

Malcolm Cook
Reaching out to Indonesia
Herald-Sun
11 January 2005
P. 17

John Howard's personal message to the Australian people last Sunday underlined his leadership of Australia's unprecedented response to Indonesia's tsunami disaster.

He was the first foreign leader to call President Yudhoyono in his moment of need and the first foreign leader the Indonesian chief reached out to.

Both men have powered through a massive, jointly administered aid package in record time and, in the process, galvanised the broader relationship between the two countries.

Australia has responded to the tsunami disaster, and the Bali bombing before it, with genuine concern for Indonesia's suffering.

In turn, the Indonesian Government at its most vulnerable has opened itself up to Australian assistance.

This has included inviting the Australian Federal Police in, and now the Australian Defence Force.

Hopefully, both countries may be able now to move beyond the legacy of East Timor's independence and overblown concerns that the Howard administration was sacrificing good regional relations for closer ties with the US.

Over and above this, Australia's relationship with Indonesia is the cornerstone of our engagement with South-East Asia.

With countries in the region seeking closer ties with China, Japan and Korea, improved relations with one of our closest, and largest, neighbour will help ensure Australia is not kept out in the cold.

Even before the tsunami disaster, Mr Yudhoyono was actively seeking to re-establish close bilateral relations with Australia and the US.

The Indonesian leader is at the beginning of his first five-year term and reasserting his country's traditional leading role in South-East Asia.

Australia's response to the Bali bombing in October 2002 also put Australia's sensitive relationship with Indonesia on firmer ground.

In the aftermath of that terrorist atrocity, the AFP helped Indonesian police capture most of the main plotters and earned wide support from Indonesia's political leaders.

The AFP is now setting up Indonesia's first national counter-terrorism centre, which is being built by an Indonesian construction firm led by an Australian.

The devastating impact of the tsunami on Indonesia and Australia's billion-dollar long-term aid package announced by Mr Howard in Jakarta will deepen this co-operation.

Our aid budget to Indonesia has more than doubled with this package and, at \$1.8 billion over the next five years, it rivals that of Australia's other northern neighbour in need: Papua New Guinea.

The aid package, called the Australia-Indonesia Partnership for Reconstruction and Development, will be overseen by Mr Yudhoyono and Mr Howard with advice from their foreign and economic ministers.

After World War II, Canberra's participation in the Commonwealth's Colombo plan to develop Asia improved Australia's image in South-East Asia for generations at a time when regional relations were tense.

Australia's swift and generous response to Indonesia's tsunami disaster holds the same kind of promise.

MALCOLM COOK is program director, Asia and the Pacific, at the **Lowy Institute**, Sydney