

Indonesia Rejects CNN 'Islamic Terror' Lies

by Mike Billington

U.S. media networks commonly portray nations in the Islamic world as breeding grounds for terrorism, asserting the most blatant lies without bothering to attempt proof or qualified sourcing. It was thus refreshing to see Indonesia respond to a recent CNN feature broadcast, "Seeds of Terror," narrated by Indonesia bureau chief Maria Ressa, under the direction of CNN documentation series host and news anchor, Aaron Brown.

Following multiple broadcasts of the CNN special during the week of Jan. 11, Mahendra Siregar, an expert on the staff of Indonesia's Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs Dorodjatun Kuntjoro-Jakti, retorted, "The Indonesian Government herein wishes to officially respond and condemn this libelous, spurious, and slanderous" program. In his public letter to CNN Executive Vice President Sid Bedingfield, Mahendra wrote that Indonesia had, in a few short years, transformed itself from 30 years under an authoritarian regime, to a struggling but progressing democracy, while "placing individual freedom and constitutional democracy above all." Thus, he wrote, "to have our fledgling democracy pilloried on the world stage by a news organization that professes to expound and demand these very freedoms and rights, while simultaneously trampling on those of others, is appalling, to say the least."

Mahendra continued: "There should be no need to reiterate that the overwhelming sentiment among Indonesians is one of distrust for the American press. It is widely believed here in Indonesia, especially following the invasion of Iraq against the will of the United Nations, that this same press, especially CNN, had little interest, if any, in reporting this universal sentiment, and stop acting as the U.S. Government's official mouthpiece."

Mahendra documented the multiple fabrications in the broadcast, noting that narrator Ressa, who spent many years in Southeast Asia before becoming CNN bureau chief in Jakarta, could have interviewed government officials or leaders of the two mass Islamic movements in Indonesia on the quite successful Indonesian police effort, and public debate, regarding the threat of terrorism—but did not. Instead, Ressa slanted her report about Indonesia: "Here there are at least 300 ethnic groups, speaking nearly 600 languages and dialects. The uniting force: Islam. Home to 200 million Muslims, Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world, a population at the heart of a struggle that is the ideological battle of our

generation.” As Mahendra reported, this is about as contrary to the truth about Indonesia as one could possibly go. The essence of the state is the concept of *Pancasila*, first formulated by founding father President Sukarno, the father of the current President Megawati Sukarnoputri. *Pancasila* includes religious freedom under God, national unity, social justice, and democracy. As Mahendra argues: “Exploiting the religion card is beyond anything comprehensible to our people and government. We are a nation of diverse peoples and religions, and in contrast to the image your organization depicts, desires only peace.”

Ressa portrayed the Islamic school system as virtual terrorist training camps, implying that the government is afraid to challenge the supposedly terrorist-minded clerics. CNN turned for its “expert opinion” to Rohan Gunaratna, author of the best-seller *Inside al-Qaeda*, a pastiche of media rumors accusing every nation and institution remotely connected to Islam as a breeder of terrorists. As this author wrote, countering some of Gunaratna’s lies, in *EIR*, Jan. 17, 2003: “It would be wise to remember that the United States and Britain dispensed huge amounts of money around the world in the 1980s to recruit militant Muslims to join the U.S.-funded irregular warfare operations against the Soviet forces in Afghanistan. To now declare that this qualifies such individuals as international terrorists, subject to intervention in breach of national sovereignty, is the height of hypocrisy.”

Mahendra’s open letter concluded with a demand that “CNN provide the Indonesian Government with equal airtime during the same prime-time slot, to rebut this broadcast.” CNN’s Bedingfield responded immediately, defending the “Seeds of Terror” as “accurate, fair, and responsible reporting,” providing no more sources or proof for the multiple fabrications than had been presented on the broadcast. Mahendra responded to CNN that “this issue is not going to go away as a result of your rather unprofessional reaction, one which I would have found amusing under different circumstances.”

Other Voices Speak Out

Mahendra was speaking for the government, but it is not only government spokesmen in Indonesia who are warning that the U.S. neo-conservative faction in power is doing more to *create* terrorism than to combat it.

On Jan. 22, at a conference sponsored by the Sasakawa Peace Foundation in Washington, D.C., Dr. Rizal Sukma, who is both the Director of Studies at Jakarta’s Center for Strategic and International Studies, and a national leader of Muhammadiyah, the second largest Islamic organization in Indonesia, and who is not shy about criticizing the government, pointed out that Indonesians are quite proud of their success at capturing and prosecuting the leading perpetrators of recent terrorist attacks, in fair and public trials (unlike the approach in the United States). Terrorism, he said, will not even be a major issue in the upcoming elections, while the

fact that there are still 40 million unemployed will be of far greater concern.

Radicalism, he insisted, is not to be confused with terrorism—the injustice in Palestine, Iraq, and elsewhere provokes radicalism, as people demand that they be heard, but this does not make them terrorists. Only by open debate and political action can such issues be resolved, said Dr. Sukma, and Indonesians are proud that such debate flourishes in their nation.

While Indonesia is dealing moderately well with the economic disaster brought on by the international speculative attack of 1997-98, the United States would do better, said Dr. Sukma, to provide economic and social aid, rather than dictating policies and conditions regarding the problem of terrorism. Regarding Gunaratna, Dr. Sukma told this reporter that he had once debated the reknowned “expert,” and after one too many assertions of “fact” which Dr. Sukma knew to be false, he challenged Gunaratna to identify his sources. The response—“confidential Indonesian intelligence sources”—made Dr. Sukma laugh out loud.

Another speaker at the conference, Daniel Benjamin, formerly a counter-terror specialist for the Clinton Administration’s National Security Council, added that the United States is making the same mistake now in regard to terrorism, as it did in the Cold War, when a preoccupation with fighting communism above all other considerations led into the quagmire of Vietnam.



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