# Briefing Note: The return of Indonesian state terror? Australian involvement in police and military torture

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On September 13, the Sydney Morning Herald and *The Age* published a set of articles by Fairfax group Indonesia correspondent Tom Allard presenting detailed claims by victims of torture by members of the elite Indonesian National Police (POLRI) Anti-Terror Squad known as Densus 88 or Detachment 88. The unit, which is part of POLRI's Mobile Brigade (Brimob), was established to be the country's primary counter-terrorism police unit, and has received considerable Australian and US government assistance. However, for a number of years Indonesian and foreign observers have reported numerous cases of Densus 88 human rights violations. Allard's report presented accounts of torture of activists arrested for non-violent support for the banned Republic of South Moluccas (Republik Maluku Selatan or RMS).

The Allard articles followed a June 2010 Human Rights Watch report on political prisoners throughout Indonesia, including a detailed account of ill-treatment of Malukan prisoners following a 2007 RMS flag-raising ceremony. One of the most striking features of the Human Rights Watch report was a map of political prisoners in Indonesia today that showed a disturbing resemblance to the pattern of state violations of citizens' human rights during the Soeharto dictatorship. A year earlier an Asia Times investigation by John McBeth had focussed on the detachment's spreading reputation for a "licence to kill" – an apparent preference for immediate resort to lethal force in policing. In 2009 Allan Nairn published detailed allegations, denied by Indonesian armed forces (TNI) representatives, that the Army's Kopassus (Special Forces) and other TNI personnel carried out extra-judicial executions in Aceh. Similar claims have been made about Kopassus illegal activities in Papua.

Allard's report brought the question of Australian government funding for the POLRI Anti-Terror Squad's activities into mainstream public scrutiny for the first time. Allard writes that

> "Detachment 88 was, at its inception, equipped and trained in large part by the United States and Australia, which provided it with high-level training in communications

> interception, close combat, forensic sciences, surveillance and intelligence gathering and analysis."

Allard also stated that Detachment 88 has "a facility at the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Co-operation, set up in 2004 with almost $40 million of Australian funding. According to the centre's website, the Australian Federal Police still run most of the counter-terrorism seminars." The Centre, which continued to receive substantial Australian funding in the 2009-10 budget, is seen by Australian authorities as a key element in its wider objectives of cooperation with Indonesian police over counter-terrorism and illegal migration.

These allegations of serious human rights abuses by an Australian- and US-funded Indonesian National Police squad lead to a renewed assessment of questions raised at the time of the resumption of Australian military assistance to the elite Indonesian army counter-terrorism unit within the army's Kopassus (Special Forces) in 2003. The Obama administration's decision in July of this year to resume direct US military assistance to Kopassus, despite widely acknowledged limitations in TNI reforms, was justified by the Secretary of Defense in terms of global and regional counter-terrorism requirements.

In both cases, Australian and US government support for close financial, organisational and indeed political support for Indonesian military and police activities rested on the claim that, after three decades of military dictatorship, Indonesia had a democratically elected government committed to civilian control of the armed forces and to the rule of law. The well-informed warning that the former Australian Assistant Secretary of Defence, Allan Behm, made on the decision to resume support of Kopassus in 2003 still holds today, and applies as equally to Detachment 88:

> "Kopassus is, in some respects, a law unto itself, able to use its relatively advanced capabilities in the use of armed force as and when it sees fit. Dominating the Indonesian command chain as it does, Kopassus is well able to employ the very specific skills it might learn or reinforce from Australia against its own government. And therein lies the greatest danger to Australia from the provision of Special Forces training. Dealings with Special Forces should await much clearer indications that they are under the full and effective control of the Indonesian military leadership and, more importantly, the elected Indonesian government."

The cases of Detachment 88 and Kopassus both raise key questions of the extent of post-Soeharto democratic control of armed forces, and indeed, of the capacity of the Indonesian police and army commands to control their own nominally subordinate organizations and to ensure adherence to Indonesian law. With the shadow of three decades of bipartisan Australian government support for Indonesian state terror in the Soeharto period, and given clear limitations on effective Indonesian government controls over its own military and police, it is in the interests of both Australia and Indonesia that the Australian government scrutinise all aspects of its involvement with Detachment 88 and Kopassus.

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