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# THE PRAWN BEHIND THE STONE

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## Introduction

Humanitarianism, the altruistic desire to help other people who are in need of assistance, strikes a moral chord with many people. Yet, state-based humanitarian initiatives in particular usually come with strings attached. Most states that provide humanitarian aid to other states do so on the condition that such aid is used in a certain way. Humanitarian assistance, whether presented in the form of humanitarian aid to help people cope after a natural disaster or as a direct response to deliberate abuse by a state against its citizens, is intervention in the affairs of a sovereign state.

Humanitarian intervention is usually welcomed by recipients as a response to natural disasters, but it is strongly resisted when such intervention directly challenges the legitimacy of a recipient state's governmental policy and procedures. It is also strongly resisted when the clamour for intervention on humanitarian grounds turns out to be nothing more than a vehicle to further the interests and aspirations of the interventionists. Challenges to state sovereignty, claims about the imposition of western values, and perceptions about hidden agendas all complicate humanitarian intervention and assistance. A well-known Indonesian proverb puts it this way; '*Ada udang di balik batu*' ('there is a prawn behind the stone'), meaning that there is often (usually) a hidden purpose behind an act.

Humanitarian intervention refers to action taken by the international community to provide assistance to the people of another state who are experiencing unacceptable and persistent levels of human suffering as a result of state collapse, deliberate government policy or natural disaster (Krieger 2001, 371). Australian government humanitarian intervention, in the form of emergency assistance, foreign aid and military intervention is an aspect of foreign policy with multiple political, economic and strategic agendas. This multiplicity of intent does not go unnoticed by the recipients of Australian humanitarian aid. In the case of Indonesia, this has a detrimental effect on its relationship with Australia.

One key aspect of humanitarian intervention is the inclusion of moral considerations in the decision to intervene. That is, it tries to place humanitarian concerns above national security or economic considerations, which normally are the focus of the foreign policy of states. This includes collective United Nations (UN) sanctioned

intervention such as Australia's role in Somalia 1993, the intervention in Rwanda (1994-95) and Australia's leadership role in assembling the International Force in East Timor (INTERFET) in 1999. Australia has also been engaged in regional intervention in Bougainville 1994 and the Solomon Islands (ongoing). These were carried out independently or multilaterally without direct UN involvement.

A contentious aspect of humanitarian intervention is the willingness of states to employ the term 'humanitarian' as an adjunct to their military operations. The non-UN sanctioned invasion of Iraq by the United States (US), Australia and other members of the 'Coalition of the Willing' is a case in point<sup>1</sup>. The Iraqi invasion was initially deemed to be warranted as part of the 'War on Terror' and to destroy weapons of mass destruction (WMD). However, as no WMDs were found, humanitarianism (freeing Iraqi people from the brutal regime of Saddam Hussein) quickly became intervention objectives (Evans 2004).

The US media promoted the routine landing of troops and munitions into Umm Qasr as a 'humanitarian operation' that was providing essential food and medical supplies to the people of the region. Not discussed or even mentioned was that under the international laws of armed conflict, the occupying power is obliged to meet these needs. Brauman states that these are legal obligations not humanitarian gestures (Brauman & Salignon 2004, 278). Many opponents to the war in Iraq assert that the readiness of the 'Coalition of the Willing' to claim a humanitarian mandate for the invasion of Iraq was a political move to validate and disguise other economic and strategic agendas (Sunhaussen 2004, 13).

## History and motives of Australian humanitarian intervention

Australia has historically played an important role in humanitarian intervention, the delivery of aid, and other UN activities. Since 1947, Australia has contributed to more than 40 peacekeeping and humanitarian actions and implemented a comprehensive foreign aid program that in 2004-05 totalled \$2.133 billion (Downer 2004). The two major Australian political parties have different views regarding humanitarian intervention and the role of the UN.

The Australian Labor Party (ALP) claims support for multilateralism and a significant role for the UN to

enhance international security. In the 1940s, the Labor Foreign Minister, H.V. Evatt, was actively involved in drawing up the UN Charter. He was president of the General Assembly in 1948-49. Australia pushed for reforms to the UN bureaucracy and an expanded peacekeeping role for Australia during the Hawke and Keating years. During this period, Foreign Minister Gareth Evans sent large numbers of troops to the conflicts of Namibia, Cambodia, Somalia and Rwanda with smaller detachments to Afghanistan, the Western Sahara and Mozambique (Firth 2005, 222).

Traditional Coalition Government foreign policy is focused on a more conservative approach of maintaining a strong bilateral association with our powerful ally the US, and to a lesser extent Britain (McDonald 2004, 154). The Government sees more value (and more relevance) in maintaining these bilateral ties rather than developing a closer engagement with the UN with its ponderous bureaucracy and doubtful authority on the world stage.

Prime Minister John Howard argued in the Simons Report (1997) that Australia's response to humanitarian crises such as those that occurred in Somalia and Rwanda were not of regional strategic interest to Australia but was only carried out as a reflection of community concern. (Simons Report 1997, 284). Australia, he said, would move toward peacekeeping and humanitarian intervention consistent with regional security interests such as dealing with unrest in Bougainville and the Solomon Islands.

The Howard Coalition Government changed its traditional conservative position on collective UN action by leading the UN Security Council approved intervention into East Timor and contributing to joint military action in Afghanistan. In both these cases the Coalition Government was able to meld Australian national interests and its alliance with the US with humanitarian objectives. Australia's involvement in Afghanistan provided an opportunity for the Coalition to show strong support for both the US alliance and the UN to defeat the Taliban in the so-called War on Terror. Joining the US, Britain and the other Coalition of the Willing partners in the Iraqi war without UN Security Council approval or general international support demonstrated a return to a more traditional Liberal Party policy of 'aligning with the USA under any circumstances, but with the UN only if that could also be arranged' (Firth 2005, 235).

Foreign aid is widely accepted as public policy with multiple political, economic and strategic agendas (Degnbol-Martinussen & Engberg-Pedersen 2003, 10-13). In the 2004-05 Australian aid program the

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underpinning rationale of foreign aid shifted to encompass broader issues of regional security and 'good governance' (Tomar 2004, 1). Australian Official Development Assistance (ODA) in 2005-06 includes new areas of funding for the further development of international security and intelligence gathering initiatives.

Australia's contribution to Indonesia amounts to \$3.5 million to the Indonesian National Police for counter-terrorism and transnational crime, \$3.5 million towards intelligence gathering to restrict the flow of financing to terrorists, and \$3 million toward enhancing travel security (Downer 2005, 16). This assistance package to Indonesia prioritises Australia's counter terrorism and security agenda ahead of the more traditional aid issues of education, health and poverty alleviation (O'Connor 2005, 2).

Australia's foreign aid policy was (and is today) frequently a subsidy for the development of private enterprise, supporting the commercial interests of Australian industries. The Hawke and Keating Labor governments heavily subsidised Australian construction companies while simultaneously extending low interest loans to the countries where the businesses operated. Transfield Construction, for example, received \$124 million to build bridges in Indonesia (Firth 2005, 282). Australia's most recent foreign aid package, the \$1 billion tsunami commitment to Indonesia, has a focus on developing opportunities for Australian contractors. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade confirmed in January 2005 that all contracts associated with the five-year program to help rebuild Aceh province will be awarded exclusively to Australian and New Zealand companies (Tomar 2005).

There is no doubt that a moral obligation to help those less fortunate is a long-held human characteristic found in all societies and within the teachings of all world religions. Ideas of unconditional giving, charity from the rich to the poor or the suggestion that the world's underprivileged have as much of a right to a fair proportion of the earth's resources as those better off, are central to the humanitarian discourse (Degnbol-Martinussen & Engberg-Pedersen 2003, 10). Yet, in the field of state humanitarian intervention, other less altruistic motives that are focused on a state's national interest are capable of distorting the altruistic elements of the humanitarian agenda.

**Indonesian perceptions of Australian humanitarian intervention**

As a democratic nation with a diverse range of cultures

and ethnicities, Indonesian perceptions of Australian humanitarian intervention policies vary greatly. There appears to be genuine gratitude and increased respect (at least on a senior Indonesian ministerial level) toward the Australian Government and the people of Australia after Australia's response to the tsunami emergency in Aceh and the promised \$1 billion aid package. The April 2005 visit of Indonesia's President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to Australia and the signing of a comprehensive partnership calling for the negotiation of a new security agreement is a step toward greater understanding and cooperation between the two regional neighbours (Woolcott 2005, 144; McDonald 2005, 153).

Despite these recent positive steps, there has existed for a significant time an underlying suspicion and a basic distrust of Australian government policies regarding humanitarian intervention in Indonesia (Adil 2002; Nusa-Bhakti 1996, 150-52; Siregar 2005, 12). Areas of contention relate to the legality of Australian humanitarian intervention (for example in East Timor), concern over the changing nature of Australian policy that is directed toward a more aggressive regional posture, and the belief in some sections of Indonesian society that the so-called 'humanitarian intervention' is, after all, just a front for other western and neo-colonialist agendas.

Australia's leadership role in INTERFET remains a sore point of contention from the Indonesian perspective. Indonesian political commentators claim that UN collective action in East Timor (mostly portrayed in the Indonesian press as an invasion) was a violation of Indonesian sovereignty (Crouch 2005). The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (2001) points out that Indonesian 'consent' to allow the UN mandated international force into East Timor was a result of coercion by national leaders and ministers who gathered at an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in New Zealand.

US President Clinton and senior officials from the UN Security Council pressured Indonesia to allow an intervention force to enter the province or risk the International Monetary Fund (IMF) blocking vital financial support for Indonesia's economic recovery (Firth 2005, 229). Such coercive strategies stir old antagonisms and build new resentments. Azyumardi Azra claims that

Australia's leadership role in INTERFET was essentially a declaration of hostility toward the Indonesian government...it caused a significant rift in the Indonesian Australian relationship (Azra 2002, 125).

Indonesia is highly suspicious of the extent to which Australia changed its policy direction in regard to

East Timor. Both ALP and Liberal dominated coalition governments, from Whitlam through to Howard, supported Indonesia's 1975 annexation and the twenty-five year occupation of East Timor. Richard Woolcott, Australian Ambassador to Indonesia 1975-78, recommended at the time that Australia should take a

pragmatic rather than a principled stand to the matter of Indonesia's annexation of East Timor (Monk 2001, 2). Successive Australian governments gave *de jure* recognition of Indonesia's sovereignty over East Timor and willingly negotiated lucrative oil and gas contracts in the Timor Gap. Indonesia considered Australia to be a long-term supporter of the occupation of East Timor (Aubrey 1999, 29; Sudarsono 1983, 25-26).

In 1998 when the Howard government changed policy direction regarding its stance on East Timor, many Indonesian commentators (and some Western observers) criticised Australian policy as duplicitous and more concerned with its own regional strategic and economic interests. Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed (2001) and George J. Aditjondro (1999) argue that western economic interests were behind the timing and implementation of Australian intervention in East Timor. That is, if intervention policy had been genuinely formulated with humanitarian objectives to promote human rights and conflict resolution, then why not earlier.

Aditjondro claims that Indonesia's devastation of East Timor and the forced deportation of at least a quarter of its population created a \$1.2 billion bonanza for Australian businesses and a handful of Timorese business partners (Ahmed 2001, 26). These observations and perceptions support the 'the prawn behind the stone' metaphor.

Australia's role in INTERFET also strengthened a widespread Indonesian perception of Australian racism (Lindsey 2004, 7). The respected Indonesian political commentator Wimar Witoelar expressed his concern that, although Australian humanitarian intervention in East Timor rightfully highlighted, the wrongdoing of the Indonesian military and East Timorese militia groups, it also maligned the ordinary Indonesian population, many of whom empathised with the East Timorese. Witoelar proposed that,

...innocent Indonesians who are cleaning up a nation destroyed by Soeharto's maniacs are mistaken for the bad guys...Indonesia, along with East Timor, is the victim too, make no mistake about that (Witoelar 2000).

Witoelar's observation suggests that some Australians do not see human rights in a universal manner but base it on an understanding of innocence related to religion or race (Philpot 2001, 377). This perception

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results in, at the very least, indifference from many Australians to the suffering of Indonesian people (who are predominately Muslim) or, at its extreme - open racism. Kevin Rudd (2002), the Labor opposition Minister for Foreign Affairs, claims that the current Howard Government is more than willing to cultivate Australian indifference/racism into a 'them and us' mentality, a type of 'politics of fear', giving a subliminal message to Australian people that the region generally (and Indonesia in particular) is a very unstable place. Philpot (2001, 378) proposes that Australian governments contribute to innocent Indonesians being broadly brushed as 'the bad guys' when they emphasise differences in national character between Australians and Indonesians.

John Howard asserted that Australia is a European Western civilisation with strong links to North America and that it no longer needs to fret about being a part of Asia' (Philpot 2001, 374-5). According to a number of Indonesian commentators, the Howard Government portrayed the East Timor intervention in an overly simplistic and erroneous manner as Australians and innocent East Timorese on the one side and those brutal and corrupt Indonesians on the other (*Asia Times* Editorial 1999).

Indonesia's perception of humanitarianism and intervention is one that is rooted in Indonesia's history. To many Indonesians, humanitarian intervention is merely part of a larger neo-colonialist agenda (Azra 2002, 10-17). This agenda promotes Western values and interests including democratic norms like free elections, a liberal market economy and capitalism. It embraces a Western ideology of human rights and a sense of duty to intervene in humanitarian crises. David Rieff (2002, 60-67) draws a comparison between the European imperialist of the nineteenth century and the advocates of humanitarianism today. He says that they share the idea of moral intent coupled with military force and the installation of Christianity and good governance.

According to Reiff, the 'white man's burden' of the nineteenth century to Christianise and relieve suffering is now repeated as another white man's burden to spread democracy and capitalism throughout the world (Rieff 2002, 66). This picture of colonialism as establishing Christianity, good morals and governance ignores the reality of oppression and exploitation of resources experienced by many in Indonesia.

Indonesia's collective memory of almost 400 years of Dutch colonial domination and the ensuing struggle for independence contributes to both a fierce pride to

defend the unity of Indonesia and a tendency toward scepticism about humanitarian intervention (Wahab 2001, 18). After the first few months of foreign emergency assistance in the tsunami affected province of Aceh, Indonesia was quick to re-establish its own full control of logistics and funding for the ongoing redevelopment program. This was in no small part due to distrust among members of the Indonesian government over suspected ulterior motives of foreign intervention in Aceh during the initial emergency stages of the disaster (Tjhin & Legowo 2005, 17). The Indonesian Minister for Intelligence, Syamsir Siregar, accused US and Australian military of using airborne food drops as a front for aerial mapping of both the province of Aceh and the Malacca Straits (Siregar 2005, 12).

Indonesia is alarmed about Australia's close relationship with the US and it is concerned that Australia's foreign policy is too directly aligned with US interests. Since the offensive in Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq (increasingly referred to by the US and others in the 'Coalition of the Willing' as a humanitarian operation), an increasing number of Indonesians resent the US and their aggressive interventionist policies (Bergen 2004; Raman 2004). The Pew Research Centre, which measures public opinion in the Muslim world, reports that favourable ratings for the US in

Indonesia fell from 61% to 15% in Indonesia over a one-year period from June 2002-June 2003 (The Pew Research Centre 2003, 3).

Australian and US foreign policy appear synonymous to many Indonesians. Australia's support for war in Afghanistan and Iraq is perceived as an example of the excessive priority Australia places on the US alliance (Esposito 2003, 16). Moreover, Howard's declaration in 1999 that Australia should play a 'deputy sheriff' role to the US and Alexander Downer's rationale for Australian involvement in Iraq where he said that it just wasn't the time to walk away from the American alliance, further confirmed Indonesian mistrust of the Australian agenda (Adil 2002; Woolcott 2005, 144).

### **Conclusion**

Australian humanitarian intervention policy is an aspect of foreign policy that has multiple agendas, and so is rarely if ever conducted for purely altruistic humanitarian reasons. This type of intervention is linked to a number of political, economic and strategic factors. Under the current Howard Coalition Government, one of these important factors is the Australian/US alliance, as

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witnessed by Australia's support for the US led war in Iraq. Another factor is the opportunity for economic gain, as in the commercial opportunities within the \$1 billion tsunami aid package to Indonesia. A third factor is the desire to increase security in Australia's area of strategic interest as demonstrated by the quantities of development aid targeting policing and intelligence gathering projects in Indonesia.

Indonesia is an emerging democracy and contains a diverse range of cultures, ethnicities and accordingly a wide variety of opinion. At an Indonesian governmental level, there is a certain sense of gratitude and increased respect toward Australia, predominately as a response to Australia's assistance in Aceh. However, there remains a strong underlying distrust and suspicion about the motives of Australian humanitarian intervention. The Indonesian government and Indonesian society in general are still resentful about Australian intervention in East Timor and they are suspicious about Australia's willingness to join the US in the war in Iraq. A certain level of suspicion and antagonism are inevitable in relations between regional neighbours, but if a key objective of Australian foreign policy is to improve security in the region and to foster confidence building initiatives then these underlying tensions cannot be ignored.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> As WMD failed to turn up, defenders of the war were forced back to supporting it on straightforward humanitarian intervention grounds: Saddam's use of chemical weapons against Kurds in the 1980s and massacre of southern Shiites in the 1990s. Opponents of the Iraq war say this was not the real motive for intervention at the time, and cannot credibly be claimed as such after the event. Address by Gareth Evans, President of the International Crisis Group and Co-Chair of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, to The American Society of International Law, 98th Annual Meeting, Panel on "Rethinking Collective Action", Washington DC, 1 April 2004.

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