

WikiLeaks cables confirm US knowledge of Indonesian military's crimes

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10 January 2011

Leaked cables from the US embassy in Jakarta demonstrate that even as Washington was pursuing closer relations with the Indonesian armed forces (TNI), the American government was well aware of the TNI's ongoing human rights abuses in Papua.

The cables provide only a glimpse of the TNI's long record in Papua of repression against the indigenous Melanesian population and criminal activities including protection rackets, drug running and illegal logging. Nevertheless, they expose Washington's claims that the Indonesian military was mending its ways.

Spanning 2006 to 2009, excerpts from the cables published in the *Age* in December revealed:

* Following riots in West Papua in March 2006, Indonesian authorities launched an arbitrary and draconian crackdown on the civilian population. US officials commented: "It is clear that the police rounded up a miscellany of perceived trouble-makers and random individuals and that the prosecutors and judges then railroaded them in a farcical show trial."

* In 2006, a Papua New Guinea government official told the US embassy that the Indonesian military was "involved in both illegal logging and drug smuggling..."

* In October 2007, an unnamed Indonesian foreign affairs official told US embassy staff that "the Indonesian military (TNI) has far more troops in Papua than it is willing to admit, chiefly to protect and facilitate TNI's interests in illegal logging operations". The official claimed that "the TNI... operates as a virtually autonomous governmental entity within the province".

* Cables detailed the protection racket carried out by Indonesian armed forces at the US-operated Freeport gold and copper mine. A January 2006 cable quoted Freeport

Indonesia's Senior Vice President Dan Bowman, who said that the "main allegations about direct payments by the company to the military are true..." Cables from 2007 document the continuation of the racket.

* Throughout 2009, US officials were blaming the Indonesian government's neglect of Papua for unrest in the province. The cables noted that the failure to fairly distribute revenues from mining was a major factor. Referring to the Special Autonomy Law introduced in 2001 and touted as a move towards greater democracy, a cable in September 2009 remarked that "Papuan increasingly view the law as a failure."

Even earlier, a senior official at Freeport mine was quoted in a March 2006 cable as telling the embassy: "Average Papuans see few benefits from the royalty and tax payments by Freeport and other extractive industries that should go to the province under the Special Autonomy Law... This corruption hurts Freeport's image with Papuans as well."

Although they are scanty, the cables are particularly damning because they document US knowledge of the TNI's criminal activities over the same time period that the American government was removing restrictions on US-Indonesia military relations.

The bans were introduced under the Clinton administration during the 1990s. They served the dual purpose of placating public outrage over the glaring human rights abuses by the Indonesian armed forces in East Timor and pressuring the Suharto regime to implement free market reforms.

Following the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998 and Jakarta's embrace of the IMF's economic restructuring program, the bans no longer served a useful purpose. Instead, they were increasingly viewed as an obstacle to American efforts to strengthen its military alliances and ties throughout the Asia Pacific—directed especially against

China.

Indonesia has always been viewed as crucial by US imperialism, as shown by Washington's decades-long support for the Suharto dictatorship. The country is the largest in South East Asia, both in terms of population and economy, and is strategically located astride key shipping routes between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, including the Malacca, Sunda and Lombok Straits.

Since the fall of the Suharto dictatorship, successive American administrations have sought to roll back the US bans on the Indonesian military. Having imposed the restrictions as a result of human rights abuses, the US claimed that the fall of Suharto opened up a new period of democracy in Indonesia.

The claim was always a lie. While Suharto stepped aside in 1998, the state apparatus developed under his rule remained intact. While formally the military cannot engage in politics, in reality it still wields considerable political clout. Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is himself an ex-general from the Suharto era.

Events in West Papua starkly demonstrate the cosmetic nature of the so-called democratic changes in Indonesia.

In 2001, Kopassus, the notorious army special forces, murdered prominent Papuan leader Theys Eluay. So blatant was the killing that the Indonesian military was compelled to try and convict those immediately responsible. At the same time, no investigation was carried out into any higher level involvement by the political and military establishment in Jakarta.

In 2002, two Americans and an Indonesian who worked as teachers at an international school run by the Freeport mine were killed in an ambush. Claims by Indonesian authorities that Papuan separatists committed the ambush were riddled with inconsistencies and evidence strongly pointed to the involvement of the TNI. Following the ambush, it was revealed that the TNI was operating a lucrative protection racket at the Freeport mine.

As a result of a campaign launched by one of the victims' widows, the case became a thorn in the side of American efforts to restore ties with the Indonesian military. In 2004, a US FBI investigation whitewashed evidence of TNI involvement in the ambush. It indicted a Papuan villager, Anthonius Wamang, and blamed the separatist Free Papua Movement (OPM) for the attack.

The indictment of Wamang was used as the legal basis for overturning bans on inter-military cooperation. In 2005, the Pentagon resumed the training of Indonesian army officers. This was followed by the removal of restrictions on the funding and supply of arms to the Indonesian armed forces.

In July 2010, Obama removed the last significant ban—restrictions on relations with Kopassus. Leaked Kopassus documents published in November exposed its involvement in “murder [and] abduction” in Papua, and revealed that it kept an “enemies list” that includes lawyers, human rights activists and religious leaders.

At the time the Kopassus ban was lifted, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates said that the decision was taken “as a result of Indonesian military reforms over the past decade, the ongoing professionalisation of the TNI, and recent actions taken by the Ministry of Defence to address human rights issues”.

Another series of leaks released to the *Sydney Morning Herald* last month revealed that the decision was taken after threats by Indonesian President Yudhoyono to derail Obama's November trip to Indonesia if the ban was not lifted. (See: “Cables show US reversed Indonesian army ban for Obama visit”)

Underlying the US desire to strengthen ties with the Indonesian military apparatus is Washington's concern over China's mounting economic and political influence in the Asia Pacific region. The US embassy cables again underscore that Washington's policies around the globe are determined by geo-strategic considerations, rather than its fraudulent expressions of concern over human rights.



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