

Cables show US reversed Indonesian army ban for Obama visit

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The United States overturned a ban on training the Indonesian Kopassus army special forces—despite their long history of arbitrary detention, torture and murder—after Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono threatened to derail President Obama’s trip to the country last month. Leaked US State Department cables released to the *Sydney Morning Herald* by WikiLeaks reveal that Yudhoyono privately told the Americans in January that the ban was the “litmus test of the bilateral relationship” between the US and Indonesia.

In July, Defence Secretary Robert Gates announced that Washington was lifting all restrictions on US military cooperation with the notorious military unit, removing the last barrier between joint operations between the two nations’ armed forces. The ban on Kopassus was imposed in 1999 in response to its atrocities against independence advocates in East Timor.

Yudhoyono’s call to lift the Kopassus training ban appeared in a cable from the US embassy in Jakarta. “President Yudhoyono (SBY) and other senior Indonesian officials have made it clear to us that SBY views the issue of Army Special Forces (KOPASSUS) training as a litmus test of the bilateral relationship and that he believes the ... visit of President Obama will not be successful unless this issue is resolved in advance of the visit,” the cable stated.

The resumption of US ties with Kopassus, which was strenuously opposed by human rights groups, academics and victims’ families, was determined by the Obama administration’s steps to counter Chinese influence in Asia. Obama’s stopover in Indonesia underlined the importance of the most populous South East Asian nation in the US’s strategic positioning in the region. The visit was one leg of a diplomatic campaign that amounted, in

the words of US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, to “a full court press” against China.

Obama’s visits to India, Indonesia, South Korea and Japan followed Clinton’s trips to Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand and Australia. In each country, Clinton and Obama sought to either strengthen existing alliances or create new partnerships for a US-led strategic encirclement of China.

Direct US-Chinese rivalry for influence in Indonesia has intensified this year. During his own state visit in April, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao had 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 was promised for infrastructure-related projects. According to a report in the *New York Times* in July, the Indonesian government had “dropped hints” it might explore ties with the Chinese military if the US ban on Kopassus remained.

The Obama administration responded by seeking to strengthen the long-standing US relations with the Indonesia armed forces (TNI). Washington was directly involved in the 1965-66 military coup that installed the military dictatorship of General Suharto 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 worldwide outrage over the gunning down of pro-independence protesters in East Timor.

Using the pretext of the “war on terror”, the Bush administration subsequently lifted the ban on US-

Indonesian military relations—with the exception of Kopassus—claiming that co-operation with Indonesia’s military and security services was necessary in the fight against terrorism.

The cables leaked to WikiLeaks expose a litany of lies by US administration spokesmen over the renewal of direct links with Kopassus. Gates said in July that the US was rehabilitating Kopassus “as a result of Indonesian military reforms over the past decade, the ongoing professionalisation of the TNI [army], and recent actions taken by the Ministry of Defence to address human rights issues”.

The claim that Kopassus has been “reformed” since the fall of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998 is patently false. Leaked Kopassus files published just last month showed that the unit utilises the most brutal and anti-democratic methods to suppress discontent in West Papua and had drawn up an “enemies’ list” which included lawyers, religious leaders and human rights campaigners. Video evidence surfaced in October showing Kopassus troops beating and torturing West Papuan civilians earlier this year.

While Gates was arguing publicly that working with Kopassus was “the best way to advance human rights”, cables from his own diplomats reveal the opposite.

In October 2007, the US embassy told Washington that “Indonesia has not prosecuted past human rights violations in any consistent manner”. Another 2007 cable noted the appearance at a Kopassus anniversary celebration of Tommy Suharto, the son of the former president who served several years in prison for arranging the murder of a judge who had convicted him of fraud.

In May 2008, US diplomats told the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, that “the key impediment to expanded engagement remains the failure of the GOI [Indonesia] to press for accountability for past human rights abuses by security forces.” The cable welcomed Indonesia’s cosmetic military reforms but noted they were not “the same as putting generals behind bars for past human rights abuses”.

Late last year, about six months before the US lifted its Kopassus ban, Bill Burns, a senior US official, told Indonesian counterparts that “engagement with Kopassus

continued to be a difficult and complex issue, particularly as there remained many in Washington, including in Congress, with serious concerns about accountability for past Kopassus actions”.

Another cable reveals that the US embassy in 2009 publicly played down a report by Human Rights Watch that alleged Kopassus soldiers had committed human rights abuses in West Papua. The embassy called the report “unbalanced” and unconfirmed and said the abuses detailed did not “meet the standard of gross violation of human rights”.

Despite these concerns, cables from the past four years reveal that Jakarta’s intense lobbying to lift the ban was, according to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, “largely supported” by the US embassy in Jakarta. Notably, the embassy cited the Australian military’s ties with Kopassus as a reason to re-establish relations. The Australian conservative government of John Howard had resumed joint operations with Kopassus in 2003. An April 2007 US embassy cable stated that “our Australian counterparts often encourage us to resume training for Kopassus”.

The WikiLeaks cables demonstrate that the US government’s alleged concern for “human rights” is as fraudulent as the propaganda surrounding the so-called “war on terror”. The decision to renew relations with Kopassus was taken solely on the basis of how best to advance US imperialism’s strategic interests in the Asian region.



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