US ends ban on Indonesian Kopassus commandos

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The Obama administration is to lift a decade-long ban on US military contact with Indonesia's notorious Kopassus special forces, despite their long history of gross abuses of democratic rights, including arbitrary detention, torture and murder.

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates made the announcement after a meeting with Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono during a visit to Jakarta late last month. He claimed that the decision did not lessen the importance of human rights, adding that the Pentagon would pursue "a measured and gradual program of security-cooperation activities".

In reality, the resumption of US ties with Kopassus is determined by the Obama administration's increasingly aggressive steps to counter Chinese influence in Asia. The Indonesian government had lobbied hard for an end to the ban, and, according to the *New York Times*, "dropped hints that the group might explore ties with the Chinese military if the ban remained".

Washington's moves to consolidate ties with Jakarta are in line with similar steps to forge closer relations with allies such as Japan, South Korea and Singapore, as well as former foes such as Vietnam. In recent weeks, despite Beijing's objections, the US has openly sided with South East Asian countries over their claims in the South China Sea and held a major naval exercise with South Korea off the Korean peninsula.

Rivalry between the US and China for influence in Indonesia, the most populous South East Asian country, is intensifying. During a state visit to Indonesia in April, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao signed agreements to provide $1.8 billion in export credits to finance the import of Chinese goods for projects such as toll roads, bridges and coal-fired power plants. A separate 1.8 billion yuan ($263.7 million) loan will be provided for infrastructure-related projects.

The Obama administration has responded by strengthening ties with the Indonesia armed forces. An op-ed comment in the *New York Times* published on July 23 and entitled "Waking Up to Indonesia" supported the decision, declaring that the US "has much bigger interests in Asia than handing out punishments for actions a decade or more ago". Writer Philip Bowring noted that no country in the region deserved more US attention than the Indonesian archipelago, "which is as wide as the continental United States, dominating the strategic straits that link the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea and the Pacific, and with an open, resource-rich economy of 250 million people".

The US has long-standing ties to the Indonesian armed forces (TNI). Washington was directly involved in the 1965-66 military coup that installed the Suharto military dictatorship in power and resulted in the slaughter of at least half a million workers, peasants and members of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). The Pentagon maintained close ties with the TNI until 1991 when a ban on some arms sales and training was imposed following the gunning down of pro-independence protesters in East Timor. The US severed all ties with the Indonesian military in 1999 after pro-Indonesian militia went on a rampage when the East Timorese voted for independence.

Using the pretext of the "war on terror", the Bush administration lifted the ban on US-Indonesian military

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relations, with the exception of the Kopassus troops. In justifying the decision to resume contact, the Obama administration claimed that the units had been reformed. Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell said: "Clearly they [Kopassus] had a dark past. [But] it's a different unit than its reputation suggest." Defence Secretary Gates argued that working with Kopassus was "the best way to advance human rights".

In preparation for lifting the ban, the Indonesian military made several cosmetic changes to Kopassus, transferring a handful of officers who had been convicted of crimes. These included two lieutenant colonels—Tri Hartomo and Untung Budiharto. Hartomo was convicted by a military court in 2003 for his involvement in the murder of leading Papuan activist, Theys Eluay, in 2001, and sentenced to 42 months in jail. Untung was convicted of kidnapping pro-democracy student activists in 1997 and 1998 and sentenced to 32 months in jail. Both men were also sentenced to dismissal but remained on active service.

The claim that Kopassus has been "reformed" since the fall of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998 is a lie. While it no longer directly controls the levers of government, the Indonesian military still retains considerable political clout in Jakarta. It is no accident that a former Suharto general—Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono—is currently the country's president. For all the claims that Indonesia is now a democracy, the armed forces have been directly involved in the suppression of separatist groups in Aceh and Papua, as well as other abuses of democratic rights. Since its founding in 1952, Kopassus has perpetrated the worst atrocities.

The US decision has provoked criticism. Usman Hamid, executive director of the Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence, told the *New York Times*: "The governments of Indonesia and the United States must be aware of the political violence involving Kopassus not only during the military period, but during the current era of democracy. So far, not one single person in the military has been held accountable for past violations. Impunity is the weakest point of the democracy in Indonesia."

Writing in the *Washington Post*, Suciwati, the widow of murdered human rights activist Munir Said Thalib, called on President Obama to reverse the decision. "Indonesia has made much progress on the road to democracy and stability, but enhancing the reach of a powerful military force that lacks respect for the rule of law jeopardises those hard-fought gains. Obama is rewarding Kopassus without requiring accountability. I fear that that the Indonesian security forces will again get away with murder."

Sophie Richardson from the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) described the move as "a stunning betrayal". She warned: "This is a development that will not just have ramifications in Indonesia. Every abusive military in the world will sit up and say, if the United States is willing to go ahead and engage with Kopassus despite its failure to reform, why shouldn't the U.S. engage with other abusive militaries?"

In Jakarta, the families of people killed by Kopassus organised a demonstration to protest the decision. Maria Catarina Sumarsih from the Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence said the move would impede chances to punish those responsible for her son's death. Her son died after being shot by soldiers during a demonstration against Suharto in 1998. "As an ordinary person, I am very disappointed with this turn of events. The US is acting like a washing machine by cleaning the dirt from the Indonesian military," Sumarsih said.

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