

Support for Foreign Military?

U.S. Weapons Aid Repression in Aceh

By Frida Berrigan | June 12, 2003

Far from the spotlight and far from Baghdad, another shock and awe campaign is underway. On May 19th, Indonesia launched a military campaign to “strike and paralyze” a small band of separatist rebels in the Aceh province. In a made-for-TV photo op, 458 soldiers parachuted onto the island from six C-130 Hercules transport aircraft manufactured by Lockheed Martin, the United States’ largest defense contractor. As many as 40,000 Indonesian troops and a police force of 10,000 followed close behind, backed up by warships, fighter planes, and other high-tech military equipment, declaring war on 5,000 separatist guerrillas armed with automatic weapons, mortars, and rocket-propelled grenades.

The attack, which is Indonesia’s biggest military campaign since its invasion and occupation of East Timor in 1975, follows the breakdown of five months of peace talks between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Indonesian government. Nongovernmental organizations working to bridge the gap between GAM’s assertion of total Acehnese independence and Jakarta’s insistence that Aceh remain part of the nation, campaigned for both sides to accept greater Acehnese autonomy and at least some say over how profits from the island’s rich resources—including oil and gas reserves—are apportioned. While there was popular support for these compromises throughout Indonesia, and the peace talks had broad support—including from the Bush administration and international lending institutions—the negotiations broke off in mid-May.

Indiscriminate Killing

Acehnese rebels have been fighting for independence for 27 years, in a guerrilla war that has cost the lives of 10,000 civilians and forced tens of thousands more to leave their homes.

While Indonesian military officials claim to be targeting armed rebels, they are employing “drain the ocean to kill the fish” tactics, with brutality and indiscriminate killing. On May 21st, Indonesian soldiers carried out two massacres; killing at least 14 unarmed people, including two 12-year-old boys. That was not an isolated incident. According to Amnesty International, the Indonesian military has engaged in extrajudicial executions of civilians—even children. The human rights group also charges that there is “widespread ... torture of detainees in both military and police custody.”

Two weeks into the intervention, the Indonesian military claims that it has killed 112 GAM fighters and captured 160, with an additional 92 surrendering. It also says that its own casualties and civilian deaths have been kept to a minimum, reporting that 10 soldiers and one civilian have been killed. Rebel sources contest these figures, saying that scores of civilians and hundreds of government soldiers have been killed.

While the true number of civilians killed in this intervention probably lie somewhere between the GAM and military counts, the displacement of civilians by the military is ongoing and well-documented



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by outside sources. The London-based *Times* quotes the Jakarta government as saying that as many as 200,000 civilians living in GAM strongholds will be interned in “strategic hamlets” for the duration of the war.

The majority of the schools in the region have been burned to the ground. While GAM and the Indonesian military each blame the other for the arson, the destruction was well orchestrated, which points to the military as the culprit. This seems to be part of a larger plan to draw popular support away from the rebels.

U.S. Weapons Do Not Equal Influence

In addition to the well-publicized use of U.S. origin C-130s, the Indonesian Air Force has deployed Rockwell International OV-10 Bronco attack planes, firing air-to-surface missiles at targets in Aceh. Other U.S. systems, like the F-16 Fighting Falcon multi-role fighter jets, S-58 Twinpack helicopters, and numerous small arms, are ready for deployment. The United States Arms Export Control Act stipulates that weapons are transferred to other countries to be used for self-defense, internal security, and participation in UN operations. It is difficult to see how one could classify what is going on in Aceh as meeting any of these three criteria.

In light of these violations of U.S. law and the fact the Washington backed the peace talks between GAM and Jakarta, the criticism of the military operation from the Bush administration has been exceedingly weak. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, who served as Ambassador to Indonesia under President Reagan and was friendly with Dictator Suharto, issued a statement saying that “it would be helpful if Indonesia would make sure that the actions of its forces are transparent ... it will help encourage the world that Indonesia is behaving professionally and carefully.”

While the Indonesian military has taken a page from the U.S. war in Iraq, embedding journalists and providing media access, its actions are far from transparent. Members of the media have been fired upon, threatened, and detained in the conflict area, and the military authorities have sought to curtail what news does appear, demanding for instance that journalists stop quoting GAM leaders.

Local human rights organizations have been attacked and international observers dispelled from the region, triggering concerns about the safety of civilians and the “transparency” with which the operation is being carried out.

For many years, the U.S. was Indonesia’s largest weapons source, equipping the country with everything from F-16 fighter planes to M-16 combat rifles. From the bloody 1975 invasion through the 1990s, the U.S. transferred more than \$1 billion in weaponry to Jakarta. Congress moved to ban some military exports to and training for Indonesia after the 1991 Santa Cruz massacre in East Timor, where soldiers wielding U.S. M-16s mowed down more than 270 unarmed people. And then, in response to military and paramilitary violence after East Timor’s vote for independence in 1999, Congress strengthened the ban, establishing a set of criteria Indonesia must meet before military ties can be resumed. None of the criteria, including the transparency in military budget and the prosecution of soldiers involved in human rights violations, have been fully met.

Judicial Process Gives Military a Free Pass

While the Indonesian government claims it is making strides to address human rights and military impunity, all the signs point in the exact opposite direction. In January an Indonesian court acquitted Brigadier General Tono Suratman, who was accused of human rights violations in East Timor. He is the 12th defendant acquitted by the court.

Even worse is the case of Major General Adam Damiri, who is on trial before a Jakarta human rights court for perpetrating crimes against humanity in East Timor. He has missed three consecutive court appearances because he is helping supervise the military assault on Aceh. Now the Indonesian prosecutors have recommended that all charges against him be dropped. This action makes it likely that there will be no serious penalties levied against the Indonesian military for its brutality in East Timor.

Despite the worsening crisis in Indonesia, the U.S.'s military embargo is under serious pressure as the Bush administration seeks a closer relationship with the world's largest Muslim democracy. In an effort to win support in the war on terrorism, the White House is seeking to renew military aid and training. The embargo on commercial sales of non-lethal defense articles has been lifted and contact between the two militaries is on the rise. Now, Indonesia's military benefits from the Regional Defense Counterterrorism Fellowship Program, a \$17.9 million military training program for Asian militaries. These steps send a message of support to Jakarta, even as many of the problems that sparked Congress' decision to freeze all military aid have not been resolved.

There has been some good news though. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee recently passed an amendment restricting International Military Education and Training (IMET) for 2004 for Indonesia until the government takes "effective measures" to investigate and criminally prosecute those responsible for a 2002 attack on U.S. citizens. Indonesian police and NGO investigations have implicated the Indonesian military (TNI) in the attack, which killed two Americans. This is a step in the right direction, but the Indonesia military technically still has access to IMET funding for 2003.

Washington often argues that weapons sales allow the administration to wield influence over the policies of purchasing nations. Well, Indonesian General Endriartono Sutarto has a response to that. When

asked about the use of UK-origin Hawk fighters in Aceh, he said, "I am going to use what I have. After all, I have paid already." The same can be said for U.S. weapons. These weapons do not go away. The Bronco planes bombing Aceh today are very likely the same ones that dropped napalm and missiles (and maybe even the bomb that killed the sister of Nobel Prize-winning Timorese leader Jose Ramos Horta) in East Timor in 1975.

Given the central role of U.S. weapons in this new round of government sanctioned killing, weapons that Indonesia has paid for already, how can the Bush administration wield its influence to demand more from our ally than "transparent" indiscriminate killing?

If the assertions that weapons sales equal influence are to be believed, the White House and Congress must muster the courage and compassion to demand an immediate cessation of military activities and a return to the negotiating table. Otherwise, our government bears some responsibility for the indiscriminate (but transparent) killing of unarmed Acehnese civilians.

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