Washington and Canberra cover up Indonesian military connection to Papua killings

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An article published in the *Washington Post* last weekend reported evidence that the highest levels of the Indonesian armed forces (TNI), including TNI chief General Endriartono Sutarto, were involved in the August 31 ambush of employees of the Freeport McMoRan Inc mine in the province of Papua. Two Americans and an Indonesian died in the attack and another 12 people were wounded.

The ambush was immediately blamed on the separatist guerrillas of the Free Papua Movement (OPM) but police investigations over the last two months have uncovered a growing body of evidence pointing to the culpability of the military. The *Washington Post* article makes clear that intelligence sources in Washington and Canberra have known for weeks about the TNI's involvement in the attack but kept silent so as not to compromise US and Australian government efforts to forge closer links with the Indonesian military.

The article is based on information leaked by two US sources from an intelligence report provided to the US State Department in mid-September. According to the *Post*, the report revealed that senior TNI officials, including Sutarto, had discussed an operation against the Freeport mine as a means of discrediting the OPM and prodding the US into branding it as a terrorist group. The information came from a source, described by the report as "highly reliable" and privy to the content of the conversations.

The *Washington Post* reported: "The discussions described in the intelligence report did not detail a specific attack, nor did they call explicitly for the killing of Americans or other foreigners, but they clearly targeted Freeport, the US official and the American source said. Subordinates could have understood the discussions as a direction 'to take some kind of violent action against Freeport,' the [US] government official said."

According to the *Post*, the information was corroborated by an electronic intercept "shared with the United States by another country, identified by a Western source as Australia". Australia's Defence Signals Directorate (DSD) maintains extensive electronic monitoring of Indonesia and the entire South East Asian region.

The extent of the DSD's surveillance operations was highlighted in March, when intelligence documents were leaked to the *Sydney Morning Herald*. These included DSD transcripts of conversations in 1999 involving top Indonesian generals as they prepared to unleash militia violence against pro-independence supporters in East Timor. The Howard government concealed the information in order to preserve its longstanding relations with the TNI and then used the bloodbath after the UN ballot on independence in August 1999 to justify the Australian-led military intervention.

The latest revelation raises serious questions about what the DSD, and therefore Canberra and Washington, knew prior to the Freeport attack and what measures, if any, were taken to prevent the murders. It also suggests disturbing questions about possible military involvement in the subsequent Bali bombings on October 12—a line of investigation that has been all but ignored.

The US FBI has been conducting its own investigation into the Freeport murders with four agents based at the town of Timika, near the mine. According to the *Washington Post*, FBI officials briefed the US State Department and embassy officials in Jakarta on the results of their investigation in early October. "The indications have pointed in that direction [of the military] but are not conclusive," one of the newspaper's US sources stated.

An article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* last weekend, based on a source "close to the US Embassy in Jakarta," confirmed that US intelligence had electronic intercepts indicating "higher levels of command" in the Indonesian military had prior knowledge of the ambush. According to the newspaper, the aim of the attack, as well as discrediting the OPM, was to "pressure the giant mining company to continue an annual protection payment of more than $US10 million to the army command responsible for Papua".

The TNI, which receives less than half of its income from the government budget, is heavily dependent on business dealings to make up the rest. The country's economic decline since the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis has forced the military to turn increasingly to illegal activities, including drug smuggling, protection rackets, illegal mining and logging, fuel smuggling, gambling and prostitution.

Much of the TNI's income has come from the country's resource-rich provinces such as Papua, Aceh and, prior to 1999, East Timor. But in these areas, the military has increasingly come into conflict with the aspiration of local ruling elites, who in the aftermath of Suharto's downfall in 1998, have pushed for larger slices of resource revenue. In regions such as Papua, the TNI's suppression of separatist movements such as OPM has been bound up with maintaining the military's political control and economic monopolies.

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Nine Kopassus soldiers, including a colonel, major and captain, are due to stand trial for the murder last November of Theys Eluay, chairman of the Papuan Council Presidium—a legal entity advocating Papuan independence. The TNI leadership has denied any responsibility for the killing, claiming the men acted outside the chain of command. Several reasons have been advanced to explain the assassination, but all have the same central theme—conflict between the military and local Papuan elites over the control of resources.

The TNI has long regarded the Freeport operation—the world's largest copper and gold mine—as a lucrative source of income. According to a recent report by the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG), business allies of former dictator Suharto took out shares in the mine from the 1970s and were given control over other assets including housing, a power plant and catering services. Between 1991 and 1997, the company guaranteed $US673 million in loans to Suharto-connected interests and the ties remain.

The provincial garrison in Papua also took its cut. After riots in 1996, which the ICG report states were probably orchestrated by the military, the TNI demanded $US100 million to build a new base. The company agreed to hand over $35 million, followed by annual payments of $11 million for continued "protection". But the company ran into difficulties this year as a result of major corporate scandals in the US. "This year was different because of the pressure for corporate transparency. It's not as easy as two years ago to spend $US10 million or $US11 million without it showing up in the books," a source told the *Sydney Morning Herald.*

The TNI has never hesitated in using the most brutal methods to defend its interests. Since Suharto's fall, the military has been implicated not only in the militia violence in East Timor but in supporting the Islamic extremist militia, Laskar Jihad, which has been involved in communal fighting in the Malukus, Sulawesi and more recently in Papua. In each case, the TNI has used the communal conflict to argue for a greater role in providing internal security. Over the last year, the generals have sought to use the Bush administration's "war on terrorism" to justify a crackdown in Aceh and Papua as well as to reestablish close ties with the US military.

TNI spokesman Major General Syafrie Syamsuddin reacted to the *Washington Post* report by declaring that to ambush Freeport employees to discredit the OPM was "illogical". "This is probably something made up to discredit the TNI," he said, but offered no evidence to support his claims. From the standpoint of the Indonesian military, an attack on mine employees, although risky, was quite logical and in keeping with its past record.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* noted that US officials were "deeply worried" that the revelations of high-level TNI involvement in the Freeport murders would "cut across the wider thrust of US policy to open links with Indonesia's violence-tainted military". According to its unnamed source: "They know the killing of the two Americans was initiated by Kopassus [Indonesia's notorious special forces] but still they sit on the information because it hurts their larger interests."

The decision to keep quiet about the TNI's involvement in the Freeport killings underscores the cynicism with which Washington and Canberra are pursuing the "global war on terrorism". Following the attack, the US Embassy in Jakarta immediately denounced it as "an outrageous act of terrorism". And without a doubt, if the FBI or the CIA had uncovered an Al Qaeda link, the intelligence would have been front-page news around the world. But, in this case, information about the murders, including of two Americans, pointed in a direction that conflicted with broader US interests and, as a result, it has been suppressed.

The "war on terrorism" has been the means by which the Bush administration has been pressuring Jakarta for closer military links, on the one hand, and to push for the US Congress to lift its ban on such ties. Despite the occasional public professions of concern about the brutal record of the Indonesian armed forces, Washington regards the Indonesian military as one of the few resources it can rely on in an increasingly volatile Indonesia and unstable region.

If the top levels of the TNI were implicated in the Freeport massacre, it would conflict with this agenda in several ways. In the first place, the Bush administration could be placed in the embarrassing position of having to call for action to be taken against Sutarto and other top generals—that is, the very people with whom closer relations are being established—for the murder of US citizens.

The administration would also face tougher opposition to any attempt to lift the congressional ban. Senator Patrick Leahy, the sponsor of the ban, told the *Washington Post* that if the Indonesian military were found to have planned the killings, then the administration's proposed military training aid, $400,000 for fiscal 2003, should not go ahead.

"It should surprise no one that the Indonesian military may have been involved in this atrocity. It has a long history of human rights violations and obstruction of justice. The fact that the perpetrators apparently believed they could murder Americans without fear of being punished illustrates the extent of the impunity," Leahy said.

Commenting on the *Washington Post* article, US Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, who has been at the forefront of pushing for ties with Indonesian military, acknowledged the revelation was "very disturbing" and the administration took it "very seriously". But he made clear that the US intended to establish closer relations with the TNI regardless, cynically arguing that US contact with those responsible for more than three decades of atrocities was needed "to support democracy in Indonesia and to support the fight against terrorism".

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