

Australian government reinforces ties to Indonesian military

Mike Head
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The Howard government in Australia has moved to reinforce its already intimate ties with the military junta in Indonesia. Australian Defence Minister Ian McLachlan has reaffirmed a commitment to joint exercises and training under a treaty signed by the previous Keating Labor Party government in 1995.

Speaking just weeks after the armed forces massacred students and then supervised Suharto's replacement by Habibie, McLachlan stated that "they've [the Indonesian military] done well". He added: "We are very keen for defence cooperation to keep going".

Under the Australian-Indonesian Defence Cooperation Program, the two governments exchange sensitive intelligence information and conduct exercises involving elite and highly secretive special forces troops. At least 32 Indonesian military personnel are currently at various staff and training colleges. Australian officers have been posted to Bandung and Surabaya.

McLachlan said Canberra will this year go ahead with joint exercises in both countries, including Trisetia '98, with the green-beret Army Strategic Reserve (Kostrad) in Indonesia in November. A series of top-level meetings are planned, culminating in one between McLachlan and his counterpart, General Wiranto, in November.

McLachlan praised the Keating government for signing the highly secretive Australia-Indonesia Agreement on Maintaining Security in December 1995. In an unprecedented move, the treaty committed Australia to consider joint military action in the event of "adverse challenges" to the Suharto dictatorship. Normally, security treaties refer to "external" threats only.

Under that treaty no less than one-third of the Australian Navy was engaged in a joint exercise with

the Indonesian armed forces off the coast of Java at the height of the upheaval surrounding Suharto's resignation last month. The warships were on standby as up to 150,000 troops, accompanied by tanks and armoured personnel carriers, patrolled the streets of nearby Jakarta.

The Howard government has in recent days warmly endorsed the Habibie regime, with Foreign Minister Alexander Downer stating that Habibie "has a very clear grasp of what he needs to do". During last month's events, Downer and Howard said the same of Suharto.

Their partnership with the Indonesian military shows the extent to which ruling circles in Australia and internationally are, above all, relying on the generals to protect their massive investments in Indonesia and maintain a repressive grip over the impoverished masses.



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