The Suharto Legacy-- as he Lay Dying

ANDRE VLTCHEK



General Suharto tops the list of embezzlers with an estimated 15-35 billion dollars spirited out of the country. (Photo: Wikipedia)

Jakarta~ At 4 PM on January 13, 2008, the main entrance to Pertamina Hospital in South Jakarta is besieged by scores of journalists. Almost all are local, as Indonesia rarely attract international media conglomerates, unless there is a deadly landslide, tsunami or airplane crash. Some reporters place the lenses of video and photo cameras against the glass of the hospital entrance, hoping to spot at least some action.

But there is hardly any detectable movement inside. General Suharto, the 86-year old former military dictator who ruled Indonesia for more than 3 decades, is lying somewhere deep inside this concrete structure, dying or more precisely in a "very critical condition" after almost all organ functions failed, as his doctor told a news conference that day. He was rushed to the hospital nine days earlier suffering from anaemia and low blood pressure due to heart, lung and kidney problems.

There is no end to the flow of dignitaries offering support or early condolences to his family. On 13 January arrived the stone-faced and tight-lipped former Singaporean Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, Suharto's close friend and fellow authoritarian ruler. Lee, who refused to answer questions of Indonesian journalists, later loosened up to his countrymen, offering his sentiments to Channel News Asia and other Singaporean media: "I feel sad to see a very old friend with whom I had worked closely over the last 30 years, not really getting the honours that he deserves. Yes, there was corruption. Yes, he gave favours to his family and his friends. But there was real growth and real progress," Lee was quoted as saying. Among other international visitors who followed Lee were former Malaysian Prime Minister Mohamed Mahathir, ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan, and the Sultan of Brunei, Hassanl Bolkiah. Indonesian visitors included former President Habibie - who replaced Suharto and was supposed to begin the new era after the dictatorship was toppled. Habibie, who flew to Jakarta from his home in Aachen, Germany, told the Jakarta Post, "My wife and I came from Germany, we arrived at the Soekarno-Hatta Airport and went straight to the hospital."

Nine years after Suharto resigned, Indonesia remains dominated by the military force that he empowered and one of the world's most corrupt nations. Berlin-based Transparency International ranks it in 143-146 place out of 180 countries ranked, tied with Gambia, Russia and Togo (The 2007 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index).