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Independent E. Timor remains Indonesia's stumbling block

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KUPANG, East Nusa Tenggara (JP): Former president B.J. Habibie was naive when he thought that letting go of East Timor would mean an end to Indonesia's problems.

Habibie then argued that getting rid of the predominantly Catholic province would help Indonesia regain direly needed credibility in the international world.

East Timor did gain its independence, although Dili is now an ""extension"" of Darwin, with its telephone area code similar to that of the Australian city. Indonesia's problems, meanwhile, persist and East Timor remains a stumbling block to this predominantly Muslim country.

The latest hurdle comes with the news of a lawsuit filed against Lt. Gen. Johny Lumintang, the governor of the National Resilience Institute (Lemhanas). The suit was filed in U.S. District Court on March 28 by the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR), the Center for Justice and Accountability (CJA) and James Klimaski on behalf of several victims of the East Timor mayhem.

Legal papers filed in court cited a telegram signed by Johny, then deputy Army chief, and sent to former Udayana Military commander overseeing security in Bali, East and West Nusa Tenggara Maj. Gen. Adam Damiri and other commanders just hours before the agreement to conduct the ballot was signed at the United Nations on May 5.

The telegram ordered commanders to plan a crackdown should the East Timorese vote in favor of independence. This was to include ""a plan to move to the rear and evacuate if the second option is chosen"", the East Timor Action Network (ETAN), said in a statement issued last Friday.

In Singapore, Adm. Dennis Cutler Blair, commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Command, said on Friday that military ties between the United States and Indonesia could only be resumed if those responsible for the East Timor violence were brought to justice.

The lawsuit and Adm. Blair's ""threat"" are clear indications that the U.S. and its Western allies are using East Timor to put pressure on Indonesia. And they will do almost anything to discredit Indonesia, as is evident from last month's visit to Jakarta by the chief of the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) Sergio Viera de Mello and UNTAET Force Commander Lt. Gen. Jaime de los Santos. The two UNTAET officials lodged complaints with President Abdurrahman Wahid and Indonesian Military (TNI) chief Adm. Widodo AS relating to 16 incidents.

The complaints were a laughing stock among Indonesian officials. In the first place, the incidents, blamed on former pro-integration fighters, occurred inside East Timor, which is ""heavily"" guarded by the supposedly professional UN Peace Keeping Force (UNPKF) armed with sophisticated weapons. Two of the ""so-called incidents"" were nothing but information on ""possible incidents"", in other words, of

""incidents"" that had not yet occurred and would probably never occur.

""So far border violations are committed by cows that cross the border illegally,"" East Nusa Tenggara deputy governor Yohanis Pake Pani said last Wednesday.

De Mello renewed his complaints last Wednesday and demanded that Indonesia move prointegration fighters from the border and demobilize them. However, he turned down a three-point proposal from Udayana chief Maj. Gen. Kiki Syahnakri, who proposed an exchange of liaison officers, the setting up of joint border posts and a joint border patrol.

If approved, the proposal would allow TNI to place liaison officers in East Timor and the UNPKF would have their liaison officers in East Nusa Tenggara. The proposed joint border posts and border patrols would also improve security operations.

""I'm baffled. He wants TNI to help stop the incursions into East Timor but he turned down the proposal,"" Kiki told *The Jakarta Post* in an interview last Wednesday. ""Maybe they are afraid that our presence on the East Timor side of the border would be an obstacle to whatever design or scheme they have in mind.""

Kiki's suspicions were justified by reports of illegal entry into the Indonesian territory by Australian members of UNPKF. The border violation occurred on March 22, when a group of Australian troops entered Silawan village, some 150 meters inside East Nusa Tenggara.

The Australian troops denied having violated the border limit, and even accused TNI of inaccuracy in defining the border limits.

""The river there is the border and the troops were on our side of the river,"" said Kiki, who lodged a protest with UNTAET regarding the illegal entry.

Kiki suspected the illegal entry was a provocation to creating new problems.

""The Australians were probably hoping to provoke TNI into clashing with them. After all, the illegal entry occurred only three days after Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer warned of possible border clashes,"" Kiki told the *Post*.

Minister of Defense Juwono Sudarsono, meanwhile, warned that the international world would continue to judge Indonesia in the light of the post-ballot situation in East Timor and along the border.

""We all know that on April 3 or 4 the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is expected to announce its decision on the disbursement of its financial aid to the Indonesian government. The aid is very important for the state budget,"" Juwono said in Kupang last Wednesday during a meeting with East Nusa Tenggara officials shortly before he met with UNTAET chief Sergio de Mello and UNPKF commander Lt. Gen. Jaime de los Santos.

Among those present at the meeting were East Nusa Tenggara deputy governor Yohanis Pake Pani, East Nusa Tenggara Police chief Brig. Gen. Yusuf Sudradjat and Udayana Military chief Maj. Gen. Kiki Syahnakri.

""We must be very, very careful lest the border disputes be made an excuse to delay the international aid. This (border issue) is no mere political and security issue,"" said Juwono.

He also cautioned against foreign use of every incident as a political commodity and against foreign media reports on border incidents as a form of information war.

""We must be aware of the vanity of the United Nations. It does not take blame. There is an impression that we are always the one to blame while the UN is faultless,"" Juwono said.

""If they are not competent and prove to be inefficient in providing security in the area under their jurisdiction, they should not blame us,"" he said, referring to UNTAET's complaints of the 16 incidents.

Juwono said Australia and New Zealand, two of the three nations whose troops were stationed along the border, did not show friendly attitudes toward Indonesia.

""We do not have the authority to ask the UN to replace them, but we will closely monitor the development on the border and as mentioned earlier by the (Udayana) chief, every incident that occurs there will be blamed on us. But we must stand firm when we are convinced that we are right,"" he said.

The only way for Indonesia to disengage itself from the East Timor problem seems to be to say no to IMF aid. After all, nearly half of the IMF funds never reach the Indonesian people, with quite a significant percentage returning to IMF coffers to pay for its consultants and so-called studies even before the money reaches Indonesia, and another large chunk lost in the hands of Indonesian bureaucrats.

The problem is that Indonesians are not united on this issue and not all are willing to share the burden of having to live without IMF or other international aid.

Indonesia should also reconsider its military cooperation with the United States, especially since President Abdurrahman Wahid said on March 25 that he wanted to reduce Indonesia's dependence on arms procurement from the United States or any single foreign country.

""They (the United States) also need us. Without us, security in this region is not guaranteed,"" he said.

Indonesia should also realize that the U.S. needs access to TNI and it can only do so openly and officially when the two countries resume military cooperation. It is as much in the interest of the U.S. as it is in Indonesia's to resume military cooperation and Indonesia should not allow the U.S. to continue to use the East Timor issue to blackmail it.

The writer is a Jakarta-based journalist.

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