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Author(s)	Mushahid Ali
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KONFRONTASI: Why Singapore was in Forefront of Indonesian Attacks

By Mushahid Ali

Synopsis

Indonesia's confrontation of Malaysia in the 1960s saw a campaign of bomb attacks against civilian targets in Singapore including MacDonald House. Several Indonesians were captured, tried and hanged. What was the objective of Konfrontasi?

Commentary

ON 10 MARCH 2015 a memorial to *Konfrontasi* (Confrontation) was inaugurated on Orchard Road, opposite MacDonald House, which was bombed by Indonesian marines 50 years earlier, on 10 March 1965. The assault, in which three civilians were killed and 33 others injured, was the most serious bomb attack, but not the only successful one, in Singapore, as reported by Daniel Wei Boon Chua in his RSIS commentary of 16 March 2015 (KONFRONTASI: Why It Still Matters to Singapore).

There were several bombs that were set off and people killed and injured during the three year-long campaign by Indonesian saboteurs, aimed at demoralising the people and damaging Singapore's economy. The low-intensity conflict was launched by Indonesia's president Sukarno to "crush Malaysia", of which Singapore was a part from 1963 to 1965. He was opposed to the formation of Malaysia, which also comprised Malaya, Sarawak and Sabah, which Sukarno described as a neo-colonialist plot.

Singapore in forefront of bomb attacks

While much of the conflict was fought along the Indonesia-Malaysia border in Sabah and Sarawak, Singapore was in the forefront of the bombings by Indonesian saboteurs engaging in hit-and-run attacks, such as the MacDonald House bombing. The latter incident was not the only attack which resulted in casualties during *Konfrontasi*.

Several bombs were set off in different parts of the island, with people killed and injured. Many Indonesians were captured and some tried and sentenced to death, besides the two marines who carried out the MacDonald House attack. In fact Singapore had commuted the death sentences of two other Indonesians and repatriated them to Indonesia.

The Indonesian bomb attacks on Singapore were targeted at civilians, as seen in the records of

security authorities. At least 42 bomb incidents occurred throughout the conflict, resulting in the deaths of seven people and injuring more than 50 others. On 9 December 1963, a bomb went off under a car along Jalan Wangi, Sennett Estate, killing two shopkeepers. On 12 April 1964 another attack took place at a nearly-completed HDB block at Jalan Rebong; the impact killed a woman and her teenage daughter and injured six others in a house nearby.

On 30 May 1964 a bomb was detonated at the Changi RAF base with the intent to cause physical injury to people and damage to property. The perpetrator, an Indonesian Lamadi Ahmad, was sentenced to death. Despite appeals from Indonesia the sentence was upheld by the Federal Court of Malaysia and on 28 March 1965 Lamadi became the first Indonesian saboteur to be hanged in Singapore for an offence committed during *Konfrontasi*.

Not long after the MacDonald House bombing, two other Indonesian saboteurs were arrested on 14 April 1965. They were found with two bombs by a police patrol before they could carry out their intended attack. However one of the bombs exploded before it could be defused. The blast, which occurred at the junction of Meyer Road and Fort Road, injured two bomb demolition experts and a police officer.

The two, Stanislaus Krofan and Andres Andea, were tried and sentenced to death for possession of explosives. However the sentences were remitted by the Singapore President following appeals from the Indonesian Government and taking into account the fact that the incident did not cause any deaths. They were released and repatriated to Indonesia in April 1967.

The two perpetrators of the MacDonald House bombing, Harun Said and Osman Mohd Ali, contrary to the report that they were "put on trial and given the death sentence in 1968", were tried in October 1965 for their role in the bombing. Following a 13-day trial, both of them were found guilty of three murder charges and sentenced to death on 20 October 1965. The sentence was upheld despite appeals to the Privy Council and clemency pleas submitted by the Indonesian government.

Both were subsequently hanged on 17 October 1968. The hanging of the two marines heightened tension between the two countries until then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew sprinkled flowers over the graves of the two marines during his visit to Indonesia in May 1973.

Objective of *Konfrontasi*

Indonesia's objective of *Konfrontasi* in Singapore was to disrupt Singapore's trade and economy as seen in the targets of the bomb attacks. On 16 November 1964 an attempt by 10 Indonesian commandos to sabotage an oil installation was foiled. Also foiled were several incursions in December 1964. One of the last major operations was an attempt on 26 June 1965 by four boatloads of saboteurs to blow up power stations and military installations in Singapore. The four boats were sunk by security forces before they could carry out the attacks. Attacks on Singapore continued even after the 9 August 1965 separation of Singapore from Malaysia.

Besides the security forces, Singaporeans volunteered for the Vigilante Corps which was mobilised to look out for intruders and saboteurs out to harm their fellow citizens and properties. Singapore was also involved in the military defence of Malaysia against Indonesian forces. Two battalions in the Singapore Infantry Regiment took part in fighting insurgents in Sabah and invaders in Johore, peninsular Malaysia, incurring several casualties.

Konfrontasi, which had been launched by president Sukarno to oppose the formation of Malaysia, ended in 1966 following his ouster and the transfer of power to General Suharto, who went on to lead Indonesia for 30 years. Relations between Singapore and Indonesia improved after PM Lee's visit to the marines' graves in the Kalibata Heroes Cemetery in Jakarta and they became fast friends and solid partners in ASEAN.

The memorial to *Konfrontasi* in front of MacDonald House is a significant reminder of an important episode in Singapore's history that accompanied its emergence as an independent nation. Besides overcoming the existential threat posed by Indonesia's confrontation, the memorial serves as a marker of Singapore's will to protect its people and defend its independence and sovereignty.

Mushahid Ali is a Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg