

162. Editorial Note

The Embassy in Djakarta was hampered in its reporting on events in the areas outside the capital by the general confusion and chaos of the initial conflict between the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI) on one hand and the Indonesian Army and anti-Communist forces on the other. At first the Embassy viewed the fighting and violence as a potential military/guerrilla conflict and concentrated on the PKI's armed activity and its potential for terrorism. In telegram 1215 from Djakarta, October 27, 1965, the Embassy recounted multiple reports of increasing insecurity and mounting bloodshed in Central Java, but could not determine whether it was caused by the PKI moving towards terrorism and sabotage, "local PKI cadres reacting uncoordinatedly to pressures upon them," or the Army "purposely moving to wipe out questionable elements and gain control." (National Archives and Records Administration, RG 84, Djakarta Embassy Files: Lot 69 F 42, POL 23) On October 28 the Embassy reported that a PKI source alleged that the PKI was about to engage in a "war of liberation" and cited incidents of PKI terrorism to support this conclusion. The telegram stated, "There [is] no question, even allowing for exaggeration, that PKI acts of terrorism have increased." (Telegram 1248 from Djakarta, October 28; *ibid.*, RG 59, Central Files 1964-66, POL 23-9 INDON) On October 28 the Embassy Country Team reviewed the situation and sent its appraisal. Although the report emphasized the deteriorating security situation in Central Java, East Java, Bandung, and Djakarta, the team could not say "whether these incidents were isolated acts of local communists or beginning of a coordinated act of terror and sabotage." The report concluded that Indonesia was heading for a "period of chaos, since PKI has residual strength and arms, but balance seems on Army side." (Telegram 1255 from Djakarta; October 28; *ibid.*)

At the end of October 1965, the Embassy began to receive reports of killings and atrocities against PKI members, which were generally reported upon in the context of continued armed PKI resistance. On October 29 the Embassy reported that "Moslem fervor in Atjeh apparently put all but few PKI out of action. Atjehnese have decapitated PKI and placed their heads on stakes along the road. Bodies of PKI victims reportedly thrown into rivers or sea as Atjehnese refuse 'contaminate Atjeh soil.'" (Telegram 1269 from Djakarta; October 29; *ibid.*, RG 84, Djakarta Embassy Files: Lot 69 F 42, Pol 23-9) By November 8 the Embassy reported that in North Sumatra and Atjeh "the Army with the help of IP-KI Youth organizations and other anti-Communist elements has continued systematic drive to destroy PKI in northern Sumatra with wholesale killings reported." On November 13 the Embassy had a report from the local police chief that "from 50 to 100 PKI

members were being killed every night in East and Central Java by civilian anti-Communist troops with blessing of the Army." A missionary in Surabaya reported that 3,500 PKI were killed between November 4 and 9 in Kediri and 300 at Paree, 30 kilometers northwest of Kediri. (Telegrams 1374 and 1438 from Djakarta, November 8 and 13, and telegram 171 from Surabaya, November 13; *ibid.*) These types of anecdotal reports continued well into the first months of 1966. In airgram A-527 from Djakarta, February 25, 1966, the Embassy reported estimates of the PKI death toll in Bali at 80,000 with "no end in sight." The Embassy attributed the murders to sharp conflict there between PKI and the Indonesian National Party (PNI), but also to the "tradition of family blood feuds" and suggested that "many of the killings that are taking place under a political cover are actually motivated by personal and clan vendettas." (*Ibid.*, RG 59, Central Files 1964-66, POL 23-9 INDON)

Gradually the Embassy came to realize that Indonesia was undergoing a full scale purge of PKI influence and that these killings were overlaid with long standing and deep ethnic and religious conflicts. The fact that many of the killings took place in outlying areas tended to obscure their magnitude. The Embassy still had no good estimates of the number of Indonesians who perished. In airgram A-641 to the Department, April 15, 1966, the Embassy stated that the problem was the impossibility of weighing "the countervailing effects of exaggeration (which is especially common in Indonesia) and the interests of persons involved to cover up some of the crimes. The truth can never be known. Even the Indonesian Government has only a vague idea of the truth." The Embassy admitted, "We frankly do not know whether the real figure is closer to 100,000 or 1,000,000 but believe it wiser to err on the side of the lower estimates, especially when questioned by the press." (*Ibid.*, POL 2 INDON)

In 1970, Foreign Service Officer Richard Cabot Howland, an officer at the Embassy in Indonesia in 1965 and 1966, published an article in the classified publication, *Studies in Intelligence* (Vol. 14, Fall 1970, pages 13-28) which has subsequently been declassified and is available at the National Archives and Records Administration, RG 263, CIA Records, *Studies in Intelligence*. Howland's article attempts to refute three misconceptions popular at the time of his article: that the Indonesian military was encouraged to move against the PKI by the forceful U.S. stance in Vietnam, that the Chinese were behind the September 30 coup attempt, and that from 350,000 to 1.5 million PKI members were killed in reaction to the September 30 coup. Howland described his own efforts in Indonesia to elicit information from Indonesians in 1966 and his difficulties in obtaining accurate answers and hard data. He suggests that PKI death numbers were inflated by local Indonesians to demon-

strate their anti-PKI sentiments to the new anti-Communist authorities in Indonesia. Howland does make his own estimate. He recalls that he received figures from a Lieutenant Colonel in the Army's Supreme Operations Command's "Social Action Affair Section" which the military man assured him were accurate from field reporting. Howland writes: "The totals were 50,000 dead on Java; 6,000 dead on Bali; 3,000 in North Sumatra. I was skeptical of his methods but accepted his estimates *faux de mieux*, and combining them with my own data produces a figure of 105,000 Communist dead." (*Ibid.*, page 23)

163. Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Indonesia¹

Washington, October 29, 1965, 3:48 p.m.

545. 1. Following is our tentative analysis of developing situation in Indonesia and implications for US. We very conscious you have most or all of what follows in mind, but would like your comments and observations in order to develop it into policy recommendations.²

2. Nasution's speech October 25 and the openly declared campaign against Subandrio are first conclusive evidence that Army leaders are determined make all-out fight against PKI and its fellow-travelers, and will not be deflected from this purpose by Sukarno's opposition.

3. Army leaders are increasingly asserting themselves against Sukarno. Their game appears be to separate him from his anti-Army advisers; isolate him; and then use him, or possibly dispose of him, as situation requires. Seems inconceivable, at this stage, they can afford let initiative slip from their hands back to Sukarno's.

4. PKI in headlong retreat in face of mass attacks encouraged by Army. However, at some stage PKI will reconstitute some of their forces and fight back—by strikes, sabotage, or guerrilla action, against

¹ Source: National Archives and Records Administration, RG 59, Central Files 1964-66, POL 23-9 INDON. Secret; Priority; Limdis. Drafted by Berger, Cuthell, and Underhill and approved by Berger. Repeated to Tokyo, and CINCPAC also for POLAD.

² In telegram 1304 from Djakarta, November 2, the Embassy agreed with the general conclusions in this analysis, although it stressed that the outcome of the continuing struggle between Sukarno and the Army was not clear. On balance the Embassy believed the Army would continue to exercise an important political role, but would make concessions to Sukarno because it needed him and because some Army leaders still revered him. The Embassy anticipated a long, difficult political struggle. (*Ibid.*)