US whitewashes Indonesian military over Papuan murders

John Roberts
5 August 2004

US Attorney General John Ashcroft announced in late June that the Justice Department and FBI had indicted Anthonius Wamang over the August 2002 ambush of employees of the giant US-operated Freeport mine in West Papua that resulted in three deaths—two US teachers and an Indonesian colleague.

The indictment was a politically-motivated decision, which conveniently ignored evidence pointing to the involvement of the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) in the murders. The ambush became an issue blocking the resumption of close ties between the US and Indonesian military. The indictment of Wamang effectively let the TNI off the hook.

Ashcroft's sudden announcement came just one day after a US Congressional sub committee renewed a ban on the provision of funds for the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program for Indonesia. The ban was initially put in place over the TNI's role in the militia violence against pro-independence supporters in East Timor in 1999 then extended after the 2002 ambush to ensure Indonesian cooperation with an FBI investigation.

Ashcroft and FBI director Robert Mueller blamed the separatist Free Papua Movement (OPM) for the attack and presented Wamang's indictment as a victory in the "war on terrorism". "Terrorists will find that they cannot hide from US justice, whether in the world's largest cities or in the most remote jungles of Asia," Ashcroft declared. Mueller claimed that the investigation illustrated "the importance of international cooperation to combat terrorism".

Ashcroft and Mueller produced no evidence to substantiate the OPM's direct involvement and neither explained why the ambush should be branded "a terrorist attack". The OPM is a poorly armed separatist militia that has conducted a spasmodic struggle against Jakarta's oppressive rule in the province since the 1960s. The US State Department has never listed it as a terrorist organisation nor does it have a history of attacking foreigners.

The decision to treat the OPM as a terrorist organisation effectively gives a green light to the TNI to step up its repression in the province. The Indonesian military in already engaged in a ruthless war of attrition against separatist guerrillas in the province of Aceh—all in the name of "fighting terrorism".

Ashcroft's announcement was greeted with delight in Jakarta where the Foreign Ministry rapidly announced its hope that military cooperation between the two countries would be resumed. Spokesman Marty Natalegawa declared: "We are very pleased that eventually the truth has been exposed."

However, Wamang's indictment answers none of the questions surrounding the ambush. While Wamang appears to have been involved in the attack, he had business relations with the Indonesian military and his ties with the OPM were tenuous. The OPM issued a statement in early July denying any involvement in the ambush. "The indicted man, Mr Antonius Wamang, has worked closely with the Indonesian military for the past four years in the sandalwood business and also as part of a pro-Indonesian militia," it declared.

Earlier this week, three Indonesian human rights groups issued a statement accusing Ashcroft of deliberately withholding evidence of the TNI's involvement in the murders. "Anton[ius] told our organisations and the FBI that he got his ammunition from TNI personnel. He said that the officers he dealt with knew exactly who he was and knew that he was about to carry out an attack in the Freeport concession," the groups said.

John Rumbiak, from the Papuan human rights group Elsham, explained: "Our organisations know that this evidence was in the hands of the FBI, since we gave it to them and later had extensive discussions about it with

© World Socialist Web Site

them."

In an interview in late June on the Australian television program "Dateline", Rumbiak said he had taken FBI investigators to meet Wamang and local OPM militia leader Kelly Kwalik. Wamang admitted to staging the attack but claimed the teachers had been killed by mistake. He thought he was attacking a TNI convoy. Kwalik denied ordering the ambush.

Rumbiak told "Dateline" that Wamang had "a very good relationship with the military, especially involving the sandalwood business, as well as gold panning, and he travelled to Jakarta and also to Surabaya and that's how he got the ammunition". So far, no one has explained how the attackers obtained the automatic rifles used in the attack.

As Rumbiak related, Wamang has given several conflicting accounts of his involvement. But even if he did organise the attack, which remains to be proven, his statements suggest, at the very least, TNI knowledge of and possible involvement in the ambush.

In its initial report of Wamang's indictment, the *Washington Post* noted: "State Department officials also said the preponderance of the evidence pointed to the Indonesian military. Congress, in classified hearings, also was given evidence to support that preliminary finding."

Other facts that emerged during investigations of the attack point in the same direction.

Some of the survivors of the attack, who pushed for an FBI investigation, pointed to an obvious discrepancy. A permanently-manned military post was within earshot of the ambush, during which at least 200 rounds were fired over 45 minutes. But the soldiers did nothing until the attack was over. The survivors also pointed out that if the attackers had travelled by road they would have had to pass through a number of TNI checkpoints.

Indonesian police who initially investigated the crime concluded that there was evidence of TNI involvement. In the immediate aftermath of the Freeport attack, the military claimed to have shot and killed a Papuan, Danianus Walker, who took part in the assault. However, a police autopsy showed that Walker had died at least 24 hours before the ambush.

Another Papuan, who was a member of the TNI-controlled Tenaga Bantuan Operasi militia, told police that he was in the immediate area with Kopassus special forces troops at the time of the attack. He claimed to have overheard a mobile phone call during which soldiers were firing on the convoy. However, the police were taken off the case and the witness disappeared once the TNI took over the investigation, which subsequently exonerated the military.

Articles in the *Washington Post* and *Sydney Morning Herald* in 2002 cited intelligence sources who claimed there had been high level communications between the military in Jakarta and Papua, referring to an operation at the Freeport mine prior to the ambush. TNI chief Endriartono Sutarto vehemently denied this and threatened to take legal action against the *Washington Post.*

The Indonesian military had a number of motives for staging an attack. The Freeport McMoRan corporation admitted that it was paying the TNI for protection at the mine site. Under pressure from shareholders, company executives said in addition to spending $US37 million on a TNI base it had made secret annual payments of $US5.6 million. The attack could well have been an attempt by local TNI commanders to extort more protection money from the company.

At the same time, the Indonesian military was seeking to overturn the US ban on the provision of IMET training. The killing of American citizens provided a convenient argument to bolster its case for the resumption of close ties as part of the Bush administration's "war on terrorism". The TNI could also use the ambush to press its demand for tougher action against separatist organisations in Papua, Aceh and elsewhere.

The Indonesian military has a long history of thuggery and repression, both under the US-backed Suharto dictatorship and subsequently. The willingness of the Bush administration to brush aside evidence pointing to the military's involvement in the murder of American citizens is a clear indication that it regards close ties with Indonesia's repressive security apparatus as essential to US interests in the region.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site