

Lessons from Indonesia

By Frida Berrigan | October 25, 2004

The Bush administration heralds Indonesia as the world's largest Muslim democracy and a crucial ally in the war on terrorism. Since 9-11 it has pushed Congress to allow it to bolster the Indonesian military with weapons and military training. For many years, the United States was Indonesia's largest weapons source, equipping the country with everything from F-16 fighter planes to M-16 combat rifles. But during the 90s the spectacle of how Indonesia was using these gifts—to repress and brutalize its own people—provoked an international outcry. The U.S. Congress responded by cutting most military ties with Indonesia.

In recent years, pressure from human rights activists has kept members of Congress wary of the Bush administration's efforts to restore military aid and training assistance. In October 2004, 45 members of the House of Representatives wrote Secretary of State Colin Powell to oppose restoration of foreign military aid to Indonesia, citing "grave concerns over the prospects of real military reforms" in a "massively corrupt" institution riddled with "impunity." They call the administration's efforts "premature, unwarranted, and unwise."

The repression continued, and so did the efforts of the White House and the Pentagon to restore full military relations.

These efforts illustrate the tension between security and democracy in the "war" on terrorism. Washington needs Jakarta as a Muslim ally in this "war" and a source of intelligence on Islamic extremism, which means strengthening its military infrastructure. On the other hand, to uphold its image as a beacon of democracy and freedom, the U.S. must act to loosen the stranglehold of the Indonesian military over politics, justice, and culture. Washington cannot erect a security state and foster democracy at the same time. Rhetorically supporting and encouraging democracy in Indonesia while actually strengthening the anti-democratic ten-

dencies within its military is a dangerous contradiction that is likely to create more of the very problems it seeks to solve.

Members of Congress who actively oppose resumption of military aid to Indonesia understand that security flows from vibrant democracy. Nations are more secure when human and civil rights are protected, laws are enforced equally for everyone (even those wearing uniforms), the political process is transparent, and military power is curtailed.

The administration behaves as if it does not understand this. In return for Jakarta's vowed cooperation in the war on terrorism, Washington is turning a blind eye to the Indonesian military's long track record of human rights abuses, brutal repression of independence movements, involvement in sectarian violence, and relationships with terrorist networks.

Thus, aid to Indonesia is on the upswing. For fiscal year 2005, President Bush is requesting \$600,000 in military training, up from the \$459,000 that was frozen in 2004. Even if Congress does not release these training funds, Indonesia is slated to receive \$70 million in Economic Support Funds. This benign-sounding program is supposed to "promote economic and political stability" for infrastructure and development projects. While it is not intended



for military expenditure, many recipient governments use it as a backdoor method of freeing up their own money for military programs.

An embargo on commercial sales of “non-lethal” weaponry has been lifted and contact between the two militaries is on the rise. Indonesia’s military will participate as an observer in military exercises scheduled for this fall, even though Congress had banned Indonesia from receiving U.S. military training.

In addition to the naval exercises, Indonesian security forces are getting other significant help under the aegis of the war on terrorism. Indonesia benefits from the Regional Defense Counterterrorism Fellowship Program, a \$17.9 million military training program for Asian militaries, and more is in the offing. Through the Anti-Terrorism Assistance program, Washington is arming and training SWAT-like police forces in Indonesia. With initial funds of \$12 million, the program has funneled new high-tech weaponry and communications equipment into the country’s arsenal. Indonesia hopes to have six units of 325 elite force members armed and trained by the end of 2005.

Background:
A Legacy of Military Ties and Repression

The history of post-war U.S. support for the Indonesian military provides the “war” on terrorism with an important cautionary tale. In December 1975, Indonesia invaded neighboring East Timor, which had just declared itself independent from Portuguese colonizers. Over the next five years, the Indonesian military killed more than 200,000 people, one-third of the population. Declassified U.S. documents point to Washington giving Indonesian leader

General Suharto the green light for invasion. In the months that followed the brutal takeover, the United States signaled its approval by doubling military aid to Indonesia and preventing the United Nations from taking effective action against Suharto.

From 1975 through East Timor’s referendum for independence in 1999, the United States continued its military support, transferring over a billion dollars worth of weaponry to Jakarta.

Washington was forced to break off military relations with Jakarta because of the military’s abuse of power, violations of human rights, massacres, and extrajudicial killings. In 1992, Congress suspended military training aid after the Santa Cruz Massacre, in which Indonesian security officers fired into a peaceful crowd of protestors, killing 271 people.

Classroom military training was restored in 1995. 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. To this day, none of the criteria, including the transparency in military budget and the prosecution of soldiers involved in human rights violations, have been fully met.

Congressional controls on U.S. origin weaponry and military know-how are crucially important, especially because the Indonesian military regularly rebukes international controls placed on the use of imported weaponry. As Indonesian General Endriartono Sutarto remarked when asked about his military’s use of UK-origin Hawk fighters, “I am going to use what I have. After all, I have paid already.”

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U.S. Weapons Used to Crush Aceh

In May 2003, Indonesia launched a military campaign to “strike and paralyze” separatist rebels in the Aceh province. 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 45,000 Indonesian troops, backed up by warships, fighter planes, and other high-tech military equipment, invaded the island. Their adversary, the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), is thought to have about 5,000 guerillas armed with automatic weapons, mortars, and rocket-propelled grenades. For 27 years, Jakarta has been trying to squash GAM’s quest for independence in a war that cost 12,000 civilian lives and forced tens of thousands more to leave their homes.

The attack, which is Indonesia’s biggest military campaign since its invasion and occupation of East Timor in 1975, followed the breakdown of five months of peace talks between GAM and the Indonesian government.

Two thousand Acehnese have been killed in this latest round of violence. President Megawati downgraded military power from imposition of martial law to responding to a “civil emergency” in May 2004. This is a shift in name only—the violence continues and 400 Acehnese have been killed since the “downgrade.”

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. 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.”

The attacks are being carried out with U.S.-origin military hardware like the C-130 military transport aircraft and the OV-10 Bronco attack planes manufactured by Rockwell International.

With the aim of adding more C-130s, Broncos, and other weapons to the volatile mix in Indonesia, the White House is failing to balance the need for security with a commitment to democracy, thus jeopardizing both.

Arguments for resuming full military ties highlight Jakarta’s contributions to the war on terrorism. As President Bush’s request to Congress for military assistance notes, “Indonesia has demonstrated its resolve to fight terrorists and violent extremism.” But

John M. Miller, an activist with the East Timor Action Network, counters that the military there, “continues to terrorize Indonesia’s residents; the military’s human rights record remains atrocious... Who are the real terrorists?”

Success in the war on terrorism depends on answering Miller’s question honestly and crafting foreign policies that are based on the response.

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