

Interviews and documents show ...

US orchestrated Suharto's 1965-66 slaughter in Indonesia

Part 3: New light on Australia's active involvement

By Mike Head
21 July 1999

Previously-secret documents at the Australian Archives in Canberra indicate that the Australian government—then led by Liberal Party Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies—and the Australian military, intelligence and diplomatic services were closely involved in the 1965-66 Indonesian coup carried out by General Suharto.

In publishing some of the records on July 12, the *Sydney Morning Herald* chose the headline, “The silent watchers”. Its introduction said the documents showed that the federal government had “turned a blind eye” to the “indiscriminate slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Indonesians”.

But the documents themselves confirm that the Australian role was as active as that of the US government, if only on a smaller scale. Its military had trained some of the officers taking part in the massacre, and during 1965-66 the Menzies government and its officials shared intelligence sources, reports and assessments on the most intimate basis with their American, Canadian and British counterparts.

Moreover, the records demonstrate that the cables sent to and from the Australian Embassy in Jakarta mirrored, at times word for word, those from the US Embassy in their insistence that the Indonesian generals led by Suharto had to act ruthlessly to crush all support for the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), especially among industrial workers.

Nor was this an “indiscriminate slaughter”. The documents point to a common view, shared by the American, British and Australian governments, that the establishment of a military dictatorship in Indonesia was an essential contribution toward the wider war against the anti-imperialist struggles that had erupted in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Malaysia.

Earlier in 1965 the Menzies government had committed troops to both Borneo and South Vietnam. In January, it had agreed to the deployment of a combat battalion and a 100-strong SAS unit to Borneo to combat Indonesian forces mobilised by the Sukarno government as part of its campaign against the British-sponsored formation of Malaysia, which included the resource-rich former British colonies of Sabah and Sarawak. In April, the Menzies cabinet had committed the first battalion of infantry to the US intervention in Vietnam

The documents published by the *Sydney Morning Herald* relate to the period after Suharto's seizure of power on October 1, 1965. Thus, they only indirectly shed light on the Australian involvement in the US preparations for the coup. In addition, the present Howard government continues to block access to hundreds of pages of material held in the Archives on the 1965-66 events in Indonesia. No doubt, the documents that have been released are the least incriminating.

Yet they are damning enough. They show that on October 5, 1965—just four days after Suharto's takeover—the Australian Ambassador in Jakarta, K. C. O. “Mick” Shann used identical language to that of the US Ambassador, Marshall Green, in welcoming Suharto's coup. It was “now or never” for the Indonesian army to deal with the PKI, Shann advised Canberra. On the same day, Green had told Washington that: “Army now has opportunity to move against PKI if it acts quickly ... In short, it's now or never.”

If anything, Shann was more vitriolic than his American colleague in demanding decisive action by the Indonesian generals. “Change there will be,” he said in a dispatch to Canberra the next day. “We will never get back to the status quo ante. But if Sukarno and his greasy civilian cohorts get back into the saddle it will be a change for the worse.”

By October 12, External Affairs Department officials in Canberra were encouraged by the developments. Arrests, murders and executions had begun, and mobs had ransacked the houses of PKI members of Sukarno's cabinet.

In a memo to External Affairs Minister Paul Hasluck, a first assistant secretary in the department, Gordon Jockel, said: “Since our last note to you the army has been more vigorous and independent. Despite the president's call for unity, the army and the Muslim groups are taking strong practical action to disarm the PKI and disrupt its organisation.” Jockel described these trends as “favourable,” although there were “still great uncertainties”.

Three days later, the Embassy informed Canberra that: “Almost daily, offices, houses and bookshops have been ransacked or burned and the momentum does not seem to be faltering.” On the same day, Shann sent a report in which he noted that mass killings of PKI supporters were underway. “At least a few ‘suspects’ have been brutally murdered. We will never know how many people have lost their lives. We think it is a lot.”

Shann indicated that the Western powers were still not fully confident in the military's role. There was likely to be no great joy for the West if the army came to power, he thought. It would remain “implacably anti-imperialist and therefore ... anti-American, anti-British and, to the extent that we bother them, anti-Australian.”

Two days later, on October 17, according to US documents, US and Australian officials met in Washington to discuss Indonesia and the army's strategy. A US State Department memo indicates that the US Assistant Secretary of State, McGeorge Bundy, met the head of Australia's External Affairs Department, Sir James Plimsoll, and Australia's Ambassador to the US, Keith Waller and exchanged views on

the army's intentions.

By October 22, Shann, like Marshall Green, was more optimistic. The Embassy reported that Indonesia was experiencing “a mounting wave of anti-communist demonstrations and sentiment and a general army-condoned, or perhaps army-inspired, blackening of the communist image.”

It referred to a “cleansing operation” that included “nocturnal army operations” at all levels of society. Shann himself had witnessed about 250 prisoners being “whisked off” by military police. “It is impossible to make any estimate of the number of people killed or detained,” the Embassy said. “It cannot be small.”

The Embassy report concluded, enthusiastically: “He would be a very cautious man who did not derive some encouragement from events in Indonesia over the past week.”

American documents also show that when, at the end of October, the Johnson administration determined that Suharto should establish a military government, it consulted the Menzies government, together with the British.

The Australian authorities were aware that workers and villagers were among the main targets of the military repression.

In the month of November, the Embassy noted that the wave of terror had been extended down to the factory floor. According to its report of November 17, it had apparently become the practice in factories and other workplaces “for the army to assemble the labour force and ask them whether they wish to continue work as usual. Those who decline are asked again and, unless they change their mind, summarily shot.”

Two days later, the Embassy proudly reported on an “action”—a massacre—led by an Australian-trained officer. Colonel Sarwo Edhie was a 1964 graduate from an 18-month course at the Australian Army Staff College at Queenscliff, near Melbourne. On November 10, 1965, just a year after graduating, he commanded 400 soldiers of the feared RPKAD (Special Forces, now known as Kopassus) on a sweep through Central Java, hunting for opponents of the military junta.

At 6.30 am the troops approached a village at the foot of Mount Merapi, in the Boyolali district, 40 km north-east of Jogjakarta, firing “test shots” into the air. Between 100 and 200 people, many of them women and children, appeared at the side of the road. According to the report sent to Canberra, the villagers advanced on the troops with cries of “Nekolim,” meaning “neo-colonialists and imperialists” and were armed with bamboo spears, knives and “one or two guns”. “Shots fired over their heads by the patrol failed to deter them and the army was obliged to shoot at them, killing seven and wounding 17.”

That report was derived from a first-hand account supplied by an Indian journalist, B. K. Tiwari, who had spent 11 days in Central Java as Sarwo Edhie's guest. Tiwari's account also confirmed that the military was training Muslim militia groups. In an interview with Tiwari, the Colonel had “spoken of the training he was giving Muslim groups (as yet no arms had been issued)”. Muslim youth were acting “as the ears and eyes of the army, guiding patrols and generally informing”.

Two days before Christmas 1965, the Australian Embassy estimated that, on average, 1,500 people had been murdered every day since September 30. “Estimates of the number of people killed vary between 100,000 and 200,000, the latter being the figure accepted by the American and West German embassies. The West Germans have heard that 70,000 people have been killed in East Java alone. Without having any firm basis for making an estimate we would if we had to name a figure put it at between 100,000 and 150,000. This works out at about 1,500 assassinations per day since September 30th.”

While the bloodbath was taking place in Indonesia, the Menzies government and the External Affairs Department sought to control and censor the news broadcast to Indonesia by Radio Australia. On October 10, 1965 Ambassador Shann advised Canberra that Radio Australia

should “do nothing to engender sympathy for President Sukarno”.

Two days later, the External Affairs Department's public information officer, Richard Woolcott noted in a memo that he and a colleague had told contacts at Radio Australia that it should “by careful selection of its news items, not do anything which would be helpful to the PKI and should highlight reports tending to discredit the PKI and show its involvement in the losing cause of the September 30 movement.”

The Department's Gordon Jockel wrote to Shann on October 15, asking to be advised “whether there are any problems with the ABC representatives in Jakarta”. In a memo to his Minister, Paul Hasluck, on October 18, David Hay, another first assistant secretary, said: “Radio Australia should be on guard against giving information to the Indonesian people that would be withheld by the army-controlled internal media, e.g. disavowals [of coup involvement] by the PKI ...”

On October 21, Woolcott reported that he had insisted that Radio Australia refer to Suharto and other key generals as “non-communist” rather than “anti-communist” and “rightist”. “I stressed again to [Radio Australia news editor John] Hall that the danger of inaccurate reporting could have an adverse effect on the army ...”

By November 5, the Indonesian army was so confident that the Menzies government would do its bidding that it relayed a message to Canberra, via Shann, that news items critical of Indonesian Foreign Minister Subandrio “should be used” by Radio Australia.

It also said “reports should never imply that the army or its supporters” were in any way “pro-Western or right wing”. At that stage in the coup, given the strength of anti-colonial feeling among the Indonesian masses, it was still unwise for the generals to openly identify themselves with their Western patrons.

The events of 1965-66 reveal the essential outlook of the Australian political and military establishment. For public consumption, government leaders extol “democratic values,” but the actual record is one of demanding and supporting, whenever it is deemed necessary, military violence ... and media manipulation.

This participation in the Indonesian holocaust was not a passing phase, nor an aberration. The figures who led the Australian involvement in the 1965-66 coup were all well rewarded for many years to come. Paul Hasluck, the Minister, was later knighted and became Governor-General of Australia. David Hay, a key official, was also knighted and then appointed Administrator of Papua New Guinea from 1967 to 1970. Gordon Jockel, also from External Affairs, went on to serve as Ambassador in Indonesia from 1969 to 1972. Richard Woolcott, another high-ranking official, became Ambassador to Indonesia too—from 1975 to 1978—then headed the Foreign Affairs Department. He remains a prominent media commentator on events in Indonesia.

As for the Labor Party, while it was not in office in 1965-66, its support for the Indonesian massacre was best summed up in the early 1990s by the then prime minister, Paul Keating. He referred to Suharto's coup as the most important and beneficial event in Australia's post-war strategic history.

To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wswp.org>