

May 1998 in Jakarta

A Personal Account



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Preamble

May 1998 saw the end of Suharto's New Order. Real political opposition had surfaced, much of it centred around Megawati Sukarnoputri, the eldest daughter of the first president Sukarno.

Suharto had engineered her removal as the popularly elected leader of PDI, one of the three 'authorised' political groupings.

On July 27th 1996 there was a raid on her party HQ in central Jakarta. The heavy handedness, orchestrated from on high, resulted in deaths and disappearances which have still (March 2012) to be accounted for.

The raid led to demonstrations and rioting around Jakarta during which buildings and vehicles were burnt and further clashes occurred between the demonstrators and the security forces.

'Er Indoors was trapped in a taxi at the front of the traffic jam during those events.

The onset of the Asian Economic Crisis, known as *krismon* in Indonesia, with punitive remedies recommended by the IMF, had further exacerbated the sense of unease and life under Suharto had become very precarious.

Many expats left the country as they saw their earnings drastically reduced. Those of us with Indonesian families and rupiah incomes shrugged fatalistically and carried on with our lives.

As elsewhere and at other times, students were at the forefront of the protests. The military and police, who were then under the same overall command, caused the 'disappearances' of several student activists. There is evidence that a rogue unit of Kopassus, army special forces, led by a son-in-law of Suharto, General Prabowo Subianto, was responsible.

Such was the paranoia at that time that 'Er Indoors would whisper the latest gossip about Suharto and his family even when our doors were shut, the TV was on and I was playing an album loudly.

As the events unfolded in May, live on TV, radio and in phone calls, I had just started handwriting a letter to Son No.1, then pursuing his university studies in New Orleans.

My letter turned from a parental missive into a commentary on what we were living through here in Jakartass Towers. My account would have made a great series of blogging posts - it's not that often that anyone, apart from journalists, can say that for a short while "I was there - or thereabouts". There were no blogs, mp3s, social networks or apps in '98. I had a computer but no internet access; all I had was a pad of airmail paper; the account that follows took up ten sheets.

There are several eyewitness accounts of those times, some in autobiographies, and others in reports, and, once the internet gained acceptance, later online.

It is only proper that those of us who have a longer term perspective should contribute to the 'oral history' of the downfall of a dictatorship.

I typed out my letter, suitably edited, and posted it on Jakartass.net as the May 1998 archive, with many hyperlinks added to give further background.

Since sending the missive, I have reviewed what I wrote in the heat of those days and added comments. These are italicised.



A Letter to Son No. 1 - May 4th 1998

By the time you read this, I may well have an email address. My father writes to say that he is "glad to hear that the rupiah has strengthened" ~ it's now 'only' £1 = Rp.14,200 rather than the Rp.18,500 of last year. He's also pleased that Charlton, having just missed automatic promotion with 88 points are in the playoffs.

My salary has been increased and with c.45 hours overtime this month I should clear c.Rp.7 million (£400 in 'real' money)

NB. I was supposed to part-support Son No.1 financially in his university studies. As the Asian economic crisis began to bite the previous year I transferred £500 to his account. £1 was then valued at c.Rp.5,000, having risen from c.Rp.3,500. I had promised to send more when the currency eventually stabilised. It has now, fourteen years later - it's c.Rp.14,000.

From the little I hear about super-statesman Tony Blair, I'm beginning to think that John Major is/was the better man.

The current cabinet is probably much more capable ~ I was acquainted with several of them when they worked in the voluntary sector.

Given the propensity for youthful radicalism to transmogrify into "I'm alright, Jack" - Jack Straw was president of the National Union of Students when I was struggling through teacher training college - as is being witnessed in Blair's Britain, it's clear that whoever you vote for, the government gets in.

I do hope that you will be of some 'service' somewhere for part of your working life. I'm not sure what that really means, but your mother and I have never worked for the love of money. Sufficient unto one's needs and tomorrow generally takes care of itself. Health before wealth: I still say that even though there's no pension plan in this house.

Three days later - Thursday May 7th

And not likely to be for a while either! Today's papers report a plunge in the rupiah due to social unrest: the students are revolting ~ aren't you all? The government raised fuel, electricity and transport costs by approx. 70% this week.

Electricity was already expensive, but in removing massive subsidies on fuel the economy should readjust albeit only after short-term inflation has hit everybody, especially the poor.

At least anger is now directed at the élite regime rather than ethnic minorities*. We now 'look forward' to housewives joining the students who are finally braving the security forces and taking to the streets, off campus.

My main concern, as always is my personal well-being. I've had the trots since starting this letter but have just managed a bowl of banana porridge so things could be on the mend. My cure is cornflour (*tepung jagung*) which, after all, is used as a thickener in sauces and custard. I've been suffering, too, as I've been clocking up overtime ~ this week 16 hours, last week 18.

Still, a major boost to my rupiah funds. Whoopee!

May 12th

It's now five days later with a wine hangover courtesy of an Australian millionaire. His access to power brokers means that his conspiracy theories are even weirder than mine.

Like, will Suharto have a strategic heart attack while he's in Cairo? He does look like the Sphinx, although he acts like a sphincter. Argentina is thought to be his favoured bolthole.

There are strange tales circulating of a trust fund (\$30 billion some say!) in Switzerland left from the Sukarno days. If true, this would be some small compensation for the massive rip-offs perpetrated by the Suharto clan. Trustees are supposed to include Amien Rais and Megawati Sukarnoputri, who'll be launching a People's Front on May 20th.

All this speculation leads to blindness. Watch this place.

**NB. I wonder why I made that comment about ethnic minorities. I presume I meant the ethnic Chinese although I cannot recall any incidents that early in the 'revolution'.*

Thursday May 14th 9am

By the time you get this, you'll know whether Suharto and his cronies have gone or whether they've shot a few more students.

A mass people march is planned for the 20th and all the signs are that this revolution is now unstoppable.

Suharto has spoken from Cairo: "If I'm no longer trusted (to lead the country), I will become *pandito* (sage) and endeavour to get closer to God. I will spend my time to guide my children so they become good people ... I will do *tut wuri handayani* (guide from behind)."

Is this enough?

I was in the middle of writing the last bit when I was rung by the office ~ we're shut for today at least. The British Embassy's advice is to take it day by day. And the news (almost) live on TV is that north and west Jakarta is burning. Are they attacking the Chinese? Fools if they are!

NB. They were.

Slightly later: they've attacked a cash 'n' carry, Goro, owned by Tommy Suharto which is just down the road from my office.

NB. Goro was a monopoly established to take over from the state-owned Bulog charged with keeping sufficient stocks of basic foodstuffs, esp. rice. The land fraud in this particular case led to Tommy being sent to prison for ordering the murder of the judge who had sentenced him to imprisonment.

Grapevine gossip. Flags are flying at half mast because of the dead students and also as a witness, I feel, to the imminent death of a régime. Phones are busy, people are busy filling up their *bak mandis* (bathroom water tanks) in case the electricity is cut off. There's little hard news on the TV or radio ~ I wish I was already hooked up to the internet.

I wish, too, I had the guts, or anonymity, to check out the local main/toll road along which Suharto will have to travel from Halim airport, if he doesn't use a helicopter - he did - to the Presidential Palace. He's due back from Cairo and students and 'the people' are rumoured to be lining the route ready for a boo-hiss scenario - or worse. Whenever, I think they'll be storming the palace gates soon.

And everything seems calm in our street. Boys are playing badminton, very few cars, motorbikes or *bajajs* ~ it's a bit like a Sunday. And the meals-on-wheels - fried rice, *bakso* (meatballs) and Walls Ice Cream - continue to ply their trade as they pass by.

Except they ring from Medan, (the hometown of 'Er Indoors) worried about us and could they have some more money to continue building the house we have up there.
And Our Kid's feeling poorly. (*He was then just a year and a half.*)

5pm

TV scenes of the army joining the people. But we can't get out of our area. Smoke rises ~ a white BMW on the toll road we hear and furniture stores in Jl. Otista the other side of the River Ciliwung, the BCA bank and a Fuji Image Plaza at the other end of our block. A siege mentality has set in.

Thank god we have a good *pembantu* (maid) and a nanny for Our Kid ~ more mouths to feed but more help with the feeding.

Channel surfing to avoid repeats of the army velvet glove apologists and endless Chinese kung fu movies.

And so to bed.

Very late.

Friday May 15th

Suharto has been misinterpreted. Of course he'll step down.

Constitutionally.

In 2003.

The People's Forum has announced itself - familiar names, but where is Emil Salim's? Oh, and one of the sons-in-law is there.

The airport road must have re-opened because there are no beds left at the airport hotels and no seats available on the flights out.

I do have an exit visa, but no credit cards which means a dependence on cash, which is something we haven't stocked up on!

And just because you're paranoid, it doesn't mean that they're not out to get you.

At the insistence of 'Er Indoors and my own who-the-fuck-knows feeling I've put the ladder in the backyard so there's an escape route into the backyard of the house behind. This is occupied by a Japanese guy with his Indonesian family.

He has a ladder ready to escape into our backyard.

And our local handyman comes by offering to sell our broken TV for Rp.150,000 (worth £7.50). We'll split it 50/50.

Today is a definite lull - the calm after ~ or before ~ the storm. Lightning flashes across the sky, distant rumbles of thunder compete with the evening mosques.

An announcement is due tonight from the DPR, the legislature under his thumb and reportedly meeting him today.

Fuel prices have been cut, but only by 20% having risen last week by 70%.

Some announcement !!

And very few petrol stations are open in Jakarta.

Saturday May 16th

Reports of hundreds dead, most trapped in the malls and supermarkets they were looting. Americans have initiated evacuation procedures. They're the first - as usual,

Our Kid's in a good mood.

Just as the storm hit, we could see black smoke rising, not quite camouflaged by the clouds.

We made it to Bank Universal's HQ ATM, one of only two in service in town. The bank itself was shut but there was a long but patient queue as the machine was refilled.

So we've got enough cash for the duration. Have we?

A fleet of buses was parked outside the packed Malaysian Embassy but I only noted three cars in the Russian Embassy compound down the road.

Some shops are open, a few, belying the TV news of the city returning to 'normal'.

We hear tell of officials at the airport charging Rp.5 million instead of the official Rp.1 million for the exit tax (*fiskal*). There are also reports of cars being sold to pay the extortionists. I've got cash so it's a pity I don't drive.

I've put a couple of beers in the fridge for tonight's FA Cup Final.

A ring round.

Two colleagues are heading off to Bali ~ and later for 'home'?

Another is heading off, with his Indonesian wife, for the happy hour at Hard Rock Café.

Most of us are settling in for a week's siege.

News from the UK is that Charlton, having beaten Ipswich twice, are in the play off final - at Wembley no less - next week. How many games unbeaten is that? Live, or highlights, next week?

Nice to have something else to anticipate.

NB. Charlton 4-4 Sunderland after extra time: we won 7-6 in a penalty shootout.

Half time: Arsenal 1 - Newcastle 0.

Great tackle by Shearer on Adams. Ring a friend as he tunes into BBC World Service and gets a message: Get out now or don't go. I can't get out, not with rupiah.

Sunday May 17th

A big calm sunny day. Quieter than the quietest bank holiday. Phones ring. Big fat millionaire made it back to Australia. Did niece make it back to Medan? (She did, but with no thanks to him.) Many acquaintances are heading for the hills. Is anywhere safe?

Charlie taught a regular private class this morning. He saw razed Chinese electrical and electronics stores. The housing complex has a barbed wire reinforced barricade. Those under siege are petrified.

Gossip talks of a massive airlift - board now, pay later, but where can we go with rupiah? Am somewhat concerned that no family member has rung from the UK. Sister Sue works for British Airways, so she should know that they're charging dollars upfront for seats.

Monday May 18th

Prepare to go to the office, but get phone call to say it is shut all week. I go anyway because my bank is next door-ish. I take Our Kid for 'protection'. The front of our building has a banner saying *Pribumi Milik* (Owned by Indigenous Indonesian.) I don't let on that the owner is ethnic Chinese from Kalimantan.

In the bank, full of colleagues on a similar quest, I'm near the back of the queue. I ask the cashier if they've got Rp.5 million. We check the needs of those behind. Thankfully, the bank has - just, so I take it 'in case'.

At home there's a message from Son No.1 on the ansafone. He's worried about us, but I can't contact him as he's set off on a valedictory tour of the US having finished his studies there. Will he visit mutual friends who, I strongly suspect have cancelled their plans to visit us here? We expected a call from them last Wednesday, but didn't get one.

One very corrupt Cabinet minister - Abdul Lateif - has quit. As Minister of Tourism his potential income must have been drastically reduced.

(Ha, still got a sense of heavy sarcasm ~ another shitty day in paradise.)

'Er Indoors says that a TV station reports that the army want to arrest Amien Rais (the *de facto* leader of the People's Forum). Do that and there's no way the people will allow it. He's really pushing and has scared off a few of his fellow forty People's Forum ~ like Suharto's son-in-law (General Prabowo?) who says he still seeks reform.

The Jakarta Post has consistently, but wisely argued the case for reform. The students are taking to the streets and to the legislative bodies, both national and regional.

The pressure on Suharto is immense. Will he conveniently die of a heart attack brought on by the stress? Or will he seek a wise, compromising but still publicly acceptable 'abdication' and peaceful succession?

It will be good for the latter if he opts for the latter.

And good too if Indonesia wins the Thomas and Uber Cups in men's and women's badminton. How can those players concentrate so far from home - in Hong Kong? But they're still in there winning.

(The men beat Malaysia 3 - 2 in the final and the women lost 4 - 1 to China in their final.)

Evening.

Two female colleagues (who live a couple of streets away) ring to say they're heading to Lombok. Good luck, have a nice holiday, but I didn't tell them that I've heard that all flights to Bali have been cancelled.

(But why??)

Some cause for optimism: journalists filming Harmoko, leader of the legislative yes-men, broke into spontaneous applause, no doubt breaking professional bounds of impartiality, when he announced that all factions, inc. the army, are asking Suharto to resign.

Phone call from Son No.1: a distinct parochial bias in the US press - "*Baton Rouge couple evacuated.*"

Tuesday May 19th

Live, in front of *ulemas* (Muslim religious leaders), Suharto says it's premature for him to 'abdicate'. Give me 20 months, i.e. to the false dawn of the millennium, to carry out reforms, even electoral ones. Will the people let him? Live comments from the *ulemas* weren't unanimous ~ one was 'censored' - i.e. the sound was cut off!

It's the waiting within a siege which is wearing. You can get excited, panicky and irrational as you watch smoke plumes, all black, and listen to gunshots which may not be because they don't sound like they do on TV in crime and cop stories, and you weren't really watching those reports from Beirut, Bosnia or wherever. But the silence may be worse.

Phone call: Charlie, my 60 year old ex-Jesuit priest friend with a very witty line in risqué jokes, is off to Bali - by executive class bus because it's comfortable and he likes the scenery. Our numbers decrease and our sense of isolation increases exponentially. An emotional balance is difficult to sustain.

Time for a SuperMie (*instant noodles*) lunch.

Repeated showings before the news finally - believably? - sinks in. He's going. Elections will be held for the M.P.R. which will elect a new president and vice-president. He will not be a candidate. He's in favour of a constitutional succession, supervised by a Reformation Ctte. composed of various public figures - including *ulemas*, no doubt, and university rectors. So ... how long will it take?

Much conjecture and TVRI (the state run TV station) shows *ulemas* saying "Don't take anything for granted" and "*terus, terus*" which rhymes with Bruce and translates roughly, as "keep on keeping on"

Common sense will out? The students are still camped out at the MPR building and tomorrow is the 20th ~ scheduled for a People's March to the Presidential Palace ~ and the 90th anniversary of National Re-awakening.

Symbolic or what? Of what, we wait for tomorrow. Will the people believe it when he talks of being against corruption and monopolies? He's old, he can afford to give up a quest - if that's what it was - for temporal wealth. But can he give up his children?

And are they, the children, really in the UK as reported on the net and supposedly confirmed by British Airways? An interesting question for we Brits: what would you have done if you had found that they were on the same flight as fellow evacuees?

Boo'd and hissed? Invited them to jump out the nearest emergency exit? Or asked them to get the drinks in?

Wednesday 20th May

Up early-ish, have regular cold *mandi* (bath) just so I'm ready for whatever.

Amien Rais cancels the People's March for fear of more bloodshed. The area around the palace is seemingly impenetrable with masses of barbed wire barricades to stop the masses

The Jakarta Post takes a very sceptical view of Suharto's 'live' announcement yesterday and reports that embassies are recommending evacuation, then has article with quotes from those of us with family commitments who can't leave. But two friends with Indonesian wives are where?

P, who'd been interviewed by phone by BBC Radio, and L have possibly headed for Bali. (One time I rang them, L was trapped one street away from their home in Bintaro.) J & I, with 3 pre-school children, will probably head off to Manado or the Moluccas on Friday.

Both P & J are on an extended break from the Korean International School so both have time - and dollars! If my office stays shut for another week, I think we may head for Bali. Why not?

Turns out that P & L have gone to Kuala Lumpur. Due to a warning from the embassy? And why not tell us?

I check with embassy - ensure I'm still registered with them and basically confirm that sitting here doing nothing is best.

Unsure even about what music to play or which book to read; nothing will fit a mood which is impossible to define. Those of us still here say the same.

A later phone call from a colleague due to leave anyway who's staying with his in-laws in Sukabumi (about two hours away). He's flapping because he wants to know if the office will still be able to process his exit permits - and year-end bonus inc. flight. (They did.)

I watched the Clint Eastwood/Charlie Sheen epic *The Rookie*. Lots of lovely blood although the gunshots don't sound like those I've heard here in Jakarta.

Thursday 21st May



Suharto resigns, Habibie ascends.

All constitutional - but acceptable? Wiranto, army chief, says the army will protect Suharto and his family.

Boo, hiss ~ but what else?

Suharto leaves the palace - with Tutut his 'public' daughter and lately Minister for Social Welfare (hers?) - in a civilian registered stretch Mercedes. Habibie leaves in the presidential version. On another channel, there's a documentary on the 60's - demonstrations, peace and love - and great music.

Who will be on the *Komite Reformasi*, now presumably chaired or engineered by Habibie? A consensus arises, documented live-ish on TV, that the succession was not done constitutionally ~ why at the palace and not in front of the supposedly elected legislature? An anchorperson signs off ~ *selamat reformasi* (long live reformation).

Following *The Rock Revolution*, which closed with John and Yoko singing *Give Peace A Chance*, we got another documentary entitled *The Art of Illusion*.

Hollywood's take (and give?) on reality.

News surfaces: the students still at the parliamentary buildings are digging in, people are supporting them with food, messages and neighbourhood discussions.

Whatever new corruption-, cronyism- and nepotism-free cabinet is formed by Habibie will not be legitimate if Habibie's there. Another sleight-of-mind by the master?

If so, we hear at 5.30pm. that it's not happening - 14 cabinet ministers have tendered their resignations. We haven't heard the names of Bob Hasan (Suharto's golfing buddy) or Tutut.

News in English, 6.30 TVRI

General acceptance of the situation; the students have won the first round. Let's not forget Suharto's achievements over 32 years, great statesman is international viewpoint ~ and one must concur. The death of his wife, Madame Tien (per cent), must have destroyed much of his drive. The children became more arrogant and must, eventually, be brought to account, preferably fiscally but judicially if just cause can be found.

Or the country can conciliate, openly, and forge a new openness and respect for - and from - the community at large. We all wait to see who's in the new cabinet, but this could be the end of our siege mentality. This country has lanced a boil.

Friday 22nd May - A Closing of Sorts

'Er Indoors brings word from the market: *Harto turun, harga turun*. (Harto falls, prices fall.)

Kabinet Reformasi contains lots of professors and a few familiar faces. General Wiranto remains Minister of Defence, Ali Alatas is Foreign Secretary, and overall co-ordination of security is in the hands of Feisal Tanjung.

For finance, there is internationally respected (presumably by the IMF) Ginanjar Sukismata.

Apart from Habibie himself, who, when he became vice president, appointed his son to head up the Bandung-based aerospace company (IPTN) he'd set up - I can't at the moment finger any Suharto cronies. But then what do I know? Only 16 out of the 36 faces are new.

Still, I'm optimistic about Habibie.

There's an air of professionalism coming from the Cabinet members, maybe because they're now allowed their own voices. Bank Indonesia is now independent which means that they, rather than any form of government, can reform the banking sector. Given the revised management structure, B.I. is no longer Suharto's private piggy bank.

There is dissension in pro-democracy circles: to accept this or not. Those who wish to accept the situation are still putting a time limit on the expected elections. My view is the same; give Habibie a chance, but watch very closely for any variation from the people's aspirations - which are very clear.

Free political prisoners, allow the formation of political parties which adopt, yet adapt, the five principles of Pancasila, especially one people, one community and, above all, allow the freedom of expression which does not prevent freedom of expression.

In other words there should be no religious fundamentalism or political extremism.

I worry when I see banners saying 'National Front' as I recall the UK fascist and racist group in London and elsewhere in the UK in the '70s and earlier. I worry because the Indonesian Chinese were recently targeted and because the Americans were the first to get themselves evacuated. This was unnecessary and led to resentment against the remaining Caucasians.

Belum pulang? (Not gone home yet?)

Goddam it. This is my home!

We met a school friend of 'Er Indoors in the local Hero supermarket today. Whilst her English husband stayed for the duration in South Sumatra, she took their daughters to Singapore, coming back with tales of fully booked hotels and vast expense.

And so this episode finishes. Very many thanks for your concerned phone calls. Life is but a series of passing phases and occasional smiling faces.

Enjoy your last year at university and, as ever, we look forward to seeing you here in what we hope will be a renewed and revitalised Indonesia.

Footnote

Having withdrawn large sums of cash in anticipation of flight, bank closures etc., people are now spending, spending. It's party time at those malls still open. Anyone got a slightly burnt modem?



Time to move on? (Written May 2006)

That was the comment from one of my readers in May 2006, but I said no.

It is essential that we call to account those who think they can get away with genocide, who can rob a country blind and then say ~ "Hey, we've got democracy now."

No we haven't, not until there is closure.

In saying what we felt then and how we feel now, perhaps there can be some understanding. I wonder though. Folks back in Blighty seem to be more interested in the impending eruption of Gunung Merapi (lit: Fire Mountain) presumably because it makes better television.

Well, this was friend Al-terity's account of the scenes he witnessed.

Over the railway track, and toward Slipi. It's getting frantic now. At the junction I notice the words *makin bikin brutal* (let's make it brutal) chalked onto the road. Groups of people milling around. A couple of guys with sticks. Thank fu#k I'm on the bike. Gotta keep moving. Full throttle, through the red lights and I'm clear.

Five minutes later, I'm home.

But what to do? There's a bottle of wine that I was saving for a special occasion, but f#ck that: this is a special occasion. I chuck it in the freezer to get it cold. And so half an hour later I'm up on the roof garden (the place where the servants hang the washing), wine glass in one hand and a Henry Wintermans in the other. I even take off my shirt to get in spot of sunbathing.



But what the hell is that?

Treespotter also posted a very moving, emotional article. This is his (slightly edited) ending:

In this legal system where the head of the Supreme Court is a suspect in a bribery case and the sitting President is his ex-security chief, Soeharto is being freed of all charges on medical grounds.

The government conveniently used the frenzy around our nuclear wielding Iranian friend and dropped this news into the end of the news cycle on a national holiday weekend when no newspapers were published. On exactly the same weekend eight years after we oversaw his downfall. Somebody there has a wicked sense of humour.

I can have a lot more to say about this, really. I had friends who died exactly this week eight years ago. I have relatives who were shot and detained without charges over this stuff. I attended Elang's funeral and I looked into his mother's eyes, thinking that she might be proud someday that her son died for something. I shook her hands and kept the tissue for days afterward.

Only I won't say anymore right now because I'm just too fucking mad today.

And that's why we mustn't move on just yet.

.....
Stay put and stay low (pub. 14th May 2006)

During the Siege of Jakartass Towers, I relied a great deal on the disembodied voices at the end of a telephone connection in the British Embassy to reinforce my perceptions. Stay put and stay low was, I felt, the best thing to do, and whoever I spoke to seemed to agree.

This was a comforting thought.

Shortly after Suharto abdicated, stories appeared in the British press about the so-called 'incompetence' of the Embassy staff. This is totally unfair. What was unfolding in Jakarta could not be planned for; it was organised anarchy.

The source of the story, a lass then living in Bandung who panicked and fled to Jakarta's Soekarno-Hatta airport, should have stayed where she was. There was no way that embassy staff could have protected her from the mobs on her route.

Since then, I have got to know one of those voices quite well and, at my request, M., who had volunteered his services, has penned a few of his thoughts about the ten days or so spent in the Embassy compound.

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I stared out of my hotel window watching the troop dispositions around the British Embassy. It was a surreal site; the road surface had been chewed up into curved and corrugated ruts by the passage of heavy tracked vehicles, there were barbed wire barriers everywhere, and an ominous lack of traffic on what is usually one of Jakarta's busiest thoroughfares.

Troop carriers and armoured cars were parked at crazy angles at the road junctions. Kids were clambering onto and into the military vehicles, while soldiers lounged in the shade under the trees at the side of the pavement, sleeping or smoking their kretek cigarettes.

The Mandarin Hotel, just across the road from the Embassy, was general HQ for the hordes of journalists and camera crews who had descended on Jakarta. I called in there every morning for breakfast, picking my way over battered aluminium cases and coils of slithery black cables to snatch what food was left at the buffet.

Journalists, I reflected, have exceedingly healthy appetites.

Sadly, their appetite for getting in close to the street action didn't seem quite so keen. My impression, from the conversations going on around me, was that a lot of them were more concerned to find some local bigwig to posture in front of a camera and pontificate on what was happening, rather than get into the thick of the action and see it first hand.

I was based in the Embassy during those critical days, updating their web site information and helping to man the emergency phone service that had been set up to provide advice for British nationals throughout the country.

Phones rang non-stop, anxious Embassy officials darted hither and thither with slips of paper and notepads, and you could smell the tension in the air. But in spite of the apparent chaos it was a well-organized and very efficiently run operation - which needs to be said, as there were completely unfounded criticisms levelled at the Embassy after the crisis.

The highlight of the second week was my escape from the Embassy. We'd been told it was still unsafe to venture outside the cordon around the place, and on no account were we to return to our homes. Sneaking out of the gate with a colleague, we drove through the barriers unchallenged and sped to our respective homes in south Jakarta.

I had two aims: check that my cat was safe, then head for the local bars to get the gossip from my friends.

The traffic was jammed solid as usual, shops and offices were open, life had returned to the streets.

It was only later while chatting with friends over a few drinks that the darker horrors of the previous couple of weeks came vividly to life from their eye-witness accounts.

M.J. May 2006

