a forest would have to provide a "compensatory site" twice as large as the mining concession they intended to lease.

Those failing to comply with the requirement within two years would be subject to an additional royalty of 1 percent of production value.

It is this additional royalty that the mining firms particularly object to, with an executive of coal miner PT Interex Sacra Raya, Frans Nongka, saying it could amount to "thousands of times the land and building taxes imposed by the Finance Ministry, and the annual royalties that mining firms have to pay to the Energy and Mineral Resources Ministry."

Central Kalimantan Governor Teras Narang agreed with the mining firms, arguing that the regulation would only add to the cost and risk of investing in the mining sector, which many regions depended on for their development.

"The regions are currently trying to pay for their own development by strengthening local revenues from business and investment. Thus, all relevant regulations need to support these efforts," he said.

Commenting on the dispute, the Energy and Mineral Resources Ministry's director general for mineral, coal and geothermal resources, Simon Felix Sembiring, said his ministry would soon discuss the matter with Forestry Minister M.S. Kaban.

He said he hoped the talks would also make a distinction between production forests and protected forests that required stricter conservation guidelines.

The bitter controversy over whether mining should be allowed in the country's protected forests erupted in 2004 after the government issued Government Regulation in lieu of Law No. 1/2004, overruling the 1999 Forestry Law, which prohibited open-pit mining in protected forests.

The regulation in lieu of law, which the government argued was necessary to provide legal certainty in respect of mining contracts signed before the 1999 Forestry Law was enacted, was later confirmed as the 2004 Forestry (Amendment) Law, thus allowing 13 mining firms to resume their operations within protected forests.

A challenge to the law brought by environmentalists was turned down by the Constitutional Court, although the court did ban six of the firms from operating in protected forests and ordered the rest to comply with the relevant Forestry Ministry regulations.

Indonesia's forestry and environment ministries face a tough task in conserving the country's remaining 40 million hectares of forest, the world's third largest forest area, with 2.6 million hectares being deforested each year, mostly as the result of illegal logging.

Lampung's mangroves now only a beautiful memory

Jakarta Post - May 29, 2006

Oyos Saroso H.N., Bandarlampung — Illegal loggers in Lampung have cleared tens of thousands of hectares of mangrove forests, the green belt along Sumatra's eastern coast.

Logging activities have also occurred along the coasts of South Lampung, Tanggamus and Tulangbawang regencies, creating large-scale coastal abrasion, thus making it difficult for traditional shrimp farmers to obtain seawater for their ponds.

According to data from the Lampung office of the Indonesian Forum for the Environment (Walhi), of the total 160,000 hectares of mangrove forests in the province, 85 percent have been damaged in the past eight years.

A traditional shrimp farmer in Sragi village, South Lampung, Sulaiman, 40, said that mangrove forest destruction had been going on for the past five years, especially within the past year to make way for shrimp ponds.

"As a result, coastal erosion has gradually worsened." According to Sulaiman, the drop in the seawater debit due to erosion has caused many farmers to go out of business and take up other jobs, like working as laborers in Bandarlampung. Hundreds of farmers involved in producing shrimp fries have also gone bankrupt.

Now, hundreds of hatcheries in South Lampung have been left idle and have become mosquito breeding grounds.

Sulaiman said that large-scale shrimp farmers could stay in business by procuring water pumps to maintain the water levels in their ponds. "Only large-scale farms can afford to do that," he said.

Illegal logging is still going on around the PT Dipasena Citra Darmaja (DCD) shrimp farm in Tulangbawang regency. Company spokesman Agus Tito said that local residents had cleared 3,000 hectares of mangrove forest spanning 27 kilometers long and 300 to 700 meters wide.

Tito said that if mangrove logging continued unchecked along the green belt, coastal erosion on the eastern coast of Sumatra would exacerbate and threaten the shrimp industry.

A number of areas along the eastern coast of Lampung are in a critical condition. Data from Mitra Bentala, an NGO advocating the conservation of mangrove forests, indicates that only around 5

to 20 percent of mangrove forests still remain.

Mitra Bentala director Herza forecast that natural disasters would likely occur if spatial planning in coastal areas was not implemented.

According to Herza, mangrove forest destruction in Lampung, such as on East Lampung regency's east coast has reached between 15 to 20 percent, Lampung Bay (Bandarlampung) 5 percent, Semangka Bay (Tanggamus) 20 to 25 percent, and on West Lampung's coast between 10 to 20 percent.

"It is caused by the rampant conversion of mangrove forest into traditional shrimp farms by local residents, around 100 meters from the beach. Ironically, after opening the farms, residents abandon them and look for more favorable places," said Herza.

The most critical condition, said Herza, was the forest area in East Lampung regency's eastern-most area which was difficult to reach. He said that apart from the opening of new traditional shrimp farms, sand miners had also contributed to coastal destruction. A researcher from Lampung University, Buchori Ayik, said that the east coast had a relatively level coast and the longest span of mangrove forest in Lampung. Mangrove forest destruction, he explained, is caused by forest conversion resulting in coastal erosion.

Lampung Walhi data shows that around 85 percent of the 160,000 hectares of mangrove forests in Lampung have been damaged due to forest conversion since 1998. As many as 12,000 hectares are located in the green belt area along the eastern coast around the Mesuji river delta in Tulangbawang.

"The loss of mangrove forests has caused coastal abrasion on the east coast of Sumatra. The mangrove forest in Tulangbawang acts as a buffer against erosion caused by strong waves especially when there are easterly winds," said Lampung Walhi director, Mukri Friatna.

The Lampung governor's aide in economic, financial and development affairs, Harris Hasyim, said that the provincial administration would require Rp 2 trillion (US\$222.5 million) to restore the damage done to mangrove forests across Lampung by illegal loggers.

Hasyim said that if forest destruction continued unchecked it would be unfavorable for Lampung's economy, especially following the endorsement of the international environmental policy on agricultural products, including fisheries, such as shrimps, a significant contribution to Lampung's economy, the consequences of which would be the ban on Lampung fishery products being exported to developed countries.

To overcome the problem, according to Harris, the provincial administration is working together with Lampung University and local hatchery companies to initiate the Forest Fisheries Program, in which residents, who depend on mangrove forests as their main source of income, are not only required to preserve them but also manage shrimp farms.

HEALTH & EDUCATION

Indonesian villagers blame magic, not flu

Associated Press - May 29, 2006

Margie Mason, Kubu Simbelang — The three brick-and-clapboard houses stand along the village's muddy dirt road, empty and forlorn. A naked light bulb hangs from a wire over one door, still burning. A white pet bird cries for food from its cage. But no one dares to go near.

Health experts have focused on the houses since an extended family started dying from bird flu and no links to sick birds could be established. They suspect limited human-to-human transmission, but say there is no need to panic because no one else in this mountain farming village has fallen ill and the virus has not mutated.

Some neighbors insist, however, that bird flu is not to blame. They are convinced black magic is at work, that ghosts now haunt their quiet Christian community of about 1,500 people.

Many are too scared to even pass by the family's houses, and some who live nearby are awakened by nightmares that they will be the next to die. "We are so afraid just to step into that house," said a 37-year-old woman who identified herself only as Sembining. "We can't tell what we're afraid of — we're just afraid."

She lived near the victims and said the first woman who died was like a daughter to her. She recalled feeding and caring for her friend as she lay burning with fever before bird flu was ever suspected. Sembining can't understand why she, too, didn't fall ill. "I think the family was cursed," she said. "It must be, because if it's bird flu, why only their family? Their blood?"

This is the largest cluster in a handful of cases involving bird flu passing from human to human, but scientists think it has always done so between blood relatives — not spouses. That has led some to theorize there may be a genetic susceptibility to the disease, but there is no evidence yet to support that.

Tests found no trace of the H5N1 virus in the village's poultry, and dozens of hens, roosters and chicks run freely in backyards. Pigs, cows, buffalo, dogs and barefoot children roam along the rutted road and across fields of chilies, oranges and limes.

Whatever the source of the infection, six of seven family members who tested positive for H5N1 have died. An eighth was buried before samples could be taken, but the World Health Organization considers her part of the cluster.

As their neighbors started dying, confusion and mistrust prompted villagers to stop cooperating with officials. Many refused to give blood samples, fearing they would later fall ill and suffer the fate of their neighbors.

The case has been a powerful lesson for WHO officials in understanding the importance of early communication and education.

"We're seeing what problems we're going to run into on the ground," WHO spokesman Dick Thompson said. "We're learning with every step."

Jules Pieters, manager of WHO's rapid response and containment group in Geneva, said it is clear that people familiar with the culture, language and customs of this area should have been involved earlier to help villagers understand what was happening, how to protect themselves and the importance of allowing treatment if they develop symptoms. Instead, many people who were never

scared of doctors before are now terrified of them.

"We are afraid to be sent to an isolation room. You know an isolation room is a slaughtering room — a room for the people who want to die," said villager Caranta Perangin-Angin. "Therefore we are afraid of (letting doctors) take blood. Taking the blood, for me, symbolizes going to die."

Indonesian officials reported that at least one patient had fled the hospital to seek traditional medicine and was later caught and returned. In the event H5N1 should mutate into a form easily passed among humans, such behavior would likely spread the illness further — a serious worry for experts who fear the possibility of a bird flu pandemic.

"In these situations, we need to first earn the trust of the people most directly at risk," Thompson said. "I think one of the lessons we're learning from this outbreak is that you can't just drive truckloads of Tamiflu into this area and expect that the problem is solved." He said some villagers began associating Tamiflu, the chief drug to treat bird flu, with death because members of the infected family — most of whom were given the medicine too late to help — were dying after taking the pills. Not everyone in the village is spooked.

Parked on a bench outside his tiny shop and strumming a guitar, Bapak Karunia Sembiring smiled when asked about bird flu. "If the doctors said it's bird flu, then so be it." He said he is happy officials are monitoring the villagers' health and spraying disinfectant. But the 60-year-old fears his village will be shunned.

"I'm a little bit worried about what will happen in the future to the village," he said. "The worst is that the world will hate us, will judge us."

Group protests bird flu decision

Jakarta Post - May 29, 2006

Jakarta — About 50 people from North Sumatra's Karo regency living in Greater Jakarta staged a

peaceful rally near the Hotel Indonesia traffic circle Saturday, protesting the government's decision to name Karo a bird flu affected area.

"The decision is premature. It only causes material losses to our brothers who are poultry breeders and traders there," one of the protesters, Anderson Ginting, said as quoted by Tempointeraktif.

Poultry breeders in Karo have seen their daily income drop drastically since bird flu cases were reported in the regency.

The Health Ministry confirmed last week that a man died of bird flu in Kubu Sembelang, Karo. The result brought the total cases of bird flu in Indonesia to 43, with 33 fatalities, second only to Vietnam.

North Sumatra joins Jakarta, West Java and other parts of Indonesia that have been affected by bird flu.

ISLAM/RELIGION

Yudhoyono concerned by militias

Jakarta Post - May 29, 2006

Jakarta — Amid criticism for his alleged failure to take action, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has expressed concern about the growth of militias who glorify violence in the name of religion or ethnicity.

Although he made no specific mention of any group, Yudhoyono said that nobody in the republic has the right to dictate their views to others by means of violence. He said he knew of groups who are intolerant and take the law into their own hands.

"No element or community in this country can force their will on others, or do whatever they want and resort to lawlessness. It's time for each of us to behave responsibly," he said while opening a two-day congress of the New Indonesia Alliance Party (PPIB) here on Saturday.

Public resentment of the government's failure to stop violent religious and ethnic-based militias

has been growing, following incidents of violence involving such groups.

The former First Lady Siti Nuriyah Wahid reported Betawi Brotherhood Forum (FBR) leader Fadloli El Muhir to the police for allegedly slandering women activists who took part in a street demonstration against the anti-pornography bill. FBR members have also reportedly tried to force singer Inul Daratista to leave Jakarta for similar reasons.

Last week, members of the Islam Defenders Front (FPI) reportedly forced former president Abdurrahman "Gus Dur" Wahid to leave the podium at an interfaith forum in Purwakarta, West Java. They did it to protest his statement on a radio talk show that the holy Koran was "the most pornographic scripture".

The Purwakarta incident has triggered tension between FPI and Gus Dur's supporters, who staged street demonstrations last Friday demanding that the government disband FPI.

Addressing his followers during a counter-demonstration near FPI headquarters in Central Jakarta, FPI leader Habib Rizieq insisted that the group would defend the anti-pornography bill as best they could.

The bill, which has found support among Islamic-oriented political parties and conservative Muslim leaders, is being debated at the House of Representatives.

The President portrayed the growth of intolerant groups which justify violence as a sign of eroding nationalism. "Our founding fathers built this country on the consensus of unity in diversity. It is a consensus that we have to uphold forever," he said.

The president said forcing others to accept certain values is not only against the law but also against the principle of democracy.

PPIB chairman Sjahrir, a noted economist and a presidential advisor for economic affairs, also warned of national disintegration because the people are increasingly segregated. They have come to distrust each other, he said. "When you don't have trust in others, you trust only yourself. The

concern is when your trust in yourself is absolute. We must maintain integration because, by design and by essence, our principle of unity in diversity is about differences," he said.

Gus Dur supporters want FPI disbanded

Jakarta Post - May 27, 2006

Ridwan Max Sijabat and ID Nugroho, Jakarta/Jember — Hundreds of supporters of Abdurrahman "Gus Dur" Wahid rallied Friday to demand the government disband the militant Islam Defenders Front (FPI), who disrupted an appearance by the former president at an interfaith meeting this week.

They demonstrated at the National Police Headquarters in South Jakarta and FPI's base in Slipi, Central Jakarta. Police kept tight control over the demonstration to prevent violence.

In the East Java town of Jember, hundreds of FPI militia members clashed with members of Garda Bangsa, a paramilitary group affiliated with the National Awakening Party, although no serious injuries were reported.

Tension between the groups has escalated after FPI members forced Gus Dur off the stage at a rally Tuesday in Purwakarta, West Java. They denounced his opposition to the controversial pornography bill, which is supported by fundamentalist Islamic groups.

Members of several other militant groups also were reportedly involved in the Purwakarta incident.

Gus Dur, a controversial leader of Indonesia's largest Muslim organization Nahdlatul Ulama, is a steadfast advocate of pluralism and has condemned the bid by hardliners to establish a theocratic state.

"The FPI have slandered Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), who is our leader, a former president, a national unity symbol and our imam. Their actions cannot be tolerated," said Garda Bangsa leader Eman Hendarman.

Separately, NU deputy chairman Rozy Munir told The Jakarta Post the police should have taken strict action against FPI members long time ago.

"Violent acts should not be tolerated. They do not represent Muslims as they claim to do," he said.

Garda Bangsa was joined by about 200 people grouped in the Alliance for an Antiviolent Society, the NU's paramilitary force Banser and Christian youth organizations at police headquarters.

"We demand the police enforce the law. Violent organizations that wage terror and criminal acts have to be stopped," Eman said. "We didn't notify Gus Dur about this protest. He would have objected to this because he is a man of peace and wouldn't approve of any actions that could incite violence." The protesters submitted a petition to the police listing alleged violent acts committed by the FPI. National Police spokesman Brig. Gen. Anton Bachrul Alam promised the police would look into the protesters' claims and discuss them with legislators.

"We listen and consider all the complaints. If it is proven that it (the FPI) has caused civil unrest and poses a threat to the public, of course we can disband it," he said.

At around 3 p.m. protesters moved to the FPI headquarters in Slipi area. At Petamburan, some 150 FPI members were joined by about 300 members of the Betawi Brotherhood Forum, who carried wooden sticks, sharpened bamboo and chains.

To avoid a confrontation between the two mobs, the police redirected Gus Dur's supporters when they reached Slipi.

FPI leader Habib Rizieq told reporters that the Purwakarta incident should not be "exaggerated" but he did not apologize, as demanded by Gus Dur's supporters.

He said the FPI would defend the pornography bill and would ask police to protect them in their efforts.

Rizieq said Gus Dur's appearance in Purwakarta had "hurt the feelings of every Muslim".

Ulemas proscribe separatist movements

Jakarta Post - May 27, 2006

Indra Harsaputra, Ponorogo — The Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) on Friday proscribed any movements, either by individuals, groups of people, institutions or organizations, that threaten national unity.

The decree was one of several decisions taken during a meeting of ulema from across the country at the Gontor Muslim boardinghouse in Ponorogo, East Java.

This was the second meeting of its kind, held to address different problems facing the country. The first such meeting took place in Jakarta in 2003, during which the ulema proscribed terrorism and bank interest rates.

"The unity of Indonesia is final. To those intending to separate from the country, Muslims have to enlighten them that such action is forbidden (by Islamic law)," said Ma'ruf Amin, chairman of MUI's fatwa commission.

Ma'ruf said that when some parties in Madura expressed their intention to establish a separate province under the name Serambi Medinnah, they had not violated the decree because they were still acting within the confines of the unitary state.

The Madura chapter of the MUI declared earlier this month its intention to establish Serambi Medinnah, which literally means Medina's veranda.

Ma'ruf said the MUI had no desire to make Islam the sole religion of Indonesia, and would continue to protect the right of non-Muslims to practice their religions.

"We agreed with all ulema to uphold the concept of the unitary state of the Republic of Indonesia, with not only Islam, which should be accommodated, but also other religions, with all the rights and obligations," he said.

Ma'ruf reiterated the MUI would protect the rights

of all nonindigenous people and non-Muslims. He said the organization was in the process of bringing together elements of all the country's Islamic groups, including the largest Muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah and the Islam Defenders Front, and reaching an agreement on tolerance.

"I guarantee they will not be involved in any acts of violence. They will be calmer and appreciate tolerance without violence," he said.

If nonindigenous people are discriminated against, like in the issuance of citizenship cards, the MUI will ask the government to address the problem. "The citizenship issue has nothing to do with religion, but the bureaucracy," he said.

The MUI again urged the government to ratify the bill on pornography, as well as an antidiscrimination bill.

The ulemas also underlined the importance of encouraging every region to have local regulations banning prostitution, the consumption of alcohol and gambling, like those already implemented in Tangerang and Cilegon in Banten, Cianjur in West Java and Bulukumba in South Sulawesi.

Other decrees issued during the meeting included one banning demonstrators from harming themselves. Protesting by sewing your mouth shut is forbidden by religion because it is against human nature, Ma'ruf said.

SBY urged to bring militants into line

Jakarta Post - May 26, 2006

Jakarta — Religious leaders from the country's major Muslim organizations and activists have demanded President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono crack down on extremist groups that commit violent acts in the name of religion.

Activists grouped in the Alliance for an Antiviolent Society and leaders of Indonesia's largest Muslim organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama and

Muhammadiyah, have warned the nation's integrity is under threat from the groups.

They urged the police to stop radical groups from taking the law into their own hands. They were responding to a number of violent incidents recently.

On Tuesday, the Islam Defenders Front (FPI) demanded former president Abdurrahman "Gus Dur" Wahid leave the podium at an interethnic and religious discussion in Purwakarta, West Java. They said Gus Dur should not have been allowed to attend the discussion because he rejected the pornography bill, and that the discussion should be stopped because the organizer used the term pluralism.

In Bekasi, police arrested Bekasi Islam Defenders Front chairman Abdul Qodir, along with 20 other FPI members, last Monday because they had damaged property, including alleged houses of prostitution. Armed with sticks, the group raided several cafes in Kampung Kresek in Pondok Gede, Bekasi, after participating in a mass protest Sunday in support of the pornography bill.

Former first lady Sinta Nuriyah Wahid reported the chairman of the Betawi Brotherhood Forum (FBR), Fadloli El Muhir, to Jakarta Police last Monday for allegedly slandering activists who took part in a rally against the pornography bill.

Fadloli said during last week's live broadcast on Metro TV that the women who participated in the rally were "evil, wretched women who did not have good morals".

The FBR also threatened singer Inul Daratista, telling her to leave the capital, and raided her karaoke lounge in North Jakarta after she appeared in a rally against the bill.

The executive director of the International Center for Islam and Pluralism, Syafi'i Anwar, said the phenomenon indicated that the state endorsed violence.

"The state must be responsible for protecting its citizens. But what we see now is that the state lets some groups use violence to force their beliefs (on others)," he said.

He said the police seemed afraid to act because the groups used Islam as a cover. "Sooner or later, the international world will see this as a threat".

Nahdlatul Ulama executive Masdar F Mas'udi said the groups' actions were contrary to Islam. "Islam teaches people not to use violence or to force their beliefs on others." He said their actions should be seen as criminal. "The state has the responsibility, because citizens can make mistakes. However, our President and Vice President have not taken any action, even though they have seen violence happening in this country," he said.

Entertainer Rieke Diah Pitaloka said the groups had been singling her out for harassment since she asked the government to issue a policy on the pornography bill. "The police did nothing to protect me".

Din Syamsuddin, the chairman of Muhammadiyah, has also expressed concern about the groups' lawlessness. He specifically referred to the harassment of Gus Dur. He urged police not to hesitate to take action against the perpetrators, regardless of whether they claimed to be defenders of Islam.

"Muhammadiyah is gravely concerned about the violence a group of people committed in the name of religion," Antara quoted him as saying Thursday in the West Kalimantan capital of Pontianak. "Violence and anarchy undermine the nation's integrity and the democracy that Indonesia is rigorously pursuing," he said.

A member of the House of Representatives, Badriyah Fayumi, called on all Indonesian people to respond in a measured way. "Do not fight violence with violence. Let the police handle the problem," she said.

Ma'ruf has no plans to drop references to religion on IDs

Jakarta Post - May 26, 2006

M. Taufiqurrahman, Jakarta — The government will maintain references to religions on identity cards for the time being, the home minister says.

"There has never been a plan to drop religions from ID cards," M. Ma'ruf told The Jakarta Post on the sidelines of a House of Representatives hearing Thursday.

Earlier this month, ministry secretary-general Progo Nurdjaman said that the government was considering dropping the reference to religions on ID cards after protests from numerous minority faiths. Progo said classing people by their religions was unnecessary and could be used by intolerant groups to incite sectarian violence.

Opposition, however, quickly mounted against the proposal. In April, Muhammadiyah chairman Din Syamsuddin told Antara the idea was preposterous.

"In a secular country, a column for religions on ID cards is unnecessary, but we should not follow this standard. People here identify themselves by their religions," he said. Secularism is enshrined in the nation's Constitution.

Din said injustice rather than religion caused most conflict in the country. The government should tackle poverty and injustice rather than remove religious references from state documents, he said.

Stating one's religion is compulsory on ID cards along with details of one's date of birth, marital status and occupation. The problem is the state recognizes only six religions: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism.

People of other faiths must choose one of the six if they want a valid ID card — a move that human rights groups have long criticized as discriminatory.

Chinese Confucians and Taoists used to suffer the most from the requirement, with many writing Buddhist or Christian in the religion column.

Now, the Confucians are officially recognized — in theory. One ID application form seen by The Jakarta Post included a six box marked "other" —

presumably where followers of Confucius could write their religion.

But would these "other" religions be recognized by local officials? Many Confucians think not and continue to tick one of the five main faiths when they get a new card.

However, according to Ma'ruf, a man in the East Java town of Malang applied successfully for an ID card as a Confucian. "It was the right decision as it was in line with the Constitution," he said.

Swandy Sihotang of the non-governmental organization the Coalition for Civil Registrations said there was no good reason for the government to continue the identity card policy.

"There are millions of people whose faiths are not recognized and have to pretend they believe in one of five recognized religions. The government should start paying attention to them," Swandy told the Post.

Activists report Maftuh for slandering Ahmadiyah sect

Jakarta Post - May 24, 2006

Jakarta — An non-governmental alliance protecting religious freedoms reported the Religious Affairs Minister to the National Police on Monday, accusing him of defaming the Ahmadiyah sect.

Uli Parulian Sihombing, a lawyer acting for the Alliance for the Freedom of Religion and Faith, said the group had "reported the minister (Maftuh Basyuni) for insulting and slandering... the members of the Ahmadiyah community." Uli said Maftuh had violated at least four articles of the Criminal Code by repeatedly saying in the media that the Ahmadiyah sect was heretical and was misleading people.

In the Feb. 20-26 edition of Tempo magazine, the minister was quoted as saying that the members of Ahmadiyah group should stop calling themselves Muslims because their beliefs were heretical to

Islam.

The Ahmadiyah follow the prophet Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908), an Indian who claims to be the last prophet of Islam — after Muhammad, an idea mainstream Muslims reject.

Uli said the alliance believed the minister's statements had helped lead to the persecution of Ahmadiyah followers in Segerongan village, West Lombok. About 120 followers were forced out of their compound there after local Muslims drove them out of the area.

"We will also request police protection for the members of Ahmadiyah," Uli said.

The alliance, established in July 2005, is made up of NGOs and individuals concerned with upholding the freedom of minority groups to worship.

"We are very concerned about the fate of several religious groups (in the country) whose members have been marginalized and have been prosecuted as criminals for their faiths," Uli said.

Lia Aminudin, the leader of a small religious group, the Eden community, is currently being tried at the Central Java District court after being charged with inciting civil unrest for spreading the group's teachings.

When contacted by The Jakarta Post, the minister's personal assistant, Ahmad, said Maftuh was aware of the alliance's plan to report him to the police but was unavailable for comment.

BUSINESS & INVESTMENT

Governments told to up infrastructure investment

Jakarta Post - May 30, 2006

Riyadi Suparno, Tokyo — The World Bank, a strong advocate of private sector investment in infrastructure, is now calling on governments around the world to increase their investment in infrastructure, noting that private sector investment in the sector can never be enough and has often brought about an unintended consequence: the victimizing of the poor.

Speaking at the opening of the Annual Bank Conference on Development Economics (ABCDE), World Bank President Paul Wolfowitz noted that attempts to differentiate between “public” and “private” approaches to infrastructure provision were misplaced.

"We have moved away from a paradigm which once expected the private sector to play the dominant role in infrastructure. The private sector can — and does — play an important role in increasing investment and strengthening service delivery.

"But it is apparent that the capacity or willingness of the private sector to respond to all the infrastructure needs is limited," Wolfowitz said.

According to the World Bank, private sector investment in the infrastructure sector in developing countries continued to decline from a peak of US\$128 billion in 1997 to a mere \$58 billion in 2003.

Antonio Estache, senior economic adviser to the infrastructure vice presidency of The World Bank, said that not only was private sector investment in infrastructure declining, but public sector investment in the sector was also falling.

This was happening because many governments of developing countries had deliberately reduced their investments in the sector as a result of zealous privatization drives.

He noted that private sector investment only accounted for about 20 percent of all investment needs in developing countries, and, therefore, public investment was badly needed to make up the shortfall.

Much of the private sector investment has been concentrated on the more lucrative sectors, especially telecommunications, while sectors important to the poor, particularly water and sanitation, were very much neglected.

Even when the private sector did become involved, the governments of developing countries often failed to provide the necessary regulatory frameworks that would ensure access and affordability for the poor. And again, the poor

were victimized by not having access to services or, even when they did have access, by being forced to spend too much of their incomes to buy the services.

Therefore, Wolfowitz warned that the public sector approach to infrastructure must focus not only on economic growth, but also on what he termed “smart” growth, i.e. “growth that is economically sound, environmentally friendly, socially acceptable, locally desirable and, most important, growth that makes a difference in people’s lives.”

Wolfowitz also called on the governments of developing countries to get tough on corruption as corruption once again penalized the poor more than any other bracket in society.

"Ordinary people will not fully benefit from new infrastructure such as roads if — as in the case of certain projects in Asia — the improved access is accompanied by ‘informal’ levies or charges that raise transport costs back to previous levels," he said.

To that end, Wolfowitz noted that the World Bank would continue to support infrastructure development in developing countries.

In the global order of infrastructure, the bank sees itself as a “two percent solution” as the bank currently contributes about 2 percent of the some \$400 billion invested annually on developing countries’ infrastructure.

Public investment in infrastructure is becoming more important now, not only because of declining private investment but also because of the increasing needs for infrastructure in developing countries as a result of population growth, as well as the increasing movement of people from rural to urban areas.

Today, of the 6.3 billion people in the world, 1.6 billion do not have access to energy services, and 2.6 billion people lack access to water and sanitation services.

In the next 25 years, another 2 billion people will be born — 97 percent of them in developing countries. Not only that, more than half of these people will live in urban areas, creating more

challenges in meeting their basic infrastructure needs. They will need access to water and sanitation services, energy, transport and telecommunication services.

"We know, however, that this is not an impossible task. Sustainable development can go hand-in-hand with responsible infrastructure development, which takes into account social and environmental considerations from the outset," Wolfowitz said.

President's plan to form new economic task force slammed

Jakarta Post - May 29, 2006

Jakarta — Experts have criticized a plan by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to form a new working unit to help address the country's economic problems and improve the investment climate, saying the only thing the business community needed was a concrete and unified economic policy.

Yudhoyono should concentrate on making concrete policies and maximizing the existing resources, the chairman of the Indonesian National Economic Recovery Committee, Sofjan Wanandi, said Sunday.

"The planned unit is basically a good idea. But I doubt that the President will implement the input provided by the unit. He cannot even implement existing plans and resolve the problems already conveyed by the business community," he said.

In a Cabinet meeting Friday, Yudhoyono came up with the idea to form a unit tasked with providing input on ways to address economic problems at home, and also to supervise the implementation of the government's economic policies.

"The unit is part of a tool attached to the President. Its task will be to smooth reform in the economy, administration, state enterprises and small and medium businesses," Coordinating Minister for the Economy Boediono said after the meeting.

The unit, which will be formed through presidential decree, will consist of professional economists and businesspeople. There are reports that former Cabinet secretary and former attorney general Marsilam Simanjuntak has been tapped to lead the unit.

Boediono said the unit also would help the government improve the business climate and ensure that problems faced by the business community would be addressed effectively and promptly.

Economist Aviliani said such a unit would be a waste of energy because the economic policies applied by Yudhoyono were no different from those of previous administrations.

"The real sector needs a breakthrough in economic policies, not more advisers or new plans. If the unit can only provide similar programs to those already arranged by the economic ministers, it would be just another waste," she said.

Since taking office in October 2004, experts say Yudhoyono has failed to introduce any substantial economic policies to help encourage investment, despite having already replaced his chief economic minister and finance minister.

Local and international investors remain concerned about illegal fees, a complex bureaucracy, legal uncertainty and unfriendly local administrations, with few signs their concerns are being addressed.

While Yudhoyono and his economic team blame external factors as the main cause of the country's economic problems, the business community sees little effort being made to lessen the impact by concretely addressing the problems.

"The problems have already been laid out by the business community. What Yudhoyono should do is execute the economic policies already planned. He should be quick because the real sector is not developing and unemployment is soaring," Sofjan said.

Indonesia is facing an economic slowdown with sluggish growth in the real sector, which has seen the number of unemployed rise to 40.1 million, or 37 percent of the country's 107 million workforce.

Profit from fashion declines by 40%

Jakarta Post - May 27, 2006

Jakarta — Fashion products have not bounced back from the fuel price increase in October last year, causing earnings from clothing and shoes to decline by 40 percent since January.

The management of Mal Cinere in South Jakarta, Lanny Darmawan, was quoted by Antara as saying that although Jakarta's shopping malls were never empty of visitors, only a few actually came to buy something.

"Visitors still come, about 10,000 visitors a day, but only a few people actually return home with shopping," she said, explaining that unlike fashion products, food and beverages sales were more resilient.

Mall tenants say that to get through this dry period, they are aggressively promoting their products through various promotional programs. "Reduced profits are no big concern, just as long as they can stay afloat during this time," Lanny said.

President says IMF debt to be repaid in 2 years

Jakarta Post - May 24, 2006

Tony Hotland and Urip Hudiono, Mataram/Jakarta — President Yudhoyono confirmed the government's intention Tuesday of repaying ahead of schedule Indonesia's multibillion dollar debt to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which would be done in two stages and within two years.

"I have talked to Bank Indonesia and I think it's about time we paid. We will repay our \$7.8 billion debt to the IMF in two years," he said during a visit to Mataram, the capital of West Nusa Tenggara, on the island of Lombok.

During a briefing of provincial governors, Yudhoyono explained that the repayment was essential to reducing the country's heavy debt burden, whose continued existence has come in for heavy criticism from some sections of the community lately.

He asked members of the public to be fair, however, and not allow the foreign debt question to be turned into a political football as Indonesia still required loans to support the nation's economic and development plans.

"We need to now manage our debts better, and continue the efforts to repay them earlier by increasing domestic revenues, both from fiscal and non-fiscal sources. We will also continue to prevent corruption so that we can pay our debts and improve our economy," Susilo said.

The government has been under public pressure to reduce the country's foreign debt and improve its management. Last year, the nation's foreign borrowings stood at US\$72.8 billion, including borrowings on the global bond market and the IMF debt.

This accounts for some 45 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), with principal and interest payments accounting for a quarter of state revenues as compared to less than 10 percent for the country's education sector.

Separately, BI Deputy Governor Hartadi A. Sarwono said the central bank would soon finalize a debt repayment plan and submit it to the government for approval. He acknowledged that besides a one-off payment of the IMF debt, a two-tranche repayment was among the options being considered.

"We may pay back half of the debt this year, and the rest next year," Hartadi said. "Our main concern is the ability of our foreign exchange reserves to cover the repayments."

Indonesia's outstanding debt to the IMF takes the form of a standby loan that BI manages to support the country's forex reserves. It matures in 2010, and is part of some \$25 billion in total loans the Fund extended since the outbreak of the 1997 Asian financial crisis to help Indonesia rescue ailing banks and restructure its debts.

BI Senior Deputy Governor Miranda S. Goeltom had previously said that early debt repayment was “almost certain”, considering Indonesia’s recently strengthening forex reserves, which currently stand at some US\$43 billion.

Analysts have, however, warned of risks in hastily repaying debts out of the forex reserves, which consist mostly of the short-term portfolio funds that have recently flooded into Indonesia’s high-yield financial markets, but which could flow out again at any time. The rupiah and local stocks have recently come under sustained pressure resulting from negative global sentiment.

Indonesia ended its loan agreement with the IMF in 2003 amid criticism from nationalist circles of a number of economic reform policies tied to the loans, including subsidy cuts and the privatization program.

Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati, who first suggested the early repayment of the IMF debt, said a preliminary study by BI showed it would be more beneficial to repay the debt given rising borrowing costs.

Sri Mulyani, a former IMF director, also said that with Brazil and Argentina having recently repaid their debts to the IMF, Indonesia and Turkey were now its largest debtors, and virtually its largest income contributors, which could be considered unfair given Indonesia’s developing country status.

IMF country director Stephen B. Schwartz had earlier said that the Fund would welcome whatever Indonesia decided to do, stressing that every member country member had the right to repay its debts ahead of schedule.

OPINION & ANALYSIS

Solidarity not enough

Jakarta Post Editorial - May 31, 2006

The entire country and the world have once again reacted with solidarity following another natural disaster here, this time the magnitude 5.9 earthquake that devastated Indonesia’s densely

populated Yogyakarta and parts of Central Java last Saturday.

Humanitarian assistance from Indonesians of all walks of life, foreign countries and institutions continues to pour in for the survivors of the deadly quake.

While praising the global response to the disaster, we question the coordination among institutions involved in the humanitarian mission. There have been continuing reports of aid failing to reach survivors days after the disaster struck.

A displaced man who was sharing a tent with dozens of other people was shown on TV complaining to visiting President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono about food shortages. Other survivors interviewed on radio and TV said their flattened village had remained unnoticed.

Coordination is the key to a successful disaster response operation, as the massive efforts in tsunami-devastated Aceh and Nias taught us. Poor coordination, lengthy bureaucratic procedures, poor management and incompetent human resources are common barriers to a relief mission, and add to the plight of disaster victims.

In the case of the Yogyakarta quake, apparently a lack of coordination has slowed the distribution of humanitarian assistance for an estimated 600,000 people made homeless by the disaster. The President has dismissed reports of looting and theft, but such crimes could happen if no improvements are made to ensure survivors get the help they need.

It is difficult to understand why there are such problems in aid distribution, given that Yogyakarta and Klaten, the areas hardest hit by the quake, enjoy the kind of quality infrastructure that Aceh and other islands outside Java generally do not have.

Perhaps some of these problems could have been prevented had the President declared the earthquake a national disaster as soon as the scale of the destruction became apparent.

National disaster status allows the President to appoint a person to handle relief operations. With

clear authority, this person is responsible for aid delivery, medical treatment for the injured and, if necessary, the reconstruction of destroyed properties.

By declaring a national disaster the government also is able to deploy all possible resources to help the survivors, including allocating emergency funds and disbursing the money without having to wait for approval from the House of Representatives.

With one person clearly in command, the President would not have to stay in Yogyakarta to directly oversee disaster handling, a move this paper sees as unnecessary.

Telecommunications infrastructure in Yogyakarta, except for the first day after the quake struck, is sophisticated enough to enable video conferences between the President and government officials in the field.

It was certainly a morale booster for Yudhoyono to make a trip to the disaster area in the immediate aftermath of the quake and show solidarity with survivors, but that was enough. His absence from Jakarta, where most of the Cabinet members and top government officials work, for several days could affect his administration.

Furthermore, his stay in Yogyakarta could raise the eyebrows, if not jealousy, of other disaster victims, like those in Aceh and Nias, where over 130,000 people were killed and thousands of others went missing when the tsunami struck in 2004.

There is still much work to be done to help quake survivors. The compassion for the survivors is certainly there, now all that is needed is teamwork to speed up relief efforts. We do not expect the people to suffer any longer.

Disaster nation

Jakarta Post Editorial - May 29, 2006

Television reports of disasters in the country now

come with melancholy tunes, most notably the ballads of Ebiet G. Ade. Since the 2004 earthquake and tsunami in Aceh, his song Berita kepada Kawan (News to a friend) seems to have become the official theme song for tragedies.

While scientists rush for explanations every time a natural disaster strikes, it is inevitable that many ordinary people look inward and ask what sins they may have committed to anger God and nature.

Ebiet's lyrics are once again being heard on Metro TV. As Yogyakartaans were anxiously anticipating a possible eruption by Mt. Merapi, a strong earthquake rocked the province and surrounding areas early Saturday. In his ballad, Ebiet speculates that the disasters in the archipelago are because God is "tired of our behavior".

We may scoff at the elderly and religious who agree with Ebiet, who say we have been cursed with earthquakes and tsunamis, landslides, floods and bird flu because of our sins. But in the wake of the prompt outpouring of condolences and aid from all corners of the globe in response to this latest tragedy, it would not hurt us to check our bad habits — mainly corruption.

World leaders and the international community are always generous in delivering humanitarian aid to the victims of disasters here. And they are kind enough not to come out and say why they are anxious every time they help us. They worry that their assistance will be misused and stolen, as has happened in previous disasters. Unfortunately, there are Indonesians heartless enough to exploit their suffering compatriots and steal the aid they so desperately need.

Greed, which clouds common sense, is an alternative explanation for the country's disasters, apart from the archipelago's hazardous location in the so-called Ring of Fire. Witness the destruction of forests and poorly constructed infrastructure, likely the result of people skimming money from the budgets for these projects. Many buildings here are all too easily damaged in earthquakes, despite claims of solid design.

And, as if forgetting that corruption remains our worst enemy, many of us, including religious

leaders, have been occupied in recent months with trying to secure the passage of a pornography bill. The controversy over this bill, aimed at improving the nation's morality, has become a national preoccupation, at times accompanied by violence, while those involved in corruption live their lives undisturbed.

When mosques in some areas of Aceh were the only structures left standing after the tsunami, it was pointed to by some as a sign that He protects the God-fearing. It may be true that God protected those mosques, but few gave thought to the possibility that these places of worship remained standing because those responsible for their construction were too afraid to steal money from the construction budgets, fearing the wrath of those who commissioned the mosques, or perhaps of God himself.

Apart from curbing greed, a little education about how to reduce the losses and damage from natural disasters would go a long way. As a country prone to disasters, we need to learn from Japan, for instance, how to take preventive measures and raise awareness among the public about how to respond to earthquakes.

In yet another difficult period, we thank domestic donors and volunteers, and the international community for their immediate assistance. From our previous experiences with disasters, we hope every measure is taken to ensure every rupiah of donated money goes to those who are entitled to it. Then Ebiet's words would no longer be relevant, of a people who repeat their mistakes and remain "proud of their follies".