

Bali Bombing: Global Low-Intensity Warfare

by Michael Billington

Just days after the U.S. Congress granted President George W. Bush the unconstitutional power to start a unilateral, preemptive, and insane aggressive war, came the most deadly terrorist attack since Sept. 11, 2001. The Oct. 12 nightclub bombing on the idyllic resort island of Bali, Indonesia, leaving at least 180 dead and hundreds wounded—mostly foreigners, and most of them Australians—was the most lethal of a series of low-intensity war attacks around the world in the past weeks. There were bombs in Finland and the Philippines—including multiple bombs that killed and injured dozens in Mindanao in the Southern Philippines on Oct. 17—explosions on a French oil tanker, and a serial sniper in the Washington, D.C. area.

Indonesia, with the largest Islamic population in the world, has been subjected in past months to a massive international campaign, both from Western governments and their media outlets, demanding that it follow the Anglo-American version of the “war on terrorism.” Indonesia has been instructed to arrest radical Muslim activists, and, in particular, the cleric Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, declared by Singapore and the Western press (quoting leaks from the CIA) to be the leader of a Southeast Asian terrorist network called Jemaah Islamiah. Indonesia has refused these demands, insisting that it will not return to the tyrannical rule of the Suharto regime, refusing to make arrests of its citizens without evidence or due process.

This resistance, however, has earned Indonesia such titles as “the new headquarters for al-Qaeda,” and the “weak link in the war on terrorism.” This is verging on the accusation that Indonesia is “harboring terrorists,” a trip wire for the utopian warriors in Washington to proclaim the right to unilateral intervention.

Threat To Name Indonesia ‘Terror Haven’

After the Bali bombing, the United States and its “deputy sheriff” in Asia (as Australian Prime Minister John Howard once described his nation’s role) have demanded that Indonesia now admit its error and obey the global imperial power structure—although the source of the carnage in Bali is still unknown. American Ambassador to Indonesia Ralph Boyce, according to the Oct. 16 *New York Times*, had told Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri, on the eve of the Bali bombing, that “if the government did not act by the time President Megawati was to see Mr. Bush at a meeting in Mexico in late October, the United States planned to send a

public signal that Indonesia was a terrorist haven, by ordering all but the most essential American diplomats home.” After the bombing, Boyce activated his warning.

Howard, whose country suffered on Oct. 12 its greatest casualties abroad since the Vietnam War, chose to follow the U.S. lead by calling on the UN to place Jemaah Islamiah on the terrorist list, a proposal first offered several weeks ago by U.S. State Department official James Kelly. On Oct. 17, Howard strongly encouraged all Australians in Indonesia—a total of more than 10,000 people—to leave immediately, citing new evidence of more attacks being planned.

Indonesia, battered by the brutality of the bombing and the intense pressure from abroad, has not been willing to submit its sovereignty to foreign dictates, nor allow the hysteria of the Bush Administration’s utopian war-cry to obscure their *real* problem with terrorism. The *Jakarta Post*, the leading English-language paper in the country, presented an unusually blunt and insightful editorial on the morning of Oct. 14, called “National Tragedy”: “We don’t believe that the arrest of Muslim cleric Abu Bakar Ba’asyir—whom Singapore and Malaysia have identified as the leader of a regional group with aspirations to turn Southeast Asia into an Islamic state—would have prevented Saturday’s attacks [in Bali]. Ba’asyir, if anything, has been a diversion, or even a decoy. While we have all debated his role in Jemaah Islamiah, and whether or not to put him under arrest on suspicion of terrorist activities, the real operatives, whoever they may be, were quietly plotting the attacks.”

Coordinating Minister for Defense and Security Bambang Susilo Yudhoyono, although sternly warning Indonesians that there could be no more delusions regarding the threat within Indonesia, refused to acknowledge any particular foreign role in the bombing pending the investigation, and added that he did not believe that Jemaah Islamiah existed in Indonesia. While not defending Ba’asyir directly, this seconded Ba’asyir’s contention that there is no such organization as Jemaah Islamiah—a term that simply means “Islamic community.”

Headlines around the world on Oct. 15 reported “Indonesia Admits al-Qaeda Role in Indonesia,” quoting the Defense Minister, Matori Abdul Djilil, who said he had no doubt that al-Qaeda was connected to the bombing. However, other Cabinet Ministers do doubt it, as international journalists were well aware, but played down.

Ba’asyir himself has denounced the bombing, speculating that the United States had the most to gain from the incident, while he is busy filing a lawsuit against *Time* magazine for slander, in leaking a CIA report which allegedly ties Ba’asyir to earlier and planned terrorist acts in Indonesia.

Economic Damage Is Great

The impact of the bombing on Indonesia, and on Southeast Asia generally, will be severe. Indonesia is already saddled with a debt burden far beyond its capacity to sustain—left by the assault of global speculators on its currency and its

economy in the 1997-98 "Asian crisis." Tourism in Indonesia, centered in Bali, represents 5% of the economy, employing more than 10 million people; at least temporarily, it will collapse drastically. There is a run on both the rupiah and the nation's equity markets, and the flight of capital, which has continued unabated since 1997, will likely get worse. A dark irony: Bali was about to open its first international airline, called Air Paradise International, with flights to Perth and Melbourne. Pre-purchased tickets are being refunded, and the company's future appears dim.

As the Argentina and Brazil crises explode over the coming months, Indonesia could easily become the next sacrificial lamb to the lords of the debt bubble. Predictably, an International Monetary Fund (IMF) representative met with government officials immediately after the attack, and said the IMF would work with the lender institutions to "offer whatever support possible to the government of Indonesia at this difficult time"—but added, the *Jakarta Post* reported, that "so far, the Bali attack has had no impact on the time frame of the IMF's delayed loan disbursement. . . . Indonesia needed to meet its reform targets first." The \$360 million tranche of the IMF's already-pledged support is being held up as Indonesia refuses to sell off valuable state-owned banks and industries (as the IMF demands) while the market is so depressed that the sale would constitute a virtual giveaway. With the markets now facing an even greater decline,

the IMF hard line shows it may be considering the Argentina treatment for Indonesia.

Theories of All Stripes

Theories abound concerning the controlling hand behind the Bali atrocity. Beside the al-Qaeda/Jemaah Islamiah theory, others accuse the Indonesian Army, saying it sought revenge for Australia's subversive role in the separation of East Timor, and continuing support for separatist movements in other Indonesian provinces. Others blame followers of former President Suharto, aiming at a comeback through the "war on terror." The primary domestic Islamic radical movement, the Laskar Jihad, might have fallen under suspicion, but it suddenly closed its headquarters in Yogyakarta and announced it was disbanding—not due to the Bali attack, but because peace between Muslims and Christians has generally been restored in the Muloccas, the scene of Laskar Jihad's violent defense of Muslims. Other theories claim U.S. or Israeli instigation to further stir up global sentiment for war against Iraq and other Islamic nations, and for Sharon's plan to expel the Palestinians to Jordan.

No conclusions can be drawn without international investigative efforts, and the necessary consideration of the global strategic transformation now taking place, centered on the imperial U.S. strategic policy declaration of September 2002, and the proliferation of low-intensity warfare worldwide.

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