Washington takes another step towards restoring US-Indonesian military ties

John Roberts
1 August 2002

The Bush administration has taken a significant step towards ending the current Congressional ban on relations between the US and Indonesian military with the announcement that the Senate Appropriations Committee has approved the allocation of $400,000 for the training of Indonesian officers in the US. While the amount of money is small, it is clearly viewed as a means for undermining US restrictions on collaboration with the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI).

The funding proposal has still to pass through Congress, where it will face opposition. But the decision of the Senate Appropriations Committee, which was undoubtedly the result of intense lobbying, is a sign of just how determined the Bush administration and the Pentagon are to pursue the issue. Administration officials are attempting to blunt any criticism by claiming the money will be for non-combatant aid and management courses but no one is under any illusion that this initial allocation will be the last.

The funding is to be made available under the US International Military Education and Training program (IMET) which was first restricted to Indonesia in 1992 in response to TNI abuses. In 1999, following the rampage by the military-backed militia in East Timor, Democrat Senator Patrick Leahy amended US foreign aid legislation to halt all military assistance through IMET and other programs to Indonesia.

Under the Leahy amendment, relations with the Indonesian military would only be resumed if those responsible for the scorched earth policy in East Timor were brought to justice. The trial of a number of middle level officers and civilian officials responsible for the violence in East Timor is currently under way in Jakarta but none of the top TNI officers have been charged and there is no guarantee that anyone will be convicted.

Since the September 11 attacks on the US, the Bush administration has stepped up its campaign to end the Congressional ban, regardless of the outcome of any trials. Indonesia has been portrayed as a weak link in the “global war on terrorism”—a means for applying pressure to the government of President Megawati Sukarnoputri and also to the US Congress to establish closer military and intelligence links.

Administration officials cynically argue that the renewal of contact with Indonesian officers through the IMET program will help promote democratic reform in Indonesia. However, the Bush administration push for close ties with the TNI has nothing to do with either “fighting terrorism” or “promoting democracy”. It is part of long held plans to reestablish a strong US military presence in South East Asia which has already seen a de facto return of US troops to the Philippines.

In geopolitical terms, Indonesia is the major country in the region both because its strategic position, astride the major sea routes to North Asia, and its size and natural wealth. Under conditions where it is determined to strengthen its dominance throughout the region, the Bush administration fears the political instability that has characterised Indonesia over the last four years.

The Megawati administration, which is itself an unstable coalition, is the third since the downfall of Suharto in 1998. The president’s own party—the Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle—is deeply divided both over her muted support for the US and her heavy reliance on the armed forces. If the current regime in Jakarta collapses, Washington may have to turn to the Indonesian military—as it did for three decades under the Suharto dictatorship—to prop up capitalist rule.

It is significant that the Bush administration is not

© World Socialist Web Site

only promoting IMET courses but, according to an article in the *New York Times* on July 5, wants funds "to finance a new Indonesian military unit to deal with civil conflict". The proposal meshes with the TNI's own priorities in any cooperation with the US which includes assistance in suppressing separatist movements in the provinces of Aceh and West Papua. The Indonesian military recently branded the Achnese separatists as "terrorists"—an indication that repressive operations are going to intensified in the province, all in the name of a "war on terror".

Commenting on an upcoming visit by US Secretary of State Colin Powell to Jakarta, Indonesia's chief security minister Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono recently told the media that the US Secretary of State "might raise the issue of cooperation in combating terrorism... I'll say Indonesia has many problems to deal with besides terrorism...We face separatist problems, communal conflicts which we're managing relentlessly. We'll deliver this so that they can obtain a holistic understanding that, besides international commitments, we have domestic duties to tackle."

The opponents of renewed US-Indonesia military contact are no more interested in "democracy" than the supporters. The Leahy amendment, like previous restrictions, served a dual purpose—to quell public outrage over the atrocities committed by the Indonesian military while at the same time putting pressure on the Indonesian government to open up the economy to international investors.

Under Suharto, the TNI not only wielded political power but was heavily involved in running its own major commercial empires. According to an Independent Task Force report drawn up for the new Bush administration in May 2001, "The TNI still obtains less than half its funds from the government budget, relying on businesses it owns for the remainder. Officers continue to wield significant power and influence in regions outside Java, particularly in the more outlying provinces. And amid a power vacuum, personal interests appear to be animating many military elements."

The Clinton administration withdrew support for Suharto in 1998 not because of the brutal practices of the military, but because of the junta's failure to implement the economic restructuring measures demanded by the IMF sufficiently vigorously. The continuing US demands for an end to "corruption" and "nepotism"—including by the TNI top brass—is animated by the ambitions of foreign investors to have a free hand to exploit the country's cheap labour and natural resources.

Senator Leahy has alluded to the economic motives in recent comments opposing the Bush administration's plans to subvert his amendment. "No high-ranking officer has gone to jail, and several have been promoted. The army continues to arm Muslim extremist militias in other parts on Indonesia," he explained, then adding: "It is involved in drug-smuggling, prostitution, human trafficking and illegal logging and other illicit enterprises."

Days before the Senate Appropriations Committee vote, the *Houston Chronicle* cautioned against resumed contact with the TNI in a similar vein. "Indonesia is plagued by corrupt courts and police and a civilian government too weak and indecisive to do anything about it... The consensus favours US support for democracy and economic development... These are the ingredients most likely to give Indonesia—a nation with strong business and cultural ties to Houston—the peace and prosperity that will keep it inhospitable to terrorists."

The Bush administration is not indifferent to demands that Indonesia open up its economy to international capital. But its top priority is to restoring close ties with the Indonesian military as a means of dealing with political crises inside the country and as a key partner in advancing broader US interests in the region.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site