

# Risk Professional: Indonesian rebels threaten invasion of Malaysia

An Indonesian group calling itself "BENDARA" has said that it intends to invade Malaysia, starting with territory on the Island of Borneo.

The trouble with storms in tea-cups is that they tend to spill over, at least a little.

Indonesia and Malaysia have the same kind of relationship that the UK and France have had for centuries: a little rhetoric here and there but nothing ever happens.

For example, there's a continuing spat over maids: there are a lot of Indonesian maids in Malaysia. Every so often, something kicks off and gets far more attention than it deserves. For example, in 2003, some Indonesian maids employed by Chinese families decided that they were being treated disrespectfully because the families had dogs which the maids had to walk and ate pork which the maids had to cook. No one thought to say that, if the maids considered either to be a real problem, they should not have taken the jobs. The fuss passed, but not until questions had been asked in Parliament and suggestions were made that work permits should be made available to Indonesian maids only to work in Muslim households. That didn't suit the maids: they feared loss of opportunity and lower pay (but produced no evidence to support either). The end result was that Indonesia stopped complaining and a diplomatic and commercial issue simply went away.

Long ago, Indonesians claimed that Malaysia's national anthem is a copy of an Indonesian song: music historians have said that the passages complained of are not Indonesian, either but from the middle east, centuries ago.

Earlier this year, Indonesia accused Malaysia of entering its territorial waters when a warship went to Ambalat - an area off the coast of Borneo that both countries claim: it is thought to be rich in oil and gas, products that shore up the economies of both countries. Indonesia claimed that it drove "the Malaysian fleet" away. The incident hardly made the news in Malaysia. The irony is that the two fleets work together in anti-piracy and anti-terrorism patrols in the South China Sea and the Andaman Sea, particularly the notorious Melacca Straits. The border dispute has been rumbling on for about five years since both Malaysia and Indonesia awarded exploration and drilling concessions in their own waters, but with some parts overlapping and some in the disputed waters.

Indonesians are still smarting over a 2002 International Court of Justice decision which decided that two bits of barren rock called Sipidan and Ligitan belonged to Malaysia: previously, they had not belonged to anyone. But so far as Indonesia is concerned, the islands were not just land-masses but also brought territorial rights over sea that Indonesia had, in effect, annexed.

Several weeks ago, Indonesians noticed that a promotional video for Malaysia included an Indonesian dance in its "Malaysia, Truly Asia" campaign. They claimed that Malaysia was trying to steal tourists from Indonesia, and that Malaysia has no culture of its own to display. Again, ministers from both countries got involved. Malaysia said that the video had been produced by a foreign company and that it had simply confused similar dances in both countries. But, honestly, the dance is almost a generic dance across the whole of South East Asia where there is Hindu influence - and that means everywhere there is Buddhism.

Then there were calls to declare batik (painting onto silk) to be defined as an Indonesian craft. That, too, belies the fact that the craft, in one form or another, is practised across dozens of civilisations. It suddenly became an issue in the middle of this year when several European design houses featured batik in their collections. And then actress Jessica Alba was photographed in a dress made from batik said to be of a traditional Indonesian design from the district of Jogjakarta (sometimes spelt Yogyakarta), the city that was once Indonesia's capital.

But amusing as these issues seem to outsiders, they are providing a fertile ground for anti-Malaysian sentiment amongst some Indonesians. And new media is enabling mass communications to create ill-will on a rapid and startling scale. One widely read blog made much of the warship incident, making a thinly veiled call-to-arms to defend the territory but to stop short of war. It ended that Malaysia would not go to war "as it'll cost them a lot more."

Neither government considers the issues of the border to be "a dispute." They merely say that there is an issue that needs to be resolved and, in time, they will come to an agreement. Neither government is, seemingly, in any rush to resolve it and infrequent meetings are held at which something is discussed but little or nothing is decided.

But some Indonesians are not prepared to wait: some consider the whole of Borneo to be Indonesian territory and resent the fact that it is partitioned. Indeed, in the 1960s, Indonesia formally invaded the Malaysian part of Borneo in a series of bloody incursions but were defeated. There was also a small and easily frustrated attempt to invade peninsular Malaysia in 1963, when Indonesia sensed that Malaysia was potentially fragmenting as Singapore left the Federation after a brief membership. The Indonesians were led by Sukarno, widely regarded as a despotic leader. Indonesia entered a period of relative domestic and regional peace after a coup by General Suharto displaced him.

Following the fuss over the pendet dance, an Indonesian group calling itself BENDARA started a PR campaign that was taken up by bloggers, and responses in blogs from both sides came thick and fast.

BENDARA stands for Benteng Demokrasi Rakyat and it claims that its mission is to "avenge all the wrongs done to Indonesia." It claims to have a slogan of "Kill Malaysians" and reportedly set up illegal roadblocks in parts of Jakarta last month, saying that they intended to "sweep our streets clear of Malaysians."

The group claims to have built a stock of Samurai swords and pointed bamboo poles, plus bows and arrows ready for their invasion of Malaysia.

And they have fixed a date: it's going to be today, they say.

Both the Malaysian and Indonesian authorities have said that the whole thing is stupid. Unfortunately, sufficient people think it's a real threat that the police in Kuching in Malaysia's Sarawak state have increase patrols. And both sides have increased border and sea patrols in a show of unity that belies the suggestion of genuine tension.

BENDERA said that it intended to invade by "land, sea and air."

The date appears to have been chosen to distract both sides from a long-planned meeting between Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak scheduled for tomorrow.

The Indonesian Foreign Ministry is livid that the country's reputation is being tarnished by what it calls "an unregistered group." The FM' spokesman Teuku Faizasyah described the supposed invasion as "ridiculous," pointing out that their stated intention to send 1,500 people armed, largely, with sharpened sticks would be defeated as soon as they arrived at a border crossing.

That might be right if the border was strictly policed but running, as it does, through hilly jungle terrain, border security is not absolute.

Faizasyah told local media that it was giving too much coverage to the story and that it was giving publicity to the group, causing concern amongst populations in both countries and, worse, might encourage people to think they should join in.

UPDATE: as dusk approached in Malaysia, BENDERA announced that it had delayed its "invasion" until tomorrow - and declared that it has placed 12 "agents" in Malaysia to agitate amongst the thousands of Indonesians working in Malaysia. Malaysian blog The Malaysian Insider says that it has spoken to "Bendera coordinator Mustar Nonaventura" in Jakarta and he told them "we will send the first 200 tomorrow."