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It's time to join forces

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800 words

21 February 2006

Herald-Sun

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English

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AUSTRALIA and Indonesia are negotiating a security treaty, which will resume military relations severed during the East Timor crisis in 1999.

Indonesia tore up the co-operation agreement signed by Keating and Suharto in the early 1990s.

The new document will probably spark a new era of co-operation between the ADF and the TNI, Indonesia's military.

It puts the TNI's record squarely on the table. Their violent crushing of secessionist movements and their brutal role in suppressing dissidents under Suharto are just part of what Amnesty International describes as an abysmal history of "scores of extra-judicial killings, torture, rapes, and other serious abuses".

Equally disturbing and linked to its traditions of violence is the widespread corruption that has always been part of TNI core business.

This has never been just the stereotyped greedy generals. It stems from the fact that the Indonesian Government, like many developing nations, can't afford to fully fund its military.

Indonesia might seem to have a big, well-financed army, but this is not the reality. Regionally, it the smallest force per capita, with a per capita budget allocation smaller than Australia or Singapore.

This is despite the massive geographical and strategic difficulties of operating across more than 17,000 islands with 230 million inhabitants.

THE result is a 30 per cent gap between military expenditure and government budget allocations that is filled by legal and illegal businesses run by the military.

But does a litany of horrors mean we shouldn't sign a new security pact with Indonesia?

Unfortunately, realpolitik says we have no choice.

First, as a matter of practicality, neighbouring countries need security agreements.

They also need mutual recognition of judgments, treaties and the other basic building blocks of co-operation that we do not yet have with Indonesia — such as prisoner exchange agreements, as Schapelle Corby discovered.

These agreements are obviously vital when our borders overlap and our citizens constantly move across them; more than 400,000 Australians visit Indonesia annually.

Getting a more sophisticated infrastructure of co-operation is particularly important for Australia and Indonesia because we are South-East Asia's largest economy and Indonesia is its largest country, both in size and population.

And it has the world's largest Muslim population.

We have a lot of catching up to do and a security pact is a good place to start.

Second, a lack of formal legal infrastructure for co-operation with Indonesia is a drag on our regional security.
Terrorists have killed more than 90 Australians in Indonesia since 2002, but there are other, serious and long-standing threats posed by, for example, transnational crime and illegal fishing.

Indonesia must be our main strategic partner in dealing with these problems, whether we like it or not. As it stands, police co-operation has been effective, but the formalities of co-operation across the security sector are still ad hoc and clunky.

Third, security co-operation now will be invaluable in the event that tensions erupt again in the future.

It was the friendships built between Indonesian-speaking Australian officers and their counterparts through joint training that played a key role in preventing all-out battle when our troops went into East Timor in 1999.

WE may need this sort of mutual understanding again if Papua flares up.

Fourth, the East Timor case shows why it is precisely regional militaries with poor human rights records with which we should engage.

Quite apart from the fact that the TNI's disturbing record shows a burning need for training in human rights and military professionalism, it is armies with poor records that we are most likely to be facing in a future conflict.

We should not excuse the terrible activities of the TNI in the past. But isolating them won't make things better, or safer, for us.

Finally, we need to stop being hypocritical about military and human rights abuse. For better or worse, we fight alongside the United States, despite their own grimy record of military human rights abuses, from My Lai to Abu Ghraib.

There is surely more of a case for peaceful engagement with our near neighbour's military than there ever was for joining US forces to attack distant Iraq.

It is time to get our heads out of the sand. If Australia wants to actively engage in human rights and political debate in Asia and protect our security interests, we need to cement a place for ourselves in Asia's political and legal architecture. This security agreement is realistic step forward.

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