

US Navy research lab under microscope in Indonesia

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JAKARTA (AFP) — The future of a major US Navy research laboratory in Indonesia is in doubt amid allegations, dismissed as "crazy" by US diplomats, of espionage and secret experiments.

Negotiations between Washington and Jakarta over the renewal of the operating contract of US Naval Medical Research Unit-2, or Namru-2, have stalled over a range of issues including diplomatic immunity for its US staff.

Established in Indonesia in 1970 and charged with researching infectious diseases of military importance, the facility employs 19 Americans and more than 100 Indonesians and is based in Indonesian health ministry grounds.

Its operations have attracted suspicion from a number of quarters in the world's largest Muslim country, from anti-US religious hardliners to outspoken Health Minister Siti Fadilah Supari and Defence Minister Juwono Sudarsono.

"We'll conduct some checks on their presence in Indonesia," Vice President Jusuf Kalla said after Friday prayers last week.

Supari, whose ministry has worked with the US laboratory on projects including malaria research and bird flu early warning systems, has thrown fuel on to the diplomatic fire.

"Until today there have been no significantly useful results for the people (from Namru-2's research)," she said last month.

"Problems with contagious diseases such as malaria and dengue fever are still relatively the same... My people ask me why is there a health laboratory working together with a foreign military?"

Some parliamentarians have demanded the laboratory's operating contract, which expired in 2005, be torn up and its facilities taken over by Jakarta.

Parliamentary foreign affairs commissioner Mutamimul Ula called Thursday for an "investigation into allegations that Namru-2 staffers were involved in intelligence operations."

"There is this flavour of intelligence activities... This can't be avoided in the eyes of the public. It is part of the defence organism of a foreign country," Ula said.

The controversy and the delays in the renewal of the contract appear to be causing a degree of angst among US officials in the departments of health and state, reflecting the importance Washington attaches to the facility.

Namru-2 has been a major point of US-Indonesian cooperation over the years, including times when relations over other issues were strained. US President George W. Bush mentioned the facility in a joint statement with Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono when he visited Jakarta in 2006.

Apparently stung by the latest whirlwind of allegations, some of which stretch back several years, the US embassy has issued a statement entitled "The Truth About Namru-2."

"There's been rumours over the last 10 years that we had to respond to," US embassy deputy chief of mission John A. Heffern told AFP.

"It's just crazy," he said of the allegations of spying and secret experiments, adding that Namru-2 was "totally unclassified, totally transparent."

"If the Indonesian ministry of health wants the raw data, it's totally open to them," he said.

"Hopefully we will resume our negotiations. This doesn't help."

Sticking points in the negotiations have included the US's insistence that all American staff at the laboratory be given diplomatic immunity.

Complicating matters is a separate dispute between Washington and Jakarta over bird flu samples.

Jakarta is insisting on "the recognition of sovereign rights of states over their biological resources," and fears the flu samples will be used by foreign companies to make vaccines, which will be too expensive for Indonesians.

US officials have slammed the position, with US Secretary of Health and Human Services Michael Leavitt recently stressing the importance of international cooperation to tackle the bird flu threat.

"The United States has very important relationships here in Indonesia, that involve joint work in laboratories in various levels of research, and we have pledged to continue that," Leavitt said after meeting Yudhoyono last month.

Indonesia has the highest number of human bird flu victims, with 108 people known to have died in the sprawling archipelago from the disease.

The World Health Organisation, which has designated Namru-2 as a Collaborating Centre on disease research, has warned that Indonesia is putting its own population in danger by failing to share its samples.