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US renews military ties with Indonesia

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On November 22, the US State Department decided to override restrictions on US-Indonesian military ties imposed by Congress less than two weeks earlier

by Kerryn Williams

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On November 22, the US State Department decided to override restrictions on US-Indonesian military ties imposed by Congress less than two weeks earlier.

A foreign aid bill approved by Congress made the resumption of US military ties with Indonesia conditional on reforms of Indonesia's armed forces (the TNI), including the prosecution of those who have committed gross human rights abuses.

On November 22, the East Timor and Indonesia Action Network (ETAN) issued a statement condemning "in the strongest terms possible the State Department's issuance of a national security waiver that removes all congressional restrictions on military assistance for Indonesia. US support for an unreformed military which remains above the law is not in the interest of the United States or Indonesia. This is a profoundly disappointing and sad day for human rights protections everywhere but especially in Indonesia, Timor-Leste, and the US."

In a November 23 statement by TAPOL, the British-based Indonesia Human Rights Campaign, spokesperson Paul Barber said: "The decision is an insult to the countless victims of military violence in East Timor, West Papua and Aceh and a blow for Indonesia's fragile transition to democracy. The Indonesian military is as powerful, abusive and unaccountable as ever. It will be encouraged by this US endorsement to resist necessary reforms and to continue with business as usual."

The decision allows the export of military equipment to Indonesia and the possibility of US loans or grants for purchasing weaponry. TAPOL noted that despite direct presidential elections and the signing of a peace agreement with Aceh, little has been achieved in reducing the power of the TNI in Indonesia, in making it more accountable or in bringing human rights violators to justice. "The US decision will encourage the practice and expectation of military impunity, which remains a major obstacle to genuine democracy in Indonesia."

The TAPOL statement noted: "Currently, at the same time as withdrawing troops from Aceh, the TNI is substantially increasing its presence in West Papua. It plans to double its strength in the territory over the next five years with the deployment of a new division of its special combat troops, Kostrad. Kostrad troops are equipped with the most sophisticated military hardware and are potentially the main beneficiaries of the State Department initiative. The arrival of Kostrad in West Papua will lead to increasing tensions and a further deterioration in the human rights situation in the territory. Regrettably, the US is sending a clear message that it supports such a disastrous policy."

According to TAPOL, serious corruption allegations regarding British military exports to Indonesia in the past have not been properly investigated. The human rights group raised concern that a similar situation could arise in the US.

A November 22 State Department statement claimed that the US "remains committed to pressing for accountability for past human rights violations, and US assistance will continue to be guided by Indonesia's progress on democratic reform and accountability". According to ETAN, this "could not ring more hollow. With what leverage will the State

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Department press for accountability? The Bush administration just gave all remaining leverage away.

"With the stroke of a pen, Secretary [of State Condoleezza] Rice and President [George] Bush betrayed the untold tens of thousands of victims of the Indonesian military's brutality in Indonesia and Timor-Leste and undermined efforts at democratic reform.