

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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JAKARTA

Jakarta, Indonesia  
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Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
Executive Director  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
4 West Wheelock Street  
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Dear Peter,

Since I'll be in Indonesia for a long time and expect to fill future newsletters with analysis and remote environments, this letter will just describe some initial impressions on returning to Jakarta. In this city, there's a definite feeling of being in the center of something. The center of what isn't always clear, but the level of hustle here certainly indicates enough action for the "mother city" (ibu kota, in Indonesian) of a nation of 175 million people.

Flying over West Java's coastal plain toward Jakarta's airport, I did a double-take. The brown and dusty grey of the fields below were not the lush green Java-colors of my memory and imagination. Java was in the grips of a three-month drought. But the drab fields were punctuated by kampungs -- villages marked by clumps of trees, brilliant in contrast to the fields, shading red tile roofs, an attractive (and cool!) change from West Malaysia's ubiquitous corrugated tin.

The brand-new airport was a bit of a shock. This outrageously expensive year-old architectural showpiece makes arriving in Jakarta pleasant! Immigration computers, automated luggage handling, and an effective campaign to get rid of customs service corruption have eliminated the wild shoving and unexplained delays in getting out of the airport. But the competition among taxi drivers for passengers to town is as intense as ever. Luckily, I'd been clued into current prices (everything about three times their 1982 levels) by a letter from a Jakarta friend. I was reassured that my Malaysianized Indonesian still worked for bargaining on the fare.

To the driver's dismay, I chose not to take the toll expressway into town, but the ordinary road, to see some parts of the city and suburbs I'd never been in before. The taxi swerved around curves unexplained by the flat topography. The road was newly surfaced. Most of the buildings beside it seemed to have sprung up within the past year or so, tile roofs still bright, woven bamboo wall panels still unpainted. I wondered what had been along this road, or if it had been there at all, before the new airport. Occasionally, we passed a kampung that seemed to have a history.

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Car windows open, we honked past motor cycles carrying complete "planned family" groups (mother, father, and two correctly-spaced children) and nearly missed flattening afternoon commuters on bicycles and crowded into pedicabs (becaks).

After nearly an hour, the narrow road widened and turned to parallel a drainage canal. We were suddenly caught in a traffic snarl. Just as suddenly, raindrops began to dot the dusty windshield, gradually becoming a downpour. I joked that I'd brought the rain with me from Singapore, where the rainy season was well underway. The driver blessed me in Arabic -- or maybe asked Allah to forgive me for daring to make such a presumptuous joke.

The next morning, I learned that the government had been seeding clouds for days trying to get some rain to parched West Java. By noon, I also learned of Jakarta's fastest-spreading status symbol -- bottled drinking water sold under names like "Aqua" and "Oasis." A health-conscious Jakarta friend explained that it's not that wells are running dry, just that during the dry season, "poisons" had become so concentrated in well water that people were just getting sick too often. (A city of eight million, most of Jakarta gets water from household wells and uses simple septic systems. While the deepest wells are safe from seasonal toxic concentrations, the shallower wells and those in more permeable soils are not. A dangerous combination of domestic seepage and chemical wastes is turning Jakarta's ground water into a capricious witch's brew.)

Providing safe alternative sources of drinking water, especially in poor neighborhoods, has become a priority. Throughout Indonesia's urban areas, as development budgets have been slashed over the past two years due to plummeting petroleum prices (oil exports having financed Indonesia's capital improvements over the past fifteen years) the government is still borrowing money, primarily from the World Bank, to pay for improvements such as alternative water supplies.

A week after I arrived in Indonesia, a quirky dirty-water situation was resolved in Surabaya, East Java (a city of about 3 million). The lower reaches of the Surabaya River had become so clogged with sewage, industrial waste, muddy gunk, and garbage that the river itself had become a health hazard to those living on its shores. Surabaya gets much of its drinking water from upstream, but by the time the river reaches the city's center, untreated household sewage alone amounts to up to a quarter of the river's dry season flow! Huge and highly concentrated industrial waste loads cap the problem, adding caustics, acids, metals, and toxic chemicals to the organic mess.

At the beginning of October, city and provincial authorities took drastic action. Over 7 million cubic meters of water were released from an upstream reservoir in a 5-hour rush to flush out the river. Squatters were warned that their houses might be washed away; the government understood the consequences of a river-full of pollution being dumped at once on nearby fisheries in the Java Sea. The government seems to be serious about taking steps to make sure the river does not clog up again. According to East Java's Vice-Governor, factories still dumping raw sewage into the Surabaya River will have to clean up their acts; those still discharging raw sewage in December will have their pipes plugged. There is some outside pressure to act on this threat. The World Bank will refuse a loan for an alternative water supply unless significant steps are taken to control pollution sources.

But back to Jakarta. The city has changed in predictable ways over the past few years. The older suburbs now all have their own bustling business centers and ramshackle strips. "Wild houses," (squatters or unauthorized dwellings) in urban kampungs near the center of the city have been cleared at an unprecedented rate to make way for new office buildings and annexes to amoeba-like government complexes. Road widening and drainage canal repairs, many sites looking like they've been under construction for years, give much of the city a permanently unfinished look. The urban kampungs that remain, however, have been among the first to benefit from national kampung improvement programs: better drainage, paved walkways on the lanes too narrow for cars to enter, piped water and regular electricity supplies.

The city smells differently than it did in the past. It took me a couple of days to figure out what's missing. Jakarta's air is still the second most polluted in Southeast Asia, after Bangkok's. But in middle class neighborhoods (i.e., anywhere on a named street accessible by car), Jakartans have stopped burning their trash. The recycling industry is booming. Young men with hand carts carry middle-class trash to neighborhood corners, where cartloads are piled on the ground. Activity around these piles is highly organized, although chaos may be a spectator's initial assessment. Salvageable materials are separated into smaller piles and sorted, mainly by women and young children, into loads of metal, containers, cloth, paper, and other goods. The remainder is either incinerated or buried, but I have yet to learn where, although there are several landfills around town. Debris floating on Jakarta's waterways now often gets the same treatment as other garbage. The government has recently installed grates across canals draining to the sea. As the tide pulls water out of the canals, floating objects get caught between the bars. When they are raked off the grate, the sorters process them like other trash, in piles beside the canals.

Only poverty makes the trash salvage system work. The returns to the sorters are minimal, due to the selling arrangements with salvage buyers, and the intrinsically low cash value of the salvaged materials. I've read about trash pickers' cooperatives here in the past, but don't know what has happened to them, since none of the trash sorters I spoke with here had ever heard of them.

Jakarta grows on you. I've often wondered if the kampungs, built below the grade level of the often-jammed streets, provide as effective a refuge from the heat, dust, and noise as the walled houses, bougainvillea and frangiapani peeking over the barbed wire or through the cut-out cinder block patterns. The kampungs still flood in the rainy season, I'm told. Most of the walled houses in Central Jakarta don't, anymore.

Sincerely yours,



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