

Bush administration dismantling remaining bans on military relations with Indonesia

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Washington is in the final stages of removing all restrictions on relations between the US military and the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) for training, supplying weapons and other forms of cooperation. This longstanding aim of the Bush administration is part of a broader strategy of forging close US ties in Asia, directed against rival China in particular, and to further its aggressive military activities in the Middle East and Central Asia.

US congressional committees recommended changes in May and June to funding bills for the Pentagon's foreign military aid for 2007 to remove clauses calling for improvements in the TNI's "human rights" record. Restrictions on US-Indonesian military relations have been in place since 1991 and such clauses have formed part of appropriations bills approved by the US Congress over the past seven years.

The US House of Representatives report on "Foreign Operations, Export Financing, and Related Programs Appropriations Bill, 2007" approved an allocation of \$US4.5 million for Indonesia from the Foreign Military Funding (FMF) allocation, one of the many programs involved in military aid. The figure was \$2 million less than requested by the White House but any links to "human rights" goals were removed.

The report referred to "the poor human rights record of the Indonesian military forces" but only to justify excluding this "record" as a condition for funding. "The government of Indonesia is a strategic ally of the United States, especially in the continuing Global War on Terrorism and these funds will be used to purchase such things as spare parts and communications equipment," it stated.

The "war on terror" provided the Bush administration with a convenient pretext for brushing aside concerns about "human rights" and reforging ties with the TNI.

Relations with the Indonesian military have been a cornerstone of US strategy in Asia ever since the bloody CIA-backed military coup that brought General Suharto to power in 1965-66. The Suharto dictatorship not only suppressed political opposition at home and welcomed US corporations, but allowed the US military a dominant position astride key naval routes between the Middle East and the Asia Pacific region.

Restrictions on US-Indonesian military ties only began in 1993 in response to the TNI's massacre of nearly 300 demonstrators in 1991 in the then Indonesian province of East Timor. The US Congress blocked Indonesian participation in the Pentagon's International Military Education and Training (IMET) program. In the mid-1990s, the State Department and Congress imposed further bans on the sale and supply of military equipment. After pro-Indonesian militias in East Timor violently attacked pro-independence supporters prior to and following the 1999 UN-sponsored referendum on separation from Indonesia, the Clinton administration broke off all US military relations.

While these measures were in part to stem public outrage in the US and internationally, they were part of the Clinton administration's broader strategy to use "human rights" to pressure US allies in Asia to implement sweeping free market reforms to remove obstacles to American investors. In the midst of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, Washington joined the push to remove Suharto only when it became clear that the aging dictator was not prepared to carry out the IMF's dictates fast enough.

However, the Bush administration, which has repeatedly demonstrated its contempt for human rights, has sought from the outset to reestablish military ties with Indonesia. The process has been slow. Efforts to

portray the post-Suharto regime in Jakarta as a “democratic” break from the past have foundered on the fact that the military continued its repressive activities in East Timor, as well as Aceh and Papua. To meet US congressional requirements, Indonesia charged a number of Indonesian officers and officials over the 1999 violence in East Timor, but the trials were a sham.

In 2002, US Congress imposed a further caveat on resumed relations with Indonesian military after two US teachers working at the Freeport mine were killed in an ambush in Papua. As evidence pointed to the involvement of the TNI, the ban on IMET funding, which the Bush administration had relaxed, was again tightened and made conditional on a full investigation of the murders.

The “war on terrorism” provided the means for subverting these restrictions. The Indonesian military, which was anxious to resume relations with the Pentagon and to obtain much-needed spares for its equipment, immediately offered assistance. Indonesian intelligence agencies assisted their US counterparts in hunting down alleged Al Qaeda members. In the name of “fighting terrorism,” concerns about the TNI crimes were increasingly pushed into the background.

The issue of the Freeport murders was effectively buried when US Attorney General John Ashcroft indicted Anthonius Wamang in June 2004 for the crime. Despite evidence pointing to Wamang’s connections to the TNI, the FBI investigation was shut down and the Indonesian military exonerated. Twelve people, including Wamang, were arrested in January and eight were detained over the Freeport killings. The flimsy nature of the charges was underscored by the fact that two of the detainees were boys who were only nine and ten years old at the time of the attack.

A report by the US-based Centre for Defence Information (CDI) in May noted that since 2001 Indonesia has been the main beneficiary of a Pentagon program known as the Regional Counterterrorism Fellowship Program (CTFP). Under the CTFP scheme, Indonesia will receive \$US700,000 in 2006. In addition, \$30 million had been channelled through a special Nonproliferation, Anti-Terrorism and Related Programs account since 2002.

The *Jakarta Post* reported on May 6 that the TNI was allocated \$19 million in a new Pentagon program to

“build foreign military force capacity” in counter-terrorism. The newspaper also noted that the commander of Kopassus, Indonesia’s notorious special forces unit, had been allowed to take part in the Pentagon’s Pacific Area Special Operations Conference in April.

In February 2005, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced the restarting of Indonesia’s full participation in IMET. Three months later she said the sale of “non-lethal” military equipment to Indonesia would resume. The latest Congressional moves set the stage later this year for the complete resumption of military relations.

Not surprisingly, the Indonesian regime has welcomed the moves. Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda told an Indonesian parliamentary committee on July 3 that the US Senate committee’s decision on June 29 to remove restrictions on the sale of arms to Indonesia in the proposed 2007 Foreign Operations Appropriations Bill was “good news from our embassy in Washington”.

Foreign ministry official Harri Purwanto told the *Jakarta Post*: “If the bill becomes law then it means that our military relations with the US are really back to normal.” The removal of restrictions opens the door for the purchase of military equipment and badly-needed spare parts, possibly with the assistance of US grants.

When the appropriations bill is voted on later this year, no opposition is expected in the US Congress from the Democrats, including those such as Senators Russell Feingold and Patrick Leahy who sponsored the previous restrictions. In a joint letter to Rice earlier this year, Leahy and Feingold urged caution in the reestablishment of ties to the TNI, but pointedly declared: “The world’s largest Muslim nation is a critical partner in combatting terrorism”.

In this, as in every other aspect of the Bush administration’s criminal activities under the banner of the “war on terrorism,” the Democrats are in complete agreement.



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