

Campaigning for justice for Indonesian human rights activist Munir

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Suciwati, the widow of Munir, the prominent Indonesian human rights activist killed by arsenic poisoning aboard a plane in 2004, visited Australia in February to call on the Australian government to help pressure Jakarta to resolve the case. Accompanying her was Usman Hamid, the executive director of KontraS — the Indonesian Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence — an organisation set up by Munir.

On September 4, 2004, Munir boarded a Garuda plane bound for Amsterdam. He had accepted a seat upgrade offered to him by Polycarpus Budihari Priyanto, an off-duty Garuda pilot. Munir reported feeling ill when the plane reached Singapore and by the time the plane touched down in Amsterdam, he was dead. An autopsy by Dutch authorities found a lethal dose of arsenic in his body.

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono appointed a fact-finding team into Munir's murder, which recommended that both Garuda and the country's highest intelligence body — the National Intelligence Body (BIN) — be investigated for their role in Munir's murder. The findings of the fact-finding team, concluded in June 2005, have still not been released publicly and demands from human rights activists that BIN be investigated for its involvement have so far been ignored by Yudhoyono. Polycarpus, who was convicted of Munir's murder, was released on appeal from jail in December last year, after serving just a few months. He was convicted of falsifying flight documents, for a letter ostensibly from Garuda permitting him to be on the Amsterdam flight.

According to Suciwati, telephone records showed that there were 40 phone calls between Polycarpus and a BIN officer, Muchdi, just prior to the Garuda flight's departure. The Indonesian police cited lack of technical competence as one reason for not tracing the phone calls to and from Polycarpus's mobile phone. Suciwati urged Australians to demand that the Indonesian government investigate Munir's murder. She contrasted the swift cooperation between the Australian Federal Police and the Indonesian police in the Bali bombing case with the lack of action on the Munir case. She argues that cooperation between the two countries must also take place on the question of human rights, contrasting this with the focus on the "war on terror".

BIN has refused to cooperate in allowing its officers to be interviewed in connection with the murder. Hamid, who served as secretary of the fact-finding team and advocated that BIN director Hendropriyono be investigated, is facing charges of defaming Hendropriyono.

Suciwati has been actively campaigning on the case, getting the agreement of UN Special Rapporteur Philip Alston to participate in reinvestigating the case. The Indonesian government rejected Alston's involvement, agreeing to reopen investigation into the case instead. Faced with an impasse in the criminal courts following Polycarpus's release, Suciwati is also suing Garuda for negligence resulting in the death of her husband.

According to Hamid, Munir's case is a major test of Indonesia's human rights record in the post-Suharto period (from 1998 onwards). Hamid suggested that Australia's decision to conclude a security agreement with Indonesia is a signal that Australia has accepted Indonesia's promises that the Indonesian military today is a reformed institution. "However this is not the case", he told Green Left Weekly. "There are many issues that need to be tackled when it comes to the military, the intelligence agencies and the bureaucracy."

Hamid argued that civilian supremacy over the military is still in doubt and the all-pervasive territorial command structure and military involvement in business continue. He said while many new human rights laws and regulations have been introduced in the post-Suharto period, many human rights abuses such as the murder of West Papuan leader Theys Eluay, rumoured to have involved the Kopassus special forces, have taken place in the same period. Military officers who have appeared before the Ad Hoc Human Rights Court on various cases, including the 1999 violence in East Timor and the 1984 Tanjung Priok case involving the shootings of hundreds of Muslims, have all been exonerated.

P.S.

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