

Accountability for Suharto's Crimes Must Not Die With Him

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Indonesia's former dictator General Suharto has died in bed and not in jail, escaping justice for his numerous crimes in East Timor and throughout the Indonesian archipelago.

One of the worst mass murderers of the 20th century, his death tolls still shock:

- * 500,000 to one million Indonesians in the aftermath of his 1965 seizure of power;
- * 100,000 in West Papua;
- * 100,000 to 200,000 in East Timor, which his troops illegally invaded in 1975;
- * tens of thousands more in Aceh and elsewhere.

Suharto also accumulated an appalling legacy of corruption – 15 to 35 billion dollars stolen by him and his family.

Suharto has avoided personal accountability for the genocide, destruction and corruption he inflicted upon those he presumed to rule. However, the generals, cronies and family members who carried out his orders via massacre, torture and theft must not get off so easily. Those who murdered and pillaged on behalf of Suharto and his "New Order" regime must be brought to justice.

We cannot forget that the United States government consistently supported Suharto and his regime. As the corpses piled up after his coup and darkness descended on Indonesia, his cheerleaders in the U.S. welcomed the "gleam of light in Asia." In the pursuit of realpolitik, U.S. administration after administration, fully aware of his many crimes, provided military assistance and hardware, training and equipping Suharto's killers. The Indonesian dictator sought and received U.S. approval before he launched his invasion of East Timor; ninety percent of the weapons used in this illegal attack came from the U.S.

In the face of broad domestic opposition as his "economic miracle" had collapsed in 1998, he finally stepped down. But only after U.S. Secretary of State Albright hinted he should do so, even as the White House insisted she was not calling on the U.S.-backed dictator to "step down now."

Persistent advocacy by concerned activists from East Timor, Indonesia, the U.S. and within Congress finally succeeded in curtailing U.S. military assistance to the Suharto regime in the

1990s. After Suharto was ousted, East Timor broke free and the Indonesian military lost some perks. Since then, military reform efforts have stalled or been reversed. Suharto's favored military still maintains substantial power. Its higher-ranking officers, and powerful retired military, like President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, built their careers during his reign. The military continues to violate human rights with impunity and in West Papua and some areas operates by Suharto-era rules, restricting outside access and employing terror in service of its commercial interests.

Limited investigations dealing with Suharto-era crimes have added some information to the public record, but the few trials that have occurred have largely failed, as defendants have lied, intimidated or bribed their way to acquittals, crushing the hopes of the victims and their families for justice or even an apology.

To overcome Suharto's legacy and to uphold basic international human rights and legal principles, those who executed, aided and abetted, and benefited from his criminal orders must be held accountable. The U.S. must undergo a complete accounting for its role in backing the dictator. As a start, the U.S. government must support for an international tribunal to prosecute human rights and war crimes committed in East Timor from 1975 to 1999, and Washington should condition military assistance to Indonesia "on progress towards full democratisation, the subordination of the military to the rule of law and civilian government, and strict adherence with international human rights" as recommended by East Timor's Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation.

A brief ETAN backgrounder on Suharto's life is at <http://www.etan.org/news/2008/01suhartobio.htm> .

This statement is also available in Tetum and Bahasa Indonesia. See <http://www.etan.org/>

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