

# INTEROPONG

By Wahyuni Kamah

## ◆ ◆ ◆ M U D I K ◆ ◆ ◆

What does the word "mudik" mean? This word stems from Betawi, a language spoken in Jakarta. 'Udik', means kampung, or to be out of town. The word has become a popular Indonesian term to indicate the act of returning home. Mudik also means "mass exodus" since those who go back home at the same time each year can reach upwards of a million people. This rite coincides holidays like Idul Fitri, where Muslims celebrate the end of Ramadan, the fasting month, or Christmas. Every urban Muslim who works in Jakarta wants to celebrate the holiday with their family at home.

In line with the growing number of urban people working in the capital, mudik becomes a yearly social rite. For the past two years, two important holidays, Idul Fitri and Christmas, have fallen in the same month. Mudik becomes the government's business for a short period of time, with agencies such as the police, the ministry of transportation, and the military getting involved. The police, especially traffic police, must stay alert during this time, watching in particular the traffic lines along the busy roads.

Private TV stations race to present the most current reports on mudik. The print media even give tips for the travelers and especially those who drive. Big car companies open service points along the roads most frequented by the travelers. Mudik is also used by some companies to promote new products. In short, mudik is a national agenda item, where all elements of society are involved.

Mudik is also a money making 'event'. It is not wishful thinking taking into account the fact that around 4 million urban dwellers leave Jakarta to celebrate their holiday. What a potential market!

One month before the holiday, most airplane tickets from Jakarta to other cities have been sold out. If you are a little late to book the tickets, you are relegated to the ever-growing waiting list. Few weeks before the holiday, trains, bus and ship tickets are transformed into highly precious objects that one queues for hours and pays dearly to acquire.

It is sometimes out of common sense to see the spirit of the people who want to mudik. It is familiar to see a crowd of people enthusiastically waiting in a snake-long queue. They tirelessly queue up the tickets for hours at places like Gambir Train Station in Jakarta, even before the ticket counter is open. Just a few days before Idul Fitri, long rows of people queue since dawn. Many of them spent the night in front of the ticket counter in order to be the first in line by the time the counter is open. There is no sign of exhaustion in their faces as they only have one objective in mind: to gather with the family celebrating the holiday in their kampung.

In the bus terminals, the situation was no better than in the train stations. The passengers have to pay unfairly inflated bus fares (50-150 percent ticket hikes from the regular price) since they really have no choice. Often they are also the targets of the scalpers.

The prices skyrocket out of government's control. Scalpers are everywhere in the bus terminal, train station, and ship's ticket centers taking the advantage of the situation. Passengers often buy the inflated tickets from the scalpers as they run out of tickets from the official counter.

A few days before Idul Fitri chaos struck the Pelni headquarters as the hopeful low-income passengers leaving for Sumatra that had waited in a queue for long hours had to go home empty-handed as the tickets were all sold out in only a few minutes. They ran amok and destroyed the Pelni ticketing office. Public blame was placed on the government by saying that it had not learned its lesson from past similar experiences. "The demand is much higher than the supply," the government argues.

Other than officials that take the advantage of the situation, pick-pockets dressed in decent clothing are prevalent in ticket centers, terminals and train stations, targeting the distracted holiday travelers.

The struggle to get the ticket along with its consequence is the first hurdle that the holiday travelers have to surmount. For those who take surface transportation, especially the bus, the trials worsen. If the holiday travelers have more money, they can afford to pay for an air-conditioned bus. However, for the "have-nots", it is quite expensive so they are forced to take the non-air conditioned bus while the rest of the money is spent to buy gifts for the families.

The traffic on some sections of the road is highly congested as all sorts of vehicles - trucks, sedans, buses, police patrol cars, mini-buses and motorcycles-fill the roads. The temporary traditional markets that extend to the road also exacerbate the problem.

Traveling in a non-air conditioned bus on mudik peak days is another struggle for the travelers. Driving on a cloudless day on a highly congested road where a distance of 20-kilometers is covered in an average of nine hours, these passengers are likely to be melted by the sun. I witnessed such a scene in Indramayu, West Java, where the traffic was so bad that the vehicles on the road had reached a standstill. The unfortunate bus passengers, children and adults, many of whom did not get a seat, had to struggle with the heat and the traffic. They covered the windows with their clothes in an attempt to minimize the sun's rays. They were truly patient people.

No matter how hard the trek to reach the home, the hardship during the travel is gone by the time one sets foot at home. It is just like reaching the finish line: a victory.

E-mail : [wkamah@yahoo.com](mailto:wkamah@yahoo.com)

Copyright © 2002 Wahyuni Kamah

23 Jan 2002