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Indonesia's progress will continue *Despite the bombing*

By Stanley A. Weiss

JAKARTA This country," my Indonesian host said to me, "is a gold mine in a mine field. Avoid the mines and you will reap the reward." Just days later, one of those mines exploded down the street - at the Marriott Hotel in the terrorist attack Tuesday that killed at least 10 people and wounded more than 150.

Can the government of President Megawati Sukarnoputri navigate the dangerous terrain ahead and prevail against the Islamic extremists within Indonesian society? Will Indonesia - and the world - reap the rewards that would follow if the country with the largest Muslim population succeeds in its bold experiment in democracy?

My discussions with political, business and military leaders shortly before the attack suggest that while many land mines litter the landscape, the gold mine of a peaceful, prosperous Indonesia is closer than many Western observers believe.

To be sure, the capital has been on high alert since Islamic terrorists killed more than 200 people in Bali last October. In recent months, explosions ripped through the Jakarta airport and Parliament. Luxury Western hotels have installed metal detectors. Encircled by barbed wire and concrete barriers, the U.S. Embassy resembles Fort Apache. Foreign tourists and investors are taking their money elsewhere.

Yet for all the uncertainty, Indonesia continues its slow march to becoming the world's third largest democracy. Economically, the country appears poised to recover from the 1997 Asian meltdown. Rampant corruption, nepotism and poverty persist. But money from the ethnic Chinese community, which fled the murderous riots of 1998, is returning. The rupiah has firmed up against the dollar. Gross domestic product is up. Inflation and interest rates are down. Privatization of state-controlled companies continues. The Jakarta stock market is bullish.

Politically, this former dictatorship inches closer to genuine democracy. A free press and independent political parties flourish. Ideologues who would impose Islamic law remain, as always, divided and disorganized. Asked who will win the presidential election next year, Jusuf Kalla, the coordinating minister for people's welfare, tells me, "Whoever wins the most votes." For the first time, the Indonesian people will choose their president in a direct election.

In terms of security, the Bali bombings finally roused Jakarta to the terrorist threat within its porous borders. Authorities have aggressively pursued Jemaah Islamiyah, the extremist group linked to Al Qaeda that is suspected in the Marriott and Bali attacks, and have put on trial the Bali bombers and their spiritual leader, Abu Bakar Bashir. The guilty verdict delivered Thursday for Amrozi, accused of helping to plan and carry out the Bali

bombings, is a sign that the Indonesian judiciary will not be intimidated.

Indeed, the massacre at the Marriott, apparently intended to thwart the government's crackdown, will probably achieve the opposite, generating a renewed determination in Jakarta to combat terrorism and to deepen U.S.-Indonesian cooperation, discreet though it may be.

Paradoxically, the biggest land mine on the way to a stable Indonesia may be the one institution capable of preserving its territorial integrity - the military.

Determined to avoid the disintegration of her ethnically diverse country, Megawati has given the army a free hand in the rebellious provinces of Aceh and Papua and has installed former generals as governors across Indonesia. Its appetite whetted, the military proposed controversial legislation granting itself authority to take action in times of national emergency without prior presidential approval.

So what is Washington doing to increase its influence with this powerful institution? Nothing. Congress — and now apparently the White House — continue to raise barriers to resuming the International Military and Education Training program, or IMET, suspended in 1992, under which more than 3,000 Indonesian officers expanded their views on democracy and human rights while learning how to handle insurgencies and terrorism.

The murder of two Americans in Papua last year, apparently by renegade soldiers, must be fully investigated, as Congress insists. And by all accounts, Jakarta is cooperating with the FBI. Yet discussions with two members of the last IMET class illustrate how resuming the program would enhance American influence.

Lieutenant General Agus Widjojo fondly recalls training with the U.S. Army Rangers, whom he describes as "warriors with a respect for human rights." Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, a retired general who is now coordinating minister of security and political affairs, speaks of America in glowing terms. "I love the United States, with all its faults. I consider it my second country."

As it wages a global campaign to win Muslim hearts and minds, Washington needs as many Widjojos and Yudhoyonos as it can get. And as Jakarta wades through the dangerous terrain ahead, it needs as much help combating terrorism as it can get.

From the charred wreckage of the Marriott comes a lesson for Indonesia and America: If these two natural partners can work together to deftly sidestep the political and economic mines that remain, a treasure awaits both in the form of a peaceful, prosperous and democratic Indonesia.

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