Serious disturbances have flared in the Netherlands, a country once known for its tranquility. It is the South Moluccans again. What has happened is not simply a replay of the scenario that hit the front pages all over the world last year. At that time a group of South Moluccan terrorists brought a train to a standstill in a somewhat desolate area and took nearly all of its passengers hostage. For a brief period a school in the vicinity served as a subsidiary scene of terror. The schoolchildren were released within a week, but the train siege set a hijacking record. Negotiations proved fruitless, and after some twenty days the Dutch Government, believing there was no alternative left, had the marines storm the train. The surprise action claimed the lives of six terrorists and two hostages. The surviving hijackers have now been brought to justice, and the trial predictably produced a great deal of commotion in Holland, particularly among the Moluccan communities.

As a nonstate-nation that attempts to press its demands through political violence, the South Moluccans are hardly exceptional. What renders their case unique is the fact that the country in which they reside, and which they have repeatedly subjected to brutality and terror, is in no position to yield to their demands. The South Moluccans are not trying to wrest territory from Holland. Their cause focuses on a homeland of their own, a sovereign republic some ten thousand miles away, in an area that is currently part of the Republic of Indonesia.

South Moluccan radicalism can only be understood in its historical context. Indeed, the Moluccans’ distressing situation has its roots in the period of decolonization. A brief survey of the mistakes and misunderstandings that developed at that time may help explain the grudges they nurse and the hopes they cherish.

Until a quarter of a century or so ago the Moluccans and the Dutch got along very well. At that time the Netherlands administered a vast empire in Southeast Asia that included the Moluccas, known in an even more distant past as the “Spice Islands.” Faced with an overwhelming majority of ethnically diverse subjects in an area many times the size of their own country, the Dutch tended to grant preferential, or at least favorable, treatment to the Moluccans. Contemporary Indonesian historians claim that the members of this minority were regarded as anak mas (golden children) of the empire. The Moluccans, who by and large had adopted Christianity, had from time immemorial served in the colonial army. Indeed, their islands were known for generations as military recruiting grounds. These two factors may have rendered the Moluccans immune to nationalism. They did not experience the colonial condition as an increasingly unbearable burden. Their attitude of collaboration and cooperation contrasted sharply with the surges of nationalism on Java.

World War II witnessed the Dutch and their faithful auxiliaries fighting the Japanese shortly after the raid on Pearl Harbor. Many Moluccans died on the battlefields during the early part of the war. Others were sent to prison camps, a fate they might have avoided had they detached themselves from the Dutch cause. Although the war spelled suffering to most Indonesians, it was particularly hard on the Moluccans.

Hardly had Japan been defeated in August, 1945, when the Indonesian nationalists on Java, skillfully exploiting a power vacuum, issued their Proklamatie. The Proclamation of Independence, which signaled the beginning of the Revolution, had ostensibly been launched on behalf of the Moluccas as well. Nevertheless most Moluccans did not hesitate for a moment but once again joined the Dutch in their efforts “to restore law and order” to reestablish the Pax Neerlandica.

Military force was futile, as more than four years of fighting revealed. However, behind the battlefield the Dutch Government tried to come up with devices that could offset, or at least contain, the Revolution. The federalization of the vast island empire greatly appealed to the policymakers in The Hague. This was especially true because the Netherlands’ ulterior motives (such as
the containment within one state of those who had started the Revolution) could be disguised as a concern for minorities. The argument was advanced that, given the developmental discrepancies that coincided with ethnic divisions, it appeared likely that the less developed would be suppressed or shunted aside. Such a fate could be averted by the creation of a federation in which the states would have equality.

The Netherlands East Indies, which had for centuries been centrally governed as one political entity, was therefore divided into a number of states, each to enjoy an unusually large degree of autonomy. Also—and this was an essential element in the federalization project—each state would, in effect, have the right of self-determination. If it did not like the political arrangement, it could opt out. Whether or not such an alternative implied complete secession was never spelled out in detail. The Round Table Conference, held shortly before the transfer of sovereignty, debated this point at length, and the Accords stipulated that:

Each constituent state would be granted an opportunity to accept the definitive Constitution [only a provisional constitution had been established at that time]. If a State could not accept the Constitution, it would be entitled to negotiate a special relation with the Republic of Indonesia, and with the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

The Moluccans had by then become extremely apprehensive about their postcolonial status. Naturally they did not want to become a part of the very republic against whose revolutionaries they had fought so arduously. Some of their spokesmen indicated they would prefer to retain their colonial status, and, if this were not possible, to become a sovereign state that would have nothing to do with the Indonesians. The Dutch authorities assured the Moluccans that although their islands would not themselves constitute a state, but instead a daerah (district) within the newly formed State of East Indonesia, they need not fear reprisals, because the revolutionary nationalists would be confined to one of the states.

The federation was doomed from the start. Many Indonesian nationalists suspected that the Dutch Government’s belated innovation stemmed from a desire to dilute revolutionary fervor and to engage in “divide-and-rule” politics. In addition, the transfer of power had witnessed the confirmation of Sukarno as president and Hatta as vice-president. These two dedicated nationalists who headed the national government were known as staunch advocates of the unitary structure. Their first aim was to liquidate what was perceived as a colonial legacy. The respective states were thus invited to merge into a new Indonesia that would not be federal. The proponents of the unitary system on occasion engaged in arm-twisting. At least the application of methods beyond persuasion may be inferred. While all the states succumbed, one by one, the State of East Indonesia, which included the Moluccas, stood firm. It indicated that it preferred to exercise the right of self-determination, a right the Accords had yielded. Apparently the decision was not unanimous, for fights broke out in the state capital. These incidents afforded Djakarta an excellent opportunity to intervene. Troops, largely veterans from the Revolution, were dispatched, and order, that is, the order of Djakarta, was restored before the state had been able to carry out its expressed intent.

The Moluccans were shocked by what had happened a couple of hundred miles from their shores. They feared the day of reckoning had come, that the naked power being used in other parts of East Indonesia would be applied also in the Moluccas because they had fought on the wrong side. In this atmosphere of fear and panic the Republik Maluku Selatan (Republic of the South Moluccas, usually abbreviated to RMS) was proclaimed on April 25, 1950. Here again the decision was not unanimous. Although the islands had been pro-Dutch during the Revolution, a number of Moluccans now chose to remain uninvolved. Others wanted the islands to be included in Indonesia, regardless of the latter’s form of government. It is not clear whether these sentiments stemmed from some amor fati, inherent in Oriental resignation, or from the belief that the Republic of Indonesia would prevail anyway and that further provocation would only make matters worse.

Nevertheless a sizable number of Moluccans did join the new cause. The Indonesian Government, fearing that a successful secession attempt might generate the progressive disintegration of the Republic, dispatched tens of thousands of men to combat that threat. It took more than six months for the separatist movement to be crushed. A few rebels escaped to the nearby island of Seram to continue the struggle. Other RMS veterans who had thoroughly compromised themselves succeeded in getting to Holland. The era of exile had started.

A large majority of Moluccans then residing in the Netherlands did not take part either in the proclamation of their republic or in the unavailing struggle for its survival. Even most of those who arrived in Holland as
first-generation exiles were not in the Moluccas when the dramatic events reached their climax.

When the RMS was proclaimed, some four thousand Moluccans were stationed on Java awaiting demobilization. Since they had been part of the former colonial army, they were apprehensive about being demobilized in what to them appeared the lion’s den. An old (prewar) army ordinance enabled those serving in the colonial army to be demobilized at a place of their choosing, that is, anywhere on Dutch soil. Invoking this regulation, the four thousand Moluccans demanded that they and their families be taken to Holland, that is, anywhere on Dutch soil. The desire to relocate in some safe place until the dust settled would hardly qualify them as full-fledged political refugees. Although they had been told that the army ordinance enabled those serving in the colonial army to be demobilized at a place of their choosing, that is, anywhere on Dutch soil. Invoking this regulation, the four thousand Moluccans demanded that they and their families be taken to Holland, that is, anywhere on Dutch soil. Since they had been part of the former colonial army, they were apprehensive about being demobilized in what to them appeared the lion’s den. An old (prewar) army ordinance enabled those serving in the colonial army to be demobilized at a place of their choosing, that is, anywhere on Dutch soil. Invoking this regulation, the four thousand Moluccans demanded that they and their families be taken to Holland, that is, anywhere on Dutch soil. Since they had in fact come to the Netherlands to be demobilized, it is obvious that they were not in the Moluccas when the dramatic events reached their climax.

The situation was clarified for them somewhat. Possibly the news broadcasts and documentaries provided by the Dutch had been one-sided and spiteful. But it is at least notable that the relocated soldiers and their families began to sympathize with the RMS, about whose existence they had known little or nothing when they left Indonesia. They now hoped they would soon be returned to the Moluccan islands so that they would be able to fight for the survival of the Republic of the South Moluccas.

The first major blow to hit the new immigrants was their prompt demobilization. Since they had in fact come to the Netherlands to be demobilized, it is obvious that they were now experiencing a change of mind. Demobilization to them amounted to a "status deprivation," which in addition (since they had never acquired civilian skills) rendered them dependent upon unemployment benefits. The demobilization caused a great fracas within the settled Moluccan communities and some rallies and protests outside.

Holland, still trying to recover from the war and from the costly attempts to restore its overseas power, was ill-prepared to deal with the absorption of this fairly large group, some thirteen thousand persons in all. Since their immigration had a provisional and temporary appearance, it is not surprising that the official policy came to be marked by flaws and makeshift measures. The Moluccans were housed in large army camps away from the big cities and towns. This arrangement had the advantage of allowing the new arrivals to stick together and preserve their culture in an entirely new setting. But it showed a lack of concern with integrating this minority. The newcomers were not exposed to Dutch culture or to the Dutch language. Significantly even today one can find among the first-generation exiles individuals, particularly women, unable to express themselves in Dutch.

Second, the Dutch Government did not object to the establishment and continued existence of the RMS government on Dutch soil. The separatist cause was simply perpetuated in Holland when the movement had been crushed in the Moluccas. The RMS government, which called itself a "government-in-exile," was at no point officially recognized by the Dutch Government. It was nevertheless highly visible on the Dutch scene, particularly on its National Day commemorating the 1950 Proclamation. Large rallies and parades were organized in which the Moluccans, emerging from their enclaves all over the country, participated. The South Moluccan flag was hoisted, the national anthem ceremoniously sung.

The RMS government also specialized in inflammatory rhetoric, which poured from brochures, flyers, and speeches. The surprisingly casual attitude the Dutch Government adopted with respect to all these activities conducted on its territory may be attributed in part to the strong anti-Indonesian sentiments that obtained in Holland throughout the Fifties. The Dutch public had been appalled by Indonesia’s fundamental change of government. It was not so much the collapse of the federal structure as the rejection of the self-determination provisions that was resented. To the Dutch this spelled the suppression of the less developed ethnic groups by the more advanced ones. In that light the South Moluccans could appear the early victims of ominous trends within the former colony.

The triangle consisting of the Netherlands, Indonesia, and the RMS reveals an inverse relationship: The Dutch appreciation for the South Moluccan cause was at its peak whenever the Netherlands-Indonesian relations were at a low point. The wave of indignation that the rejection of minority rights had caused was upstaged by the prolonged dispute concerning New Guinea. The latter issue was, in effect, an illustration of the self-determination principle. Undoubtedly the RMS cause would have been furthered had the Dutch been able to make the self-determination principle prevail in the case of West New Guinea. The Indonesians again categorically rejected that position and won the day.

Relations between the Dutch and the Indonesians went on an upward trend once the New Guinea dispute had been resolved in 1963. The new development sounded the knell for the RMS, whose presence in Holland had become entrenched over a period of thirteen years. The RMS problem was one of the many issues that awaited discussion within the Dutch-Indonesian rapprochement. The Netherlands Government offered to have all the exiles repatriated at public expense, and on a voluntary basis. Djakarta appeared willing to let bygones be bygones but emphasized that there could be no question of a "special territory" with greater autonomy, much less a separate state. Very few Moluccans accepted the offer. Some who did underestimated the adjustments that had to be made and returned to Holland in disillusionment.

The improvement of Netherlands-Indonesian relations gathered momentum once Sukarno had been forced to leave the scene in 1966. No breakthrough had been achieved in regard to the RMS problem, but it became apparent that the first-generation Moluccans were giving up hope. Even the RMS government, exclusively manned by elderly exiles, paid only
lip service to the old cause. Curiously, about that time, in the mid-1960's, a new generation of Moluccans, most of whom had no recollection of their ancestral islands, began to seize the banner. These young men and women had been raised in the Netherlands. They had gone to Dutch schools. Nevertheless their education had been conditioned by Moluccan customs and traditions. They had made no attempts to wrest themselves away from the parental influence. Indeed, most of them continued to live within the Moluccan compounds even if that meant commuting considerable distances. The generation gap did make itself felt in one respect: The young Moluccans were more outspoken and aggressive toward what they perceived as a hostile environment. Some established the Liberation Front RMS. and the South Moluccan Youth. Others labeled themselves the South Moluccan Panthers.

Many attempted to imitate the life-styles of terrorist groups. Trains became objects of vandalism.

As indicated, the present unrest relates to the trial of the terrorists who survived the May, 1977, hijacking, Dutch authorities, meanwhile, embarked upon a thorough search of some nearby Moluccan camps and compounds, fearing the trial might provoke armed conflicts. Although some firearms were found and confiscated, fights could not be averted. Masked Moluccans circled the courthouse, carrying posters that warned: "Our vengeance will come while you sleep."

These incidents have thoroughly exacerbated Dutch-Moluccan relations. In this atmosphere the defense plea that the hijackers, intended to use their weapons for purposes of intimidation only fails to impress the Dutch public. By the same token one is struck by the amount of evidence favorable to the terrorists that has been submitted by some former hostages.

"What the RMS terrorists did in Holland has shamed their kinfolk and relatives in the Moluccas."

As things stand now, only two solutions present themselves. It may be possible through Indonesian intervention to make the Moluccans realize that their movement is doomed. Until recently Djakarta insisted that the RMS was an exclusively Dutch problem, not an Indonesian concern. Interestingly, this position has now been abandoned. Indonesian Ambassador Yuwono indicated some weeks ago that he was greatly intrigued by the problem and that he hoped to contribute to its solution. He wanted the young Moluccans to travel through Indonesia and see the situation for themselves. It is true that the RMS has no appeal in the Moluccas. Two Dutch journalists who recently visited the islands concluded that the views of the Moluccan people in Molucca contrasted sharply with those of the Moluccan people in the Netherlands. Interviewing people from all walks of life, they found that the RMS often presented themselves. It may be possible to impress the Dutch public. By the same token one is struck by the amount of evidence favorable to the terrorists that has been submitted by some former hostages.

A few years later a plan was uncovered to abduct Queen Juliana from her palace and keep her hostage until the South Moluccan demands were met. The train hijackings of December, 1975, and May, 1977, are still fresh in public memory. The latter produced more tensions. The police and army patrolled highways, stopped cars, and posted guards at many government buildings and at the Indonesian diplomatic and consular missions. The economic costs of the latest train hijackings are estimated to exceed a million and a half dollars.

This experimental stage gradually led to conflicts. Moluccans reportedly roamed the streets at night, molesting passers-by and damaging public property. Trains became objects of vandalism.

In 1970, one year after a plebiscite had effectively eliminated whatever self-determination New Guinea might have had, the president of Indonesia paid a state visit to the Netherlands. Young South Moluccans saw the visit as an opportunity to have the RMS problem discussed at the highest level—between the Indonesian and the South Moluccan presidents. Since the Dutch Government refused to act as a go-between (Holland had never officially recognized the RMS), the Moluccan youngsters were unable to establish communication. It was at this point that they committed their first major act of violence. They occupied the Indonesian Embassy, killing one policeman. The Indonesian ambassador was not in, but his wife and members of his staff were taken hostage. The incident was highly embarrassing to the Dutch authorities, who finally persuaded the desperados to surrender themselves to the police. When brought to justice the South Moluccans received surprisingly light sentences. Maybe this was part of the deal for their surrender. But it may also have encouraged their peers to further terrorism.

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