

# President Of World's Largest Muslim Nation Visits Washington

by Mike Billington

Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri visited Washington on Sept. 19, meeting with President George Bush, Vice President Richard Cheney, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and other administration and Congressional leaders. Megawati, in office for only two months, decided to proceed with the trip, despite pressure at home to cancel in the wake of Sept. 11 and the war plans being pursued in Washington, to show, in her words, "that this was the time for the government and the people of Indonesia to accept the invitation of President Bush, and to show their deep sympathy and support for the government and the people of the United States of America in this difficult time."

President Megawati is taking a huge political risk. If the Bush Administration proceeds with its current rush toward a "flight-forward" war against one or several Islamic nations, the reaction within Indonesia, the world's largest Islamic nation, could turn against her, denouncing her for making deals with Washington.

On the other hand, her presence in Washington may help temper the influence of the mad-dog faction within the administration. (Ironically, Indonesia's closest friend within the administration is former U.S. Ambassador to Indonesia Paul Wolfowitz, now the Deputy Secretary of Defense, and the most rabid advocate in the administration of a new imperial policy for the United States, and for striking out at both Afghanistan and several Arab states.)

According to the joint statement released following her meeting with Bush, Megawati used a moderating tone to "encourage President Bush in his stated purpose of building a broad coalition across religious lines and cultures to deal with these new and dangerous threats. She further emphasized the importance of taking into account the views of the Muslim world as the U.S. leads an appropriate response to the events of Sept. 11."

Indonesia has its own "Islamic terrorist" problem, and, together with its neighbors Malaysia and the Philippines, has learned that although the Afghansi networks parade under an Islamic banner, they are sponsored by international interests with political and economic motives in destabilizing target countries. Megawati made clear that she would not tolerate further outside interference in support of the Islamic separatist movement in Aceh. At a dinner in her honor in Washington, she said: "I would like to make it clear once again that the

integrity of our country is of the highest importance, and we will defend it at all cost. . . . America became great because . . . the principle of national integrity was upheld by Abraham Lincoln and other heroes of that era."

## Across Southeast Asia

Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, there was evidence of the same serious intent to end terrorism, but concern that the United States not precipitate a greater danger through a reckless reaction. Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad, who has taken measures to coordinate with his neighbors in operations against Afghansi terrorist cells in the region, called for an immediate international conference on terrorism. After signing the condolence book at the U.S. Embassy, he said: "We have to look at terrorism as a crime that has to be addressed by the whole world. Islamic countries should not take sides with fellow Islamic countries, while non-Islamic countries should not take sides with non-Islamic countries who are their friends or their enemies." He said that a solution must be sought to resolve issues which were at the root of terrorism, or, if this were not addressed, a spiral of violence would see retaliation followed by retaliation.

In Thailand, which has both an Islamic separatist movement in the south, and must deal with the transshipment of arms through its territory for various terrorist networks, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra also sought international cooperation against terrorism, but cautioned against any religious war, while advising the U.S. that it would not make its former B-52 bomber bases available for any new war effort.

Philippines President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo responded to the attack in a more precipitous manner, offering "all-out support" to the United States on the afternoon of the atrocities in New York and Washington: "We will extend all the support we can in the international coalition's war against terrorism." She offered to reopen Clark and Subic Bay military facilities to the United States, and even to join in possible troop deployments, without any idea of what the military actions were to be. She was met with fierce resistance, however, first from the Congress, which reminded her that such decisions were the Constitutional responsibility of the Congress, not the President, and then from the Church. Archbishop Orlando Quevedo, president of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, said that "terrorism is not to be met with terrorism," and that the response to the attacks must be taken with "prudence and preparation . . . and with wisdom and discernment." He advised that the government solve the problem in the South (the Afghansi Abu Sayyaf terrorists who are currently holding 18 American and Filipino hostages) before sending troops overseas.

President Arroyo has moderated her tone as a result, and, while insisting that Manila's participation in the war against terrorism is a "moral imperative and a diplomatic obligation," she gave her support for a regional anti-terrorist coalition, to include Malaysia and Indonesia, to focus on rooting out the regional cells of the international terrorist networks.