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# A Risky Decision: To Evacuate or Not to Evacuate: Making Risky Decisions in a Crisis

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*Bill Glenwright and Mike Murray<sup>1</sup>*

A large US multinational with extensive operations in Indonesia had retained our company to advise on its corporate security within Indonesia. We were co-assigned to this project with the responsibility to manage and direct security operations throughout the archipelago. We reported directly to the President of the client company and jointly formed the Crisis Management Team for security-related matters.

The situation in Jakarta had been deteriorating for several days, but the danger escalated following the shooting dead of students at a local University by security forces on Tuesday 12th May 1998. By the morning of Thursday 14th May, anarchy reigned in the city, with rampaging mobs burning and looting premises throughout Jakarta with little or no intervention from the security forces.

In the early hours of May 16th 1998 all expatriate employees and their dependants, with the exception of seven essential employees and seven dependants, were evacuated from Indonesia. This evacuation followed two days of sustained rioting, burning and looting in Jakarta during which over 1,100 people were killed and much property destroyed.

The decision to evacuate was very difficult to make. To evacuate meant exposing 95 families, (nearly 370 persons) to an element of risk due to the state of anarchy on the streets of Jakarta as well as the imminent potential for civil war. Such a situation had been foreseen and planned for in the Evacuation Plan, and it was felt that the best thing to do would be to stay in place (STANDFAST) until a clearer picture emerged.

However, a decision to evacuate was made for the following reasons. The majority of Western Governments, including the United States and Australia, advised their nationals to leave Indonesia immediately. The exception was the United Kingdom, which ordered its nationals to leave three days later. In addition, intelligence sources indicated that a military coup/civil war was probable. The risk of staying in place was outweighed by the prospect of fighting between various military factions.

There were three elements to the success of the evacuation. These were, transport, intelligence and circumstance — luck.

## **Transport**

As soon as the President confirmed that an evacuation should take place, a search for aircraft began in earnest the evening of May 14th. The client had evacuation cover with a medical/evacuation flight provider but they were unable to even provisionally provide an aircraft before

Saturday 16th May. Their control room explained that it was not safe to evacuate as routes to the airport were blocked. We had reliable information that this was not true and suspected that the contractor simply could not secure aircraft.

We also contacted an Australian air charter company, who offered an Airbus. Using this aircraft involved two trips because of passenger capacity limitations but appeared to be the fastest option. The air charter company faxed a proposal at 0550 hrs on 15th May 1998 stating that their aircraft could land in Jakarta within 6 hours of a commitment being made. The client made that commitment within an hour and paid for the service. At 1015 hrs the air charter company faxed an itinerary which was entirely unacceptable as the flight was not due to arrive in Jakarta until 0700hrs on Saturday the 16th, over 24 hours after confirmation. It was decided to dispense with the air charter company's services.

Obviously many other companies were desperate to secure aircraft for evacuation purposes. It is suspected that the air charter company was paid more by another organisation. However, we were able to secure a Boeing 747 for that evening (Friday the 15th) through the assistance of our Hong Kong office and a major international airline. It was hoped to land the flight at Halim (military) Airport because this airport is closer to the expatriate residential areas and the customs and immigration officers were considered more 'flexible', especially during emergencies, but landing permission was denied, so Soekarno Hatta International Airport had to be used instead.

### **Intelligence**

Knowing what incidents were happening, and where, was critical to planning the evacuation as it reduced the risk of contact with mobs and unlawful activity. Our sources in the military, the police, schools and embassies provided most intelligence to the President of our client company. The embassies proved an inadequate source of information, however, simply because telephone lines were understandably busy and it was difficult to locate the right people.

Such information was critical to making decisions during the process of evacuation. Some children were stranded at an International School situated in a residential area for ethnic Chinese (the main targets of the riots). As soon as intelligence was forwarded that there was a lull in the fighting in this area, we extracted the children from the school. The children were exposed to minimal risk due to that intelligence.

The evacuation itself initially went according to the plan. Jakarta was split into Warden Areas when the plan was devised two years ago. Each area has a Warden and alternates (all with radios). Some of the Warden Areas were instructed to go to assembly points. The central business district area was instructed to assemble first because that area is well spread out and also included several visitors unfamiliar with Jakarta; thus any assembly required more time.

At this stage the actual evacuation then diverged from the preconceived plan. Intelligence pointed to attacks on expatriate residential areas so a decision was made to move everyone to an intermediate staging area, the Hilton Hotel, on the main route to the airport.

Whilst this move was in progress another hotel housing a family new to Indonesia was overrun by a mob numbering 3-5,000 people. We had managed to obtain the services of a section of the security forces, for guarding and escort duties. When it became necessary to extract the family from the hotel that was being overrun, the security forces personnel refused to come with us.

The explanation for this refusal was that their presence would only antagonise the situation. There was probably some truth in this, but the main reason appeared to be fear. Eventually we went to the hotel ourselves without armed support. The family was then extracted.

Our decision to allow people to move around the hotel after arrival there proved to be a mistake because at approximately 1800 hours information was received that rioters intended to attack a property situated next to the toll road on the way to the airport. The security forces were in danger of losing control of the only route to the airport. It was decided to move to the airport immediately. Unfortunately, because everyone was spread out throughout the hotel, it delayed reassembly and briefing.

### **Circumstance**

Certain circumstances combined to facilitate the evacuation. Normal communication systems remained functional, allowing the use of landlines, hand-phones, facsimile and email. While the client was well equipped with auxiliary communication equipment, the availability of normal communications was an unexpected bonus.

The client's drivers remained loyally at their posts. This meant that vehicle convoys' drivers were thoroughly familiar with the routes. This was particularly critical during the move to the airport when darkness and driving rain reduced visibility dramatically; had the evacuees been driving themselves some might have become lost.

Luckily, that heavy rain kept many rioters off the streets at a critical time. On the negative side, the heavy rain and the lack of space at the hotel car park made it unrealistic to reorganise the Warden Area convoys for the move to the airport. Instead, the Security Consultants set up an adhoc arrangement by which the 100 vehicles were grouped into convoys as they emerged from the hotel.

This arrangement certainly speeded up the operation but also disrupted command and control. Convoys did not have a convoy leader and radios were not distributed evenly. The advantages of moving to an intermediate staging area need to be weighed against the disruption that might be caused. In this case, the need to evacuate a potentially dangerous area clearly outweighed any disadvantages caused by the move.

Instead of going straight to the International Terminal, the Security Consultants instructed the convoys to drive to the Domestic Terminal car park. The car park was deserted and therefore provided an isolated and secure waiting area for families while the Security Consultants and client company managers liaised with airline ground staff. The International Terminal was very busy and would not have been a good location to hold a large group of people.

It was at this point that problems began to arise.

### **Problems at the airport**

The airline were unable to arrange for the mass payment of the 'Fiscal' departure tax so everyone had to pay individually; this proved to be a time-consuming business. The Immigration queue was very long as only two desks were open, and this further delayed the process of getting on the flight.

The most serious problem was the fact that seven people did not have passports, although all had photocopies. On many occasions this has not been a problem in Indonesia, but this time the Immigration official was adamant that these people could not leave and they were unable to board the flight.

It is possible that with better liaison at the airport some of these problems could have been solved. One other evacuation party from another company was observed going straight through the Immigration check without queuing up, so clearly in some circumstances it was possible to 'circumvent' some procedures. It is clear that more attention needs to be paid to airport ground-handling liaison for future evacuation plans. Nonetheless, the procedures that had to be followed were the legally correct ones and there can be no guarantee that the situation could be improved in future.

The flight finally took off at approximately 0300 hours on 16th May. Those people who had been unable to fly were rushed back to the US Ambassador's residence in an attempt to get them on US Government evacuation flights. They missed the last bus but this proved fortunate as the US Embassy had underestimated the number of people to be evacuated and the vast majority of passengers could not get on a flight and had to return.

We spoke with the US Ambassador and determined that there would be more flights the next day. The following morning the people without passports were taken to the US Embassy, where new passports were issued. They were then taken to the American Club to sign on for an evacuation flight and were flown out that evening.

The situation in Indonesia looked increasingly bleak over the coming days. President Soeharto did not appear to be stepping down and serious divisions within the Government were beginning to appear. Civil war came very close. On the 18th and 19th May the essential employees were also evacuated, using a charter aircraft from Halim Airport. We stayed on to oversee security operations.

### **Conclusions**

The evacuation went very smoothly, given the anarchic situation. Paramount to the evacuation was the safety of the 367 persons. Due to extensive planning and some luck, all employees and their dependants were evacuated without injury.

As part of the contingency plan for evacuation, each family knew roughly what the plan was and their role and responsibilities. They had participated in several training exercises. It is a credit to each family that they complied with instructions fully and without question. This made the logistics and planning of the evacuation much easier.

There are lessons to be learned for the future. Indonesia still teeters on the brink of socio-economic breakdown. Although it is hoped that the evacuation plan will not be needed again, next time they will be ready, having learnt from the experience of risky decisions made last time that did not always work out as planned.

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