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## **U.S. plan to train Indonesian elite army unit raises alarm**

**The plan to train members of Kopassus, which is accused of rights abuses, would violate U.S. law, critics say. Analysts, however, say the goal is to engage, rather than isolate, troubled nations.**

By John M. Glionna

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Reporting from Jakarta, Indonesia

Usman Hamid knows the fear of being stalked. He's tasted the panic of receiving threatening, late-night phone calls.

"They say, 'I'm going to take out your eyes,' " he said. " 'I'm going to throw you into the ocean. I'm going to kill your mother.' "

The menace hasn't come from any bandits or terrorists, he says, but from operatives who he suspects work for his own military.

Hamid is chairman of the Commission for Disappearances and Victims of Violence, a nonprofit that for years has investigated alleged human rights abuses by an elite army special forces unit called the Indonesian Komando Pasukan Khusus, known as Kopassus.

Allegations date to the squad's inception in the 1950s and include beatings, abductions and assassinations that have gone largely unacknowledged -- and unpunished -- by officials here, Hamid said.

Now, contrary to U.S. human rights law, the covert counter-terrorism and intelligence unit that many here say already views itself as being above the law is about to go into business with the U.S. government.

The Obama administration has begun talks with Indonesian military officials to establish a special training program for Kopassus troops despite legislation known as the Leahy Law.

Passed in 1997, the measure bars the U.S. from training foreign militaries facing

accusations of human rights abuses unless officials attempt to bring all wrongdoers to justice.

Although details of the training remain unclear, Indonesian officials hint that they include bringing Kopassus officers to the United States for nonlethal counter-terrorism training.

Analysts say the administration's plans are part of President Obama's agenda to engage, rather than isolate, troubled nations or their militaries.

U.S. officials view the 100-member Kopassus force as a key ally in fighting Islamic extremist groups that have struck scores of times in recent years, including bombings in Bali and at two foreign-owned hotels in Jakarta, the Indonesian capital, last year.

For the United States, the new military ties would help strengthen its position in the region as China's influence rises. Kopassus officers recently visited the U.S., and Obama hopes to complete the training arrangement when he visits Indonesia in June, analysts say.

"It's just a matter of time, [maybe] a couple of months," former Indonesian Defense Minister Juwono Sudarsono told the Jakarta Post about Washington's intentions of lifting the training ban.

Indonesian military officials declined an interview request. But Hamid called the negotiations troubling.

"This relationship has to be more fully explained," he said. "Are they going to solely focus on anti-terror operations or continue a secret war within Indonesian society? And how will the U.S. deal with past human rights abuses by Kopassus?"

For the Obama administration, any training deal struck with the red-bereted commandos will involve some delicate diplomatic footwork.

U.S. officials may try to circumvent the congressional prohibition by training younger Kopassus officers who, they insist, were not part of the unit during major human rights abuses, analysts say.

Activist groups in Southeast Asia have organized petitions opposing the administration's plan, which many characterize as a risky diplomatic and military gambit.

The U.S. Congress also has its concerns. Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.), chairman of the Appropriations subcommittee on foreign operations who wrote the Leahy Law, said Kopassus has committed some of Indonesia's worst human rights atrocities.

"For the United States to resume military aid, Kopassus needs to change," he said. "Kopassus can no longer violate human rights, Indonesian military officers who violated human rights cannot continue to serve in the military, and the military, including

Kopassus, needs to fully cooperate with civilian investigations and prosecutions."

But regional security experts say the U.S. has an opportunity to help shape a military unit that has already scored important strikes against wanted Islamic extremists here.

"It would be naive to cut off your ability to work with security forces that are turning the tide against terror," said John Harrison, security analyst at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University. "By denying support, the U.S. loses a chance to change the group's behavior. There's an opportunity to teach these forces how to act with higher regard to the issue of human rights."

Others point to the U.S. forces' own human rights abuses.

"The U.S. military has committed grave violations in Afghanistan, Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo," said Rohan Gunaratna, a Singapore-based terrorism analyst and author of the 2002 book "Inside Al Qaeda." "That doesn't mean that the U.S. Army or Navy SEALs are bad. Abuses are often the work of individuals. The U.S. has a lot more to gain by working with Kopassus than shunning them."

Hamid acknowledges that the U.S. faces a tough choice.

"The Indonesian military can point to similar accusations against American soldiers," he said. "The government can say, 'If you don't want to work with our military, we can always go to Beijing. They'll work with us.'"

Hamid wrote a letter that he hopes to deliver to Obama in June explaining the disappearance of pro-democracy activists in 1998 as well as other killings linked to Kopassus.

A presidential fact-finding team at the time concluded that a high-ranking Kopassus officer was involved in one of the deaths. The officer was convicted but later acquitted as the result of what Hamid calls judicial corruption and witness tampering.

Kopassus operatives are also believed to have been involved in kidnappings and killings in East Timor and Papua, he said.

Hamid, a 33-year-old activist with glasses and wavy brown hair, said he first ran afoul of Kopassus when he investigated the slayings of four fellow university students in 1998.

He later formed his human rights commission, which has largely focused on Kopassus cases. "They work in a disguised way -- phone calls and text messages -- but the threats are real, against your family, your wife, your parents," he said.

He knows that his newest campaign won't go unnoticed. "You learn that when you deal with Kopassus," he said. "You watch your back."

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