

# Indonesian-U.S. Tensions Mount

by Michael O. Billington

Indonesia's Defense Minister Mohammad Mahfud, in the most recent public attack on U.S. Ambassador to Indonesia Robert Gelbard, said on Nov. 2, "Once again we remind him to change his attitudes and behavior and to cooperate in good manner." Mahfud added that the government would not hesitate to expel Gelbard if he remained "uncooperative."

Gelbard, in the manner of his boss, would-be colonial princess and U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, has managed to enrage nearly everyone in Indonesia in recent months. The Indonesian economy, like nearly all the Southeast Asian economies, is descending into another round of economic crisis, brought on by the collapse of the bubble economy in the Anglo-American financial system, on top of the disastrous policies forced on most of these countries by the International Monetary Fund over the past three years—policies widely blamed on the United States.

In addition, Clinton Administration pandering to the right-wing fanatics around Ariel Sharon in Israel, turning the Middle East conflict into a religious war, has provoked rage across Indonesia, the largest Muslim nation in the world. In the same vein, several U.S. Congressmen, with ties to the millenarian fundamentalist cults in the United States who are behind the drive to provoke a war in the Middle East, are also accusing the Indonesian government and military of doing nothing while Christians are being slaughtered in ethnic riots in Maluku Province, a charge calculated to aggravate tensions.

In this environment, Gelbard, in an interview in the *Washington Times*, ridiculed the Indonesian government, claiming that Indonesian intelligence agencies had allowed terrorists to "burrow in and implant" themselves in the country, while the intelligence agencies were obsessed with the notion that the United States and Australia are the country's "real enemies." That interview set off a series of calls from members of the Indonesian House of Representatives to declare Gelbard *persona non grata*.

The United States has also undermined the Indonesian military at a time when the continued existence of the nation is threatened by a combination of religious, ethnic, and separatist conflicts across the vast archipelago—conflicts which cannot be contained without a functioning and well-supplied military. Blaming Indonesia for the highly unstable situation in East Timor and in the refugee camps on the Indonesian side of the border, the United States has placed an embargo on military sales, even though the Indonesian Army is, to a great

extent, dependent on U.S. spare parts and equipment. Gelbard has exacerbated the problem by accusing government ministers of trying to cover up problems in the military by blaming the U.S. sanctions for the Army's inability to keep the peace in areas of conflict.

Threats of further sanctions from U.S. Defense Secretary William Cohen, British Ambassador Jeremy Greenstock, and World Bank President James Wolfensohn in regard to the East Timor situation, provoked the Chairman of the People's Consultative Assembly, Amien Rais, to respond: "If the U.S. goes ahead with an embargo, Indonesia can retaliate by nationalizing all American companies in the country."

Ambassador Gelbard has also been accused of interfering in the sovereign affairs of the nation by trying to influence the selection of the military high command, in favor of those deemed willing to dismantle the military under the guise of "reform."

The existing U.S. sanctions, plus threats of other steps against Indonesian security, have led Defense Minister Mahfud to call for Indonesia to consider a defense pact with China, Japan, and India. The pact, he said, would not be designed to fight the United States, but is necessary because "as a sovereign nation . . . , we don't want to be continuously pressured by the U.S." While the idea of such a pact has been ridiculed by some, the fact is, the nations of the East and Southeast are faced with having to create an independent economic alliance to defend against the collapse of the Western banking system, a policy being actively considered by the ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations plus China, Japan, and South Korea (ASEAN-Plus-3). With the Anglo-Americans' proven capacity to deploy military force against sovereign nations virtually at a whim, with or without UN approval, such a military alliance may be taken seriously by the Asian nations.

## Anti-American Ferment

In the past weeks, small but persistent demonstrations have taken place daily outside the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta. For the first time since the 1960s, the Embassy closed its public access offices for a week, due to what Ambassador Gelbard described as "credible threats." On Oct. 29, several dozen members of various Islamic groups in the central Java city of Solo raided the hotels, confronting all Americans with a demand that they leave the country within 48 hours.

On Oct. 30, the U.S. State Department issued a sternly worded advisory warning U.S. citizens to avoid travelling to numerous locations in Indonesia.

The Administration of President Abdurrahman Wahid has attempted to lower tensions with the United States, but he is himself under fire for failing thus far to stop the regional conflicts or reverse the economic decay. If Indonesia is to recover from the current social and economic crises, the leadership must forge, in league with other Asian governments, new regional institutions to defend their sovereign right to economic development and the general welfare.