

Indonesia's good intentions, bad "fengshui": Projecting international image and coping with domestic disasters

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Indonesia's good intentions, bad "fengshui": Projecting international image and coping with domestic disasters

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Introduction

Yeo Lay Hwee and Cynthia Chang of Southeast Asia Peace and Security Net write that

"amidst internal problems of battling bird flu, dealing with the after effects of the earthquake in Central Java, and now flash floods and landslide, Indonesia played host to

the second International Conference of Islamic Scholars, topping off with SBY's budding attempt to play a mediating role in North Korea, while dealing with yet another Australia-Indonesia row."

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Essay - Indonesia's good intentions, bad "fengshui": Projecting international image and coping with domestic disasters

Amidst internal problems of battling bird flu, dealing with the after effects of the earthquake in Central Java, and now flash floods and landslide, Indonesia played host to the second International Conference of Islamic Scholars, topping off with SBY's budding attempt to play a mediating role in North Korea, while dealing with yet another Australia-Indonesia row.

Indonesia's bird flu death toll rose to 39 on Tuesday, pushing it closer to becoming the country hardest hit by the virus. At the sidelines of a meeting of top bird flu experts in Jakarta on Wednesday, Peter Roeder, an animal health expert with the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, said the disaster-prone country, which has reported the world's highest number of human deaths from bird flu this year, lacks manpower and money to battle the H5N1 virus alone and needs support from the international community.

Indonesia needs donors to give it US\$50 million over the next three years to establish a system to help fight bird flu in poultry. The money would be used for initial capacity-building: to lay the groundwork to strengthen surveillance, coordination and rapid-response systems for the country's vast poultry population which can be found in millions of backyard farms. Roeder said Indonesia could not be expected to foot the bill for the fight against the spread of H5N1, especially since it had so many other natural disasters and problems to handle, referring to the deadly earthquake that killed close to 6000 people recently. Adding to that, flash flood and landslides, believed to be caused by deforestation, killed more than a hundred people in South Sulawesi province on Tuesday.

While struggling to cope with various domestic problems, Indonesia still aspires to an active and constructive international role. The second International Conference of Islamic Scholars (ICIS) on Wednesday recommended that the United Nations take an active part in easing conflicts in Islamic countries. Opening the conference on Tuesday, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono stressed the importance of enhancing the role of Islamic organisations such as the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) to play a greater role in promoting the resolution of conflicts in the world. Both Yudhoyono and Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi took the opportunity to exhort their community to play a bigger role in helping to solve global problems.

The conference is the brainchild of Indonesia's largest Muslim group, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which preaches a moderate form of Islam. NU chairman Hasyim Muzadi said the conference was aimed at promoting conflict resolutions among Islamic sects and reducing tension between the East and West. Touted by its organisers as the most inclusive gathering of Islamic scholars, the ICIS boasts participants from different Islamic sects and schools of thought. The first meeting in 2004 established the ICIS's platform of Islam as rahmatan lil alamin (Arabic for 'a blessing for all humankind and the universe') to be the basis of future programmes to promote a more progressive form of the religion. This time, the organisers hoped to translate the philosophical guideline into

action by forming three groups which discussed specific issues on conflict resolution, how to put the ICIS platform into action and how to help Muslim societies achieve social and economic progress. It remains to be seen what will come out of the conference, which ended Thursday.

Meanwhile, Indonesia reiterates that it will try to play a role as mediator in North Korea. SBY was scheduled to visit North Korea but the trip was postponed because of the quake in Central Java. "Indonesia could help cool tension in the Korean peninsula," Dino Patti Djalal, a spokesman for the president, said Tuesday in Jakarta. He didn't give a date for the re-scheduled visit. Hans Blix, chairman of the UN Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission (WMDC), said Tuesday after meeting Yudhoyono that it's "urgent" for North Korea to return to the nuclear disarmament talks. Blix told reporters that Yudhoyono may have "a mediating influence" with North Korea.

Indonesia-Australia bilateral relations remain stormy after the recent row over the early release of radical Muslim cleric Abu Bakar Bashir, believed to be the spiritual head of Jemaah Islamiah and the men convicted of inspiring the Bali bombings. The recent row could not have come at a worse time but it seems that the pressure is building more on Prime Minister John Howard than it is on his Indonesian counterpart. While Indonesian politicians have come out strong and united on their stand on the Bashir issue, Howard has been drawing criticism from within Australia on what is perceived to be his appeasement toward Indonesia following the West Papua controversy.

Howard has been anxious to build bridges with Jakarta since Indonesia withdrew its ambassador to Canberra over the granting of protection visas to 42 West Papuan asylum seekers. Indonesian politicians accused Australia of supporting the separatist movement in West Papua, prompting Mr Howard to introduce new legislation to tighten border protection; a crackdown that led to claims that he was, in effect, appeasing Indonesia.

Yudhoyono and Howard will re-discuss their security cooperation agreement in a meeting in Batam this week. There is a lot at stake as Canberra hopes to sign a new security agreement with Jakarta soon, a treaty that would foster closer cooperation in matters of security, counter-terrorism and defence. But first both nations have to address the twin problems of Bashir and West Papua, and these seem poised to put a brake on any breakthrough in bilateral ties.

Information about the authors

Dr Yeo Lay Hwee is Executive Director and Senior Research Fellow of the [Singapore Institute of International Affairs](#) (SIIA). Her most recent publications include "Asia and Europe: The Development and Different Dimensions of ASEM", Routledge (2004); and "The Eurasian Space: Far More than Two Continents" (with Wim Stokhof and Paul van der Velde), Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) (2004).

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