

SMART NEWS

Declassified Records Show U.S. Knew About, Supported 1965 Massacre in Indonesia

One cable referred to the brutal transition of power as a “fantastic switch”

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In this Oct. 30, 1965, Associated Press file photo, members of the Youth Wing of the Indonesian Communist Party (Pemuda Rakjat) are watched by soldiers as they are taken to prison in Jakarta. ASSOCIATED PRESS



In 1965, the Indonesian army began a calculated massacre against supporters of the country's communist party. Within a year, at least 500,000 people were killed. As [Colin Dwyer reports for NPR](#), newly declassified State Department documents reveal the scope of the United States' support and knowledge of the massacre unfolding.

Brad Simpson, director of National Security Archive's Indonesia/East Timor Documentation Project, which made the 39 declassified documents available on

Tuesday at the George Washington University, doesn't mince words when discussing the significance of the documents.

"It suggests that the U.S. was a supporter — an enthusiastic supporter — of a campaign of mass murder against the unarmed civilians whose only crime was belonging to a political party that was on the wrong side of the Cold War," he tells Dwyer.

The files come from a collection of nearly 30,000 pages of paperwork from the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta, recorded between 1964-1968. Several hundred of these files remain classified, but the rest are being digitized and released.

In 1965, the Associated Press explains, Indonesia was home to the world's third-largest Communist party (following China and the Soviet Union), which was known by the acronym PKI. Indonesian President Sukarno was a PKI sympathizer and vocal in his anti-American sentiment. On October 1 of that year, communist fighters purportedly killed six army generals in an attempted coup—though some historians have questioned whether the communist party was actually responsible for the murders.

In response, the Indonesian army embarked on a campaign of annihilation against PKI and its supporters, assisted by paramilitary groups and Muslim militias, according to Human Rights Watch. Their targets were not only suspected communist sympathizers, but also ethnic Chinese, students, teachers, artists and union members. President Sukarno was replaced by Major General Suharto, the leader the Indonesian army, who would hold power for more than three decades.

The declassified documents reveal that U.S. officials were well aware of the mass-murders being perpetrated by the army and its supporters. One file, for instance, records a meeting between embassy staff and an Indonesian official, who suggests "we will probably have to string up" important PKI leaders. Another document reports that the Islamist group Muhammadiyah was disseminating instructions to kill PKI

supporters, claiming that spilling PKI blood was “comparable to killing chicken[s].” Yet another claimed that Suharto was supporting, or ordering, mass executions.

The U.S. government did not intervene to stop the killings. Occasionally, it applauded them. Embassy First Secretary Mary Vance Trent referred to the shift in Indonesia’s power as a “fantastic switch which has occurred over 10 short weeks,” reports the AP. Another document specifies that the United States would not provide aid to Indonesian officials until Sukarno was removed from power.

“We knew about these things more generally, but it’s great to have this information in black and white so it’s not just based on oral interviews with victims,” John Roosa, an associate professor of history at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, tells Hannah Beech of the *New York Times*. “The U.S. was following what was happening very closely, and if it weren’t for its support, you could argue that the army would never have felt the confidence to take power.”

Decades later, Islamist and paramilitary groups are once again attempting to stoke a Red scare in Indonesia. As Human Rights Watch notes, violent anti-communist protests have erupted in Jakarta, and the Indonesian military has launched a propaganda campaign that attempts to enforce the prevailing narrative of the the massacre—namely, that it was a justified response to the communist threat.

That narrative remained unchallenged for many years. But alternative viewpoints have started to emerge in Indonesia. According to the National Security Archive, Indonesian human rights activists helped push for the release of the State Department’s records, working in conjunction with a group of U.S. senators. As a result of their efforts, the documents—along with the stories they tell of inaction and complicity—are emerging from the shadows of secrecy.

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