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Viewing cable 07JAKARTA3223, INDONESIA REACTS TO REPORT ON JOURNALIST KILLINGS

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REF: A. JAKARTA 3008
B. JAKARTA 1475
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Classified by: Pol/C Joseph Legend Novak, reasons 1.4(b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: An Australian coroner's report released November 16 accuses the Indonesian Military (TNI) of deliberately "executing" five foreign journalists in East Timor in 1975. An Australian Embassy contact in Jakarta told Pol/C that he has reviewed the conclusions of the report with the GOI. Indonesian officials publicly maintain that "the Balibo Five" were killed inadvertently in a cross-fire during Indonesia's invasion of East Timor. Meanwhile, human rights activists have demanded that the Indonesian government provide a serious response to the accusations. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) INDONESIA REACTION: In reaction to the report on the Balibo incident (named after the incident site in East Timor), the TNI publicly stated that the Australian coroner's assertions were nothing but "politics." TNI and Ministry of Defense officials continue to maintain that the five foreign journalists--two Australians, two Britons and one New Zealander--were killed inadvertently in a cross-fire in 1975 during Indonesia's invasion of East Timor. The November 16 report by the New South Wales Coroner's office--done at the behest of the family of one of the victims--states, however, that the five journalists were "deliberately killed" by the TNI in order to prevent information on Indonesia's invasion from getting out. Minister of Defense Juwono Sudarsono rebuffed the report, saying "the case is closed" and that the TNI was not involved in the journalists' case.

3. (SBU) Indonesian Chief of the Armed Forces Marsekal Djoko Suyanto was similarly dismissive of allegations against the TNI (which at the time was known by the acronym "ABRI"). Re the allegation from the report that the TNI could be charged with war crimes, Suyanto said, "Well, that's what they say. Their courts also have only one perspective. Let them be, we don't have to listen to them. We will just go on with the agreements and commitments we have between both countries." Suyanto also commented that "all parties, especially Indonesia and Timor Leste, (should) hold onto the commitments set forth in the Commission on Truth and Friendship." (Note: The Commission on Truth and Friendship Indonesia-Timor Leste, which is focused on events in East Timor surrounding the 1999 referendum and not the journalists' slaying case, for example, will complete its final report in early 2008--see reftels.)

¶4. (C) AUSTRALIAN EMBASSY VIEWS: The Australian Embassy is closely monitoring the case. In a November 21 conversation with Pol/C, Justin Lee of the Australian Embassy said he had reviewed the coroner's report with the Indonesian government. He had stressed to his Indonesian interlocutors that Australia wanted to work with the GOI carefully on the matter. The Indonesians replied that they also wanted "to help manage" the issue, although they categorically rejected the allegation that Indonesian security forces committed human rights violations or war crimes. Lee noted that the soundings he picked up in private were "much more constructive" than the tenor of some of the public remarks. He added that as far as he knew there were no active duty TNI members implicated in the Balibo incident.

¶5. (C) THE DEPARTED: With the approval of the families, the remains of the victims were buried in Jakarta. Lee said there is a move afoot by the families to have the remains sent back to Australia and Britain. The coroner's inquest report has recommended that the Australian government liaise with the next of kin to facilitate their wishes with regard to the continued internment of the remains in Jakarta. The Australian Embassy understands that the bodies were badly burned after the incident and that little was left. The Indonesian government is not standing in the way of an effort to repatriate the remains, Lee remarked.

¶6. (C) PRESSURE FROM ACTIVISTS: Indonesian human rights activists have demanded that the government provide a serious

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response to the war crimes accusations. In a November 17 meeting with poloff, human rights activist Rafendi Djamin expressed disappointment with the TNI's public remarks about the matter. One person accused of ordering the journalists' executions is former general Yunus Yosfiah. Yosfiah served as minister of information in the 1990s, overseeing some advances in press freedom under then president Habibie. (Note: Justin Lee told Pol/C that Yosfiah is "persona non grata" in Australia, though formal charges have never been brought against him over the killings.)

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