

Indonesia: Oscar-nominated documentary filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer calls for US to acknowledge its role in 1965 killings

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Oscar-nominated documentary filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer on Tuesday called on the US to acknowledge its role in Indonesia's communist purge after screening *The Act of Killing*, his film on 1965 death-squad leaders, for US Congress members and staff.

"Fifty years is a long time to not call a genocide a genocide," he said. "If we want to have a constructive and an ethical relationship with Indonesia moving forward, we have to acknowledge the crimes of the past and we have to acknowledge our collective role in supporting those crimes, in participating in those crimes and ultimately in ignoring those crimes," he said.

The Army, with the help of civilian death squads, killed 500,000 to 1 million people between 1965 and 1966 after the assassination of six army generals in an alleged communist coup attempt. The US government, which at the time was waging a war against Vietnamese communists, was reportedly pleased with the crushing of communism in Indonesia, and saw it as a success in their containment policy. Declassified CIA documents and investigative reports by journalist Kathy Kadane have showed that the US supported the communist purge by providing a list to the Army of around 5,000 people to be killed. The US then supported the Soeharto regime, responsible for orchestrating the massacres, as the new regime took over the country.

Despite the enormity of the crime, the International Criminal Court could not try the perpetrators of the 1965 genocide as it happened before the signing of the Rome Statute that founded the court. "What can happen is a special tribunal like the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia can be formed and that usually happens at the level of the UN Security council," Oppenheimer said. "Before that can happen, probably the countries that were involved with supporting this, will actually have to say 'Hey enough time has gone by for us to become comfortable with acknowledging what has happened here, in the name of addressing impunity and corruption in the fourth most populous country in the world'," he said. "We need to pursue this because this was in fact a crime against humanity," he said.

The Act of Killing was recently nominated for an Oscar Award in the Best Documentary category. The chilling film that follows death-squad leader Anwar Congo happily re-enacting the killings of 1965 has picked up awards in film festivals around the world. In Indonesia, the film has been shown in thousands of underground screenings across the country and as of Sept. 30 last year has been available for download in Indonesia. It has become a catalyst for national conversation on a topic that was largely buried under government propaganda during the Soeharto regime and self-censorship after *reformasi* (reformation).

"Bringing it here [Washington] is a new step in that journey for me," Oppenheimer said. "I'm just pretty moved sitting here talking to you because it has been our hope that this would start a conversation everywhere about this past and about who we are as human beings in some deeper

ways as well," he said to the audience.

US Senator Tom Udall, who sits on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, organized the Tuesday night screening. "When I heard about this film, I thought that this should be given an opportunity for members of congress and staff and everybody to see," he said.

Some 60 people, mostly staffers of Senators, attended the screening held at the Library of Congress. The audience was silent for a couple of moments after the film ended before giving a somber applause. After watching the film, Udall called Oppenheimer an artist. "Artists sometimes tell us stories that we don't want to hear, that we don't want to face. They open a reality to us," he said.

Udall said it was significant that the film was screened here. "This is our nation's capital. This is the seat of government. As you heard from his [Oppenheimer's] interview, we [the US] were involved. So it's important that this space be created to have a discussion also," he said.

Proditia Sabarini, Contributor, Washington, DC, Sun

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<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2014/02/16/director-calls-us-acknowledge-its-role-1965-killings.html>