

Australian military renews ties with Indonesia's military thugs

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Few things expose the completely fraudulent character of the “global war on terrorism” as much as the decision of the Australian government last week to renew close relations with the thugs of Indonesia's notorious Kopassus special forces. In the name of fighting terror, Canberra is planning to collaborate with one of the organisations in South East Asia that has a proven record of terrorism—from the torture and murder of political opponents to systematic violence against entire populations in East Timor, West Papua and Aceh.

Kopassus's bloody record is not a matter of the distant past. Just this year a Kopassus lieutenant-colonel and six soldiers were convicted over the November 2001 murder of Papuan leader Theys Eluay. The assassination was part of a violent campaign of intimidation and terror in West Papua by the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) aimed at suppressing separatist sentiment in the province. The army helped arm and organise militia, including Islamic extremist groups such as Laskar Jihad, to do its dirty work.

Kopassus is also accused of organising the attack last August on a group of school staff from the US-operated Freeport gold mine in West Papua that left three teachers, including two American citizens, dead. The incident has become a major stumbling block in attempts by the Bush administration to reestablish relations with the Indonesian military.

Canberra has longstanding ties with the TNI going back to the 1965-66 CIA-backed military coup that brought the Suharto dictatorship to power. Along with the Pentagon, the Australian military helped train Indonesia's special forces units. Australian Prime Minister John Howard only broke off the relationship in 1999 because he was preparing to use TNI-sponsored violence against pro-independence supporters in East Timor as the excuse for military intervention.

Having established Australia's presence in East Timor,

however, the Howard government has been keen to resume relations. The TNI has long been regarded in Canberra as vital to ensuring political stability, and thus the interests of Australian capitalism, in Indonesia. Howard and his Foreign Minister Alexander Downer have latched onto the “war on terrorism” as the pretext.

Initially at least, ties with the Australian Special Air Service (SAS) will be limited to the “hostage rescue” units of Kopassus. Australian Defence Force chief General Peter Cosgrove revealed last week that these Kopassus forces would initially be invited to observe training exercises at the SAS base in Western Australia. Howard and Downer both justified the decision on the grounds that cooperation over “hostage rescue” was vital.

It is clear, however, that “hostage rescue” is simply a flimsy justification for far broader cooperation. Cosgrove has already indicated that joint military exercises will be considered in the future. Kopassus chief Major-General Sriyanto is due in Australia next month for detailed discussions.

Downer claimed that Kopassus units would be carefully screened to ensure their members had not been involved in human rights abuses or linked to Islamic extremist militia such as Laskar Jihad. But he let the cat out of the bag when he contemptuously dismissed all criticism of Kopassus's long record of atrocities as simply an “esoteric debate”.

The Labor Party's foreign affairs spokesman Kevin Rudd criticised the decision, ridiculing Downer's claim that the units would be screened for human rights abuses or links to Islamic militia. He pointed out that only nine months ago the government had provided parliament with details of Kopassus's links to various Islamic extremist groups. Was the government going to put Kopassus troops in a line-up to separate the “good chaps” from the “bad chaps”? he asked.

Rudd proposed no genuine alternative, however, calling

instead for close Australian collaboration with the Indonesian police. But under the Suharto dictatorship, the police were part of the military and intimately involved in the brutal repression of political opposition. Some 13,000 police, including heavily-armed Brimob paramilitary units, are currently operating alongside more than 30,000 troops in a war of attrition aimed at suppressing separatist guerrillas in the north Sumatran province of Aceh.

Rudd's current posturing over Kopassus is utterly hypocritical. For more than three decades, beginning with the Suharto coup, successive Australian governments—Liberal and Labor alike—have maintained the closest connections with the Indonesian military and turned a blind eye to its atrocities.

In fact, far from being a barrier to cooperation, the military's brutal methods have been enthusiastically embraced. Twice in the 1990s, Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating described the 1965-66 coup, which resulted in the massacre of an estimated half a million alleged Communist Party members and supporters, as the most important and beneficial event in Australia's post-war strategic history.

Throughout Suharto's reign, Kopassus functioned as the TNI's dirty operations unit and was crucial to the junta's survival. Indonesian special forces, along with other security units, were involved in kidnapping, torturing and murdering political opponents, either directly or through specially-hired thugs. They were also the shock troops who were used against separatist movements in West Papua, Aceh and other regions where tens of thousands of people "disappeared".

The essential role of Kopassus has remained unchanged since the fall of Suharto. Along with the military as a whole, special forces units were actively involved in organising the militia violence on East Timor in 1999 that resulted in the murder of hundreds of pro-independence supporters. Kopassus also helped train the Islamic fundamentalist Laskar Jihad fighters engaged in the communal violence in Ambon that left up to 10,000 dead. And their specially-trained "anti-guerrilla" forces are currently fighting in Aceh.

The absurdity of attempting to identify untainted Kopassus forces is underscored by the record of its so-called "anti-terrorist" units. Writing in the *Age* last week, Dr Damien Kingsbury, a specialist on the Indonesian military, described the outcome of one of Kopassus's two hostage rescue missions. "[In 1981] a Garuda aircraft was hijacked by Islamic extremists to Bangkok airport. The rescue mission freed 50 passengers and left dead three

hijackers, one Kopassus member and members of the aircraft crew. Two captured hijackers, who left Bangkok with Kopassus alive, arrived in Jakarta dead," he stated.

Kingsbury explained: "The history of Kopassus's other activities reads more like that of a terrorist organisation, which is not surprising given that the techniques and tactics of terror are explicitly outlined in chapter five of a confidential Kopassus training manual." He pointed out that Kopassus had actually been responsible for setting up the Islamic organisation Komando Jihad which carried out the 1981 hijacking.

By reestablishing Australian ties with the Kopassus thugs, Howard is signalling his government's support for further military repression in Indonesia. He is also acting as a proxy for the Bush administration, which has been impeded in its attempts to forge close links with the Indonesian military by the murder of the two US citizens in West Papua. The US Congress has refused to lift a ban on funding for the TNI, imposed after the militia violence in East Timor, until a full investigation has taken place. [See: Freeport murders hamper US plans for ties with the Indonesian military]

Washington's attitude was summed up last week in comments by US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage in an interview on Australian television last week. He gave his unequivocal backing for Canberra's decision to collaborate with Kopassus, saying: "I not only understand it, I fully support it very much." He then added that he would like the US to get closer to Kopassus "but we have to resolve the fate of two of our citizens first.... it's a little premature for us yet."

Like Howard, the Bush administration regards the TNI as the only guarantee of US interests in Indonesia and is eager to resume ties as quickly as possible. In the meantime, Washington is more than happy for Canberra to set the precedent and act as a go-between to the generals in Jakarta, on whom the US has relied for decades.

The eagerness of the US and Australia to embrace the TNI's experts in thuggery and terrorism exposes the "global war on terrorism" for what it is: a threadbare disguise for the prosecution of their imperialist agenda in South East Asia and around the world.



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