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RFK Memorial Center for Human Rights Questions Dept. of Justice Announcement on West Papua Ambush

Yesterday the Department of Justice announced the results thus far of an FBI investigation into the August 30, 2002 assault on a group of U.S. citizens in Timika, West Papua, Indonesia. The announcement raises many more questions than it answers about the investigation of this crime.

The federal grand jury indictment names a single Indonesian citizen whom it contends was a leader of a group of Papuan independence fighters known as the OPM. The Indonesian military (TNI) was itself quick to lay blame on the OPM at the time of the attack. The TNI's claim, however, soon fell apart in the face of evidence contained in the initial investigation carried out by the Indonesian police, as well as the research of respected local human rights organizations, all of which point to the Indonesian military having played a central role in the attack.

Those investigations and research pointed out, among other findings, that Papuan independence elements lack the weaponry and ammunition to conduct a sustained 45-minute attack. The site of the attack is tightly secured by the TNI, rendering the area impossible to access or exit without TNI cooperation. The attackers were well trained sharpshooters. The attack transpired only a few hundred meters from permanently staffed TNI security posts but TNI personnel appeared on the scene only after the assault ended.

According to the Australian newspaper The Age, "The initial police report on the attack concluded: 'There is a strong possibility that the (Timika) case was perpetrated by the members of the Indonesian National Army Force, however, it still needs to be investigated further.... Indonesian police investigators were threatened, evidence appeared to be planted and the crime scene was interfered with.'"

Human rights advocates investigating the attack were similarly threatened.

Although the DOJ statement lauds the Indonesian government for its cooperation, the FBI initially received no cooperation from the Indonesian military, which had taken over the investigation from the police after the police implicated the TNI. FBI investigators made several fruitless visits to the region. The level of cooperation changed only after sustained pressure from Congress and survivors of the attack. President Bush then made clear to Indonesian President Megawati that the lack of cooperation was hindering the US-Indonesia relationship.

The RFK Memorial Center for Human Rights takes no position on the guilt or innocence of the individual accused. However, any conclusion that the TNI was not instrumental in the attack ignores a bloody past record replete with instances of TNI organizing, equipping and directing "militia" attacks in order to evade responsibility. The TNI's use of such a modus operandi is evident in its use of the infamous East Timor militias as proxies to wreck havoc in East Timor during and after the United Nations sponsored referendum in 1999.

Justice in the matter of the Timika attack - which killed two U.S. citizens, one Indonesian citizen and wounded eleven others - requires a thorough investigation not only of who might have participated in the assault, but more importantly, who organized, enabled and directed the attackers.