

Talk of Aiding Indonesia Military Angers Ambush Survivors

By Dana Priest

Washington Post Staff Writer

Wednesday, July 30, 2003

The Bush administration has informed Congress that it wants to release \$400,000 in training funds to the Indonesian military, a move that has sparked congressional protest and angered the American survivors of an ambush that U.S. officials have said the military may have committed.

Congress approved the money last year, but the State Department has delayed releasing it to see how cooperative the Indonesian government would be in an FBI investigation of the ambush. But with the fiscal year ending in September, senior national security officials decided several weeks ago to seek congressional views on the matter, congressional and administration officials said.

On Aug. 31, 2002, gunmen ambushed the American staff of an international school in Papua, Indonesia, along a steep, winding road controlled by the military and PT Freeport Indonesia, a gold and copper mine owned largely by New Orleans-based Freeport-McMoRan Copper & Gold Inc.

Two Americans and an Indonesian were killed in gunfire that lasted 30 minutes. Ten other Americans, including a 6-year-old girl, were wounded. U.S. officials with access to classified intelligence have said the "preponderance of the evidence" indicates that members of the Indonesian military were involved, a preliminary judgment supported by an initial Indonesian police investigation.

But during the FBI's initial efforts to investigate, Indonesian military officials would not allow soldiers in Papua to be interviewed without superiors present and would not allow the FBI to conduct forensic tests on evidence.

The survivors have urged the Bush administration to condition military training on the Indonesian government's cooperation in the case. After lobbying by Patsy Spier, who was wounded in the attack and whose husband, Rick, was killed, the House and a Senate committee passed provisions linking military assistance to cooperation.

The House recently approved an amendment by Rep. Joel Hefley (R-Colo.) that would attach conditions to the release of a proposed \$600,000 for military training in 2004. An amendment to the Foreign Assistance Authorization Act, sponsored by Sen. Russell Feingold (D-Wis.), passed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and is to be taken up by the full Senate after the August recess.

Spier said yesterday that releasing the \$400,000 from the 2003 budget "would send the wrong message and would give the Indonesians the impression that the U.S. government believes they have cooperated enough in the investigation."

Recently, the FBI was allowed to bring home some evidence for analysis -- mostly shell casings -- but has still not interviewed soldiers in the absence of their superiors.

Officials at the Defense and State departments have argued that U.S.-funded military training programs improve U.S. officials' chances of having access to foreign military leaders, and that exposing foreign officers to U.S. military standards will lead to more professionalism and fewer abuses.

Opponents argue that the Indonesian military, in particular, has failed repeatedly to learn those lessons from U.S. programs. The Indonesian military has a well-documented history of atrocities against the population in East Timor, Aceh province and Papua.

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