

Australian navy in joint exercise with Indonesian military

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One-third of the entire Australian Navy is currently engaged in a joint exercise with the Indonesian armed forces off the coast of Java. The warships took up their positions last Saturday in the waters north-east of Jakarta, where tanks, armoured personnel carriers and more than 15,000 crack troops were mobilised to defend the Suharto dictatorship.

The Howard government went ahead with the previously planned week-long exercise just four days after the Indonesian military massacred six students in Jakarta, provoking three days of rioting and looting.

Exercise New Horizon 98 involves 450 Australian personnel and six ships -- the frigates HMAS Canberra, Newcastle and Adelaide, the destroyer HMAS Torrens and the patrol boats HMAS Geelong and Wollongong. There are also three airforce F-111 attack jets and a PC3 Orion maritime surveillance aircraft. The naval tanker HMAS Westralia was on its way to join the fleet when fire swept through its engine room on May 5, killing four sailors and crippling the ageing vessel.

A spokesman for Australian Defence Minister Ian McLachlan confirmed there were no plans to cancel the exercise despite the unrest. He did not rule out some form of Australian military intervention into the political crisis, saying the ships might be needed to help Australian citizens escape Indonesia in the event of an emergency.

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer defended Canberra's involvement with the Indonesian military. 'In a country where the military play a very substantial role, not just in law and order but in the whole structure of society, it's a big advantage to have those sort of links,' he said. There was not a word of criticism from the Labor Party opposition.

Downer's statement typifies the way that successive Australian governments have sought to legitimise the military junta that seized power in the bloody coup of

1965. For the past 32 years, the Indonesian military command has certainly played 'a very substantial role'. It has maintained a brutal dictatorship over the Indonesian masses, suppressing all political opposition.

Both conservative and Labor Party governments in Canberra have kept the closest ties with the Indonesian military, particularly those units directly responsible for the torture and murder of civilians. For decades the Australian armed forces have helped train Indonesian special forces units, such as the commando unit Kopassus, or Red Berets, which has been deployed against street demonstrators in Jakarta, another elite group, Kostrad, commanded by Suharto's son-in-law Lieutenant General Prabowo Subianto, which occupies central Java, and Suharto's presidential guard.

Last March it was revealed that American forces were also still training these units, in violation of a congressional ban.

In recent days, the Howard government has tried to distance itself from Suharto and portray itself as a democratic force -- not wishing to intervene in the Indonesian crisis but willing to work with any government formed by the 'Indonesian people'. Last weekend it announced \$2 million worth of 'training assistance' to the Indonesian Human Rights Commission, a token body established by the Suharto regime itself.

Its intimate collaboration with the Indonesian military unmasks this hypocrisy. The latest naval exercise underscores the extent to which ruling circles in Australia and internationally are relying on the Indonesian generals, with or without Suharto, to maintain a repressive grip over the Indonesian masses.



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