

## Our neighbour, and yet we know little of them

by Mike Carlton (Sydney Morning Herald March 17, 2007)

And so once again we see Australian bodies coming home from Indonesia. It has happened so often. We have had the five journalists murdered at Balibo in Timor in 1975, presently the subject of a harrowing coronial inquiry. There have been the two Bali bombings; the death of nine defence personnel in the navy helicopter disaster at Nias in 2005, and now Wednesday's sombre return of the five killed in the Garuda crash in Yogyakarta.

Go back further, and we can add to this grim litany the 468 men who died in or after the sinking of the cruiser HMAS Perth in the Sunda Strait between Java and Sumatra in 1942, and the hundreds massacred in Japanese prison camps on the island of Ambon.

And there could well be more to die soon. Six of the "Bali nine" drug smugglers jailed in Denpasar have been sentenced to death. It is as if our two countries are locked in some reluctant, fatal embrace, doomed only and forever to be bad news to each other.

Late last year I began shooting an SBS television documentary on the Australian relationship with Indonesia. It will be, in part, a memoir grounded in my three years as a foreign correspondent in Jakarta in the late 1960s. Doing the interviews, I was struck again and again by how much educated Indonesians know about us and, conversely, how little we Australians, educated or otherwise, know about them.

Paul Keating was spot on to say that no country is more important to Australia, yet our ignorance of this great neighbour is lamentable. Look north, and most of us see only mdeath and destruction, Islamist terrorism, or, at best, the cheap Bali holiday for the braided hair and the Bintang beer singlet.

For whatever reason, the Indonesian language is barely taught in our schools any more. I would be surprised if even one member of the Federal Parliament can speak it. Inevitably, all this week broadcast journalists managed to grossly mispronounce the Indonesian surname of Allison Sudradjat, the Australian aid worker killed in Yogyakarta.

The rich cultures of the archipelago are a closed book. We learn zilch of Indonesian history, nothing about Australia's honourable role as diplomatic midwife at the birth of the republic's independence from the Dutch in the late 1940s. And we have little comprehension of Indonesia's contemporary struggle to emerge from the shadows of dictatorship to re-invent itself, not as the Islamist caliphate we illogically fear but as a functioning democracy.

I confess a bias here. I like the Indonesian people; they are brave, resourceful, and generous of spirit, and their country fascinates me. We can, and must, do better by them than we do. Then, perhaps, the news from Indonesia would not always be so bad.

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