



Submission No 59

Inquiry into Australia's Relations with Indonesia

Name: Mr Sam de Silva

Address: PO Box 12222
A'Beckett Street Post Office
MELBOURNE VIC 8006

Submission No 59



Date: 27 November 2002

To: The Secretary
Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

From: Sam de Silva – sam@myspinach.org – 0412 238 041

Re: Review of Australia's relationship with Indonesia

This submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade contains ideas and suggestions about increasing friendships between Australia and Indonesia; Australia carrying out a 'Truth and Reconciliation' like commission in relation to its past and present dealings with Indonesia; and moving beyond the Bali bombing.

I feel that it is vitally important that as many people with connections to Indonesia (and the region) participate in the discussion 'Building Australia's relationship with Indonesia'. However, often with such inquiries, it is only 'peak' bodies and organisations with adequate resources that can actually participate.

The resulting submissions therefore often lack diversity and may be dominated by agendas that are more about building Australia's 'financial' relationship with Indonesia, rather than submissions that deal with how to establish a genuine and mutually respectful relationship with Indonesia that would lead to a positive environment in our Region.

The following submission is not detailed or comprehensive due to a lack of time and resources. However, I am happy to provide more information about any of the ideas and suggestions below.

In making this submission, I want to acknowledge that Indonesia is a collection of communities and that some of those communities are seeking to be independent.

About the Author

Sam de Silva has traveled to Indonesia twice – once in late 2001 and again in April 2002. He has visited Java, Sumatra, Aceh, Bali and Lombok.

Sam has an active interest in media and communications and is working on understanding Australia's relationship with the Asia Pacific, and developing positive relationships and reducing ignorance between the peoples who live in the region.

He was a supporter of an independent East Timor and spent 3 months working for the UN administration over 1999 and 2000. He also spent time sharing skills and ideas with a number of Timorese media groups.

Sam is currently enrolled in a Masters program (*Creative Media*) at RMIT and works in the domain of information and communication technology. Recently, he completed an information video to raise awareness about the situation in West Papua.

In the past he has project managed and coordinated online projects for clients such as Qantas, ABC Online, Sega Ozisoft, NSW Government and Gleebooks Bookshop. He recently received a grant from Film Victoria and is working on a digital art work about surveillance and stereotyping.

A BRIEF SUBMISSION TO THE REVIEW OF AUSTRALIA'S RELATIONS WITH INDONESIA

1. Genuine Friendships through Exchanges and Experiences

There is a need for young people from Indonesia to meet and exchange ideas and opinions with young people from Australia. Programs do exist that facilitate such exchanges, but often, these programs are designed for young people who belong to financially (and politically) affluent demographics.

Small-scaled programs that provide opportunities for exchange between young people who identify themselves as belonging to the 'grass roots' or from a community-oriented background would expose a demographic of peoples who may develop ideas and relationships that are truly beneficial to a community sector.

Existing residency programs and funding schemes are often oriented towards individuals and organisations that focus on personal and business development, or towards creating high-level relationships between established and often conservative arts and cultural agencies and individuals. People who want to engage and exchange on a more local and grass roots level are often excluded from such programs, overtly by guideline criteria or by the complexity of the application process.

Flexible residency programs that are designed to promote engagements and exchanges between progressive young people who are driven by community and social aspirations rather than financial benefits would certainly provide a positive space from which new ideas and relationships between Australia and Indonesia could emerge.

It is important that the programs are two-way. Young people from Indonesia need to spend time in Australia as well.

Exchange programs help break down stereotypes and broaden understanding towards the complexity of our societies. Therefore, it is important that such programs do not aim to hide the negative aspects of our societies.

In 2001 / 2002, a project called 'Trans/Actions' was carried out with funding assistance from the Australia Council for the Arts for a pilot project. This project was a residency program that placed media-makers and artists with human rights and social justice organisations, with outcome aims of new friendships and relationships, compelling media-art works, and an improved understanding of the environment in which the residency was held would emerge.

The 'Trans/Actions' project is intended to be operated by small organisations operating at a community level. More information can be found online at: <http://transactions.media2.org>

Exchange programs are one way of bringing young people together. Another way would be to facilitate small-scaled discussion groups. Careful preparation is needed however to ensure that everyone who comes together is coming together because they want to – not because they've been invited to.

Working through and providing appropriate funding to existing organisations operating on a community level to facilitate such discussion group gatherings may be the best option.

2. Acknowledging the Past – Moving Through the Deception

It is becoming very clear that there has been a systematic attempt by Australian Governments to support the Suharto dictatorship, to assist in Indonesia enforcing 'integration' – including supporting the illegal occupation of East Timor until late 1999, and covering up human rights abuses carried out by Indonesian Military that continue to occur today.

This evidence is conclusive and is widely available on the internet and through mainstream media.

There is an urgent need for the Australian Government to be open and honest about its dealings with issues relating to Indonesia.

Australia needs a form of 'Truth and Reconciliation' commission in to its relationship with Indonesia. Some of the issues such a commission could address and re-dress include:

- ⊗the invasion of West Papua by Indonesia and the so-called Act of Free Choice
- ⊗the coup which put Suharto in to power, and the murder of hundreds of thousands of Indonesians that followed.
- ⊗the murder of the Australian and Australian based journalists in Balibo
- ⊗the acceptance of Jakarta's illegal occupation of East Timor
- ⊗the way the Timor Gap treaty is being negotiated
- ⊗the appeasement Australia shows to Indonesia in relationship to its human rights record and continued support of groups such as Kopassus who are renowned for their brutal ways
- ⊗why Australia is so eager to back the Indonesian Government and to support its actions against the peoples of Aceh, Maluku and West Papua?

If Australia is to develop a relationship with Indonesia based on mutual respect, then it needs to address its historic and current position towards issues such as those mentioned above.

If Australia does not recognise its past mistakes, then it will never gain the true respect of the Indonesian people, and in the long term, young Australians will lose confidence in Government and its values.

3. Beyond Bali – A Unique Opportunity

The Bali bombing in October 2002 has created an atmosphere of fear amongst Australians, and unfortunately, the more conservative and backward elements of our society and leadership are fuelling this fear.

The situation in Bali provides a unique opportunity for Australia and all Australians to consider our relationship with Indonesia and the region. We need to take this opportunity with a positive attitude rather than one driven by fear.

Many Australians who were planning to travel to Bali and possibly the rest of Indonesia have changed their minds. After the attack in New York, we were all encouraged to visit New York to help the city rebuild, however, in the case of Bali, the Australian Government put out travel warnings against visiting the province whose people will no doubt begin to suffer massively from the loss of tourism.

For there to be a better relationship with Indonesia, we must not treat the country and by default its peoples as dangerous. Our Government needs to explain to us that Indonesia is a complicated place, as is Australia, and as is this so-called 'war on terrorism'.

The Bali bombing has put Indonesia in the minds of all Australians and from that position, there is an incredible opportunity to encourage Australians to further explore (in all its complexities) the region to our north. But unfortunately, the Government seems to be adopting the now predictable 'terrorism' line and encouraging us to become vigilant and cautious about what we do not understand.

We should not be afraid of the Indonesian peoples or their religions. Our Government needs to clearly tell us this. Further, our Government needs to send out strong signals to the peoples of Indonesia that we are their friends, and we want to build stronger relationships with them. This needs to be done across all demographics, not just the business sector.

4. Conclusions

Recently, a friend suggested that Australia is becoming like Israel – afraid and suspicious of our neighbours, living with a fortress mentality.

Australians are considered by many as a friendly people – but it seems like we are slowly losing that reputation – especially within the region. We need to regain our respect by informing our neighbours that we want to live in the region and become accepted as part of the region, rather than an English or American outpost.

Our politicians and advisors need to create policy with their great grand-children in mind. We need to strive towards removing the first and third world distinctions between countries and peoples. This may sound idealistic, but unless we strive for it with all our efforts, we will never have a positive relationship with the region.

In building Australia's relationship with Indonesia, we need to ensure that we do not consider our quality of lives or our lives as somehow superior to those of Indonesians (or of any of our neighbours).

We can certainly avoid becoming the Israel of the Asia-Pacific. But to do this we need to engage and communicate with our neighbours in positive ways rather than treat them like dangerous peoples and places. We need to understand cultural differences and ways of life and build genuine relationships. And we need to remember that respect can never be obtained or fostered through financial or military ways.