

Washington resumes officer training for the Indonesian military

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In a significant step towards the resumption of full military ties with Indonesia, the US State Department announced on February 26 that the Pentagon would restart the training of Indonesian officers under its International Military Education and Training program (IMET). The decision overturns a Congressional ban on Indonesian participation in IMET in place for more than a decade.

The State Department said that the legal basis for lifting the ban was a determination by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that Jakarta had fully cooperated with an FBI investigation into the murder of two US citizens in West Papua in August 2002. The two Americans and an Indonesian died in an ambush on the road to the Freeport gold and copper mine where they were employed as teachers.

While Indonesian authorities blamed separatist rebels, evidence emerged pointing to the involvement of the Indonesian armed forces (TNI). Despite Rice's claims, the circumstances of the murders remain to be explained. The alleged organiser of the ambush, Anthonius Wamang, had close business connections to the Indonesian military and had their assistance in obtaining arms. He is still at large.

In reality, Rice's declaration was simply aimed at circumventing the formal Congressional condition on the resumption of IMET funding. Ever since coming to office in 2000, the Bush administration has been straining to resume US ties with the TNI that go back to the bloody CIA-backed coup of 1965-66 that brought the Suharto dictatorship to power. The White House regards close relations with the TNI as a crucial element of its strategy for a more aggressive US presence in South East Asia.

A Congressional ban on IMET funding was first imposed in 1992 in response to the TNI's massacre of

pro-independence protesters in East Timor the previous year. Prior to that the US trained some 8,000 Indonesian officers, including the current Indonesian president and retired general Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. The Pentagon sidestepped the ban by training Indonesian troops, including the notorious Kopassus special forces, under a separate program—a practice that was finally stopped in 1998.

The US has also imposed restrictions on the sale of arms to Indonesia. In 1993, Washington blocked the transfer of US F-5 fighters from Jordan to Indonesia. In 1994, the US State Department banned the sale of small and light arms and riot control equipment to Indonesia.

Following the eruption of TNI-organised militia violence in East Timor against pro-independence supporters in 1999, the Clinton administration cut off all formal military contacts with Indonesia. A Congressional amendment formalised the ban laying down a series of conditions, including bringing to justice those who were responsible for organising the rampage. This condition has also been effectively ignored. A series of trials in Jakarta exonerated the officers directly involved and failed to even prosecute the TNI leaders.

Following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the US, the Bush administration has intensified pressure to lift the ban, arguing that relations with the TNI were essential for prosecuting the "war on terrorism". Washington used the opportunity to strengthen links to Indonesian intelligence agencies and to provide money for anti-terrorism training.

In the wake of the December 26 tsunami, the US lifted the embargo on desperately needed spare parts enabling the Indonesian air force to refurbish its planes. Despite claims that the aircraft were needed for relief supplies, there is no doubt that they will also be used to

ferry troops into Aceh to fight separatist rebels. The move indicates that the remaining restrictions on the sale of military equipment will soon follow the IMET ban.

While lifting the ban on IMET training does not involve a large expense, the decision is nevertheless highly significant. Officer training was always a critical element in establishing US links inside the Indonesian officer caste. Such contacts were crucial to the US during the 1965-66 coup. Given the growing political volatility in Indonesia and the region, Washington is keen to expand its influence in the TNI.

Rice signalled the removal of the IMET ban during testimony to the US Senate Appropriations Committee in early February. She told the senators that it was an opportune time to resume IMET arrangements with Indonesia. "They have just had a presidential election, a successful democratic exercise in a huge country with a huge Muslim population." Rice indicated that she had been in discussions with the FBI and that the Freeport case was not an obstacle.

In other congressional testimony, Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, a former US ambassador to Jakarta, went further. He declared that the US bans on links to the TNI had "outlived their usefulness" and insisted that the TNI today was not the same force responsible for the crimes committed in East Timor. Wolfowitz, one of the chief architects of the US-led invasion of Iraq, has been central to the push for resumed relations with the Indonesian military.

The reasons proffered by Rice and Wolfowitz are entirely bogus. Yudhoyono's election as president, far from being a sign that democracy is taking root in Indonesia, signals the reemergence of the Indonesian military as a potent political force. Immediately after the fall of Suharto in 1998, the military was forced onto the back foot. But the failure of the so-called reformers Abdurrahman Wahid and Megawati Sukarnoputri to satisfy the needs and aspirations of the masses has enabled figures like Yudhoyono to parade as defenders of the people and the military to play an increasingly assertive role.

Yudhoyono was a senior general in the Suharto dictatorship and thus bears responsibility for its crimes. As a general and then a minister under Wahid and Megawati, he has had a hand in the military's repressive activities in Aceh, East Timor and Papua.

Yudhoyono has played an important function in giving the military a cosmetic face-lift and refashioning it to meet the demands of the US and other major powers. Washington's chief objection to Suharto was not the repressive character of his regime, but that the strongman and his cronies were an obstacle to foreign investors.

The TNI's completely cosmetic reforms cannot hide the return of the old methods of repression. The sharpest example is in Aceh where the military has waged a brutal, decades-long campaign to suppress separatist sentiment among the local people. After a temporary lull following the ousting of Suharto, the military launched a savage new offensive involving more than 50,000 heavily armed troops in mid-2003. Despite a media blackout on the province, reports continued to filter out of extra judicial murders, arbitrary arrest and torture.

In the wake of the tsunami that claimed over 250,000 lives in Aceh, the military has continued its war of attrition. A recent "Dateline" program on Australian SBS television provided details of the TNI's activities and debunked its claims that clashes with separatist rebels had been caused by their attacks on aid convoys. The military has been involved in herding refugees into barrack-style accommodation and monitoring these camps. One mother told "Dateline" that soldiers entered the camp housing her family, accused her teenage son of being a separatist guerrilla and shot him dead.

Yudhoyono is directly responsible for the military's crimes—first as Megawati's top security minister in 2003, and now as president. There is no doubt how his government and the TNI regard Washington's decision to lift the IMET ban. It will be interpreted as a green light for further atrocities.



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