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Stirring things up can be good business

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The military in Indonesia

JAKARTA A hail of gunfire burst from the mist-shrouded jungle in Indonesia's remote Papua Province, strafing a convoy of cars belonging to the American mining corporation Freeport McMoRan. The Aug. 31 ambush on the mountain road leading to one of the world's largest gold and copper mines killed three employees and injured 11. It was a symptom of the troubled state of affairs in Indonesia.

The Bush administration wants to work with the Indonesian military to suppress Islamic extremism. It recently extended up to \$50 million in aid to the military and police, circumventing restrictions imposed more than a decade ago because of human rights violations in East Timor and elsewhere. The U.S. rationale is simple - and simplistic: In this sprawling, predominantly Muslim country, the armed forces and the police are the only institutions that can be counted on to block the spread of Islamic radicalism.

But do U.S. officials understand with whom they are dealing? According to the International Crisis Group, the fractious Indonesian military generates more than 70 percent of its income from "off-budget" operations that include protection and extortion rackets, illegal mining, illegal logging, prostitution and trafficking in narcotics and endangered species. The troop deployments that spawn such "business" opportunities are determined by regional conflict. As a result, the security authorities have a vested interest in perpetuating instability. This is the *economy of conflict*, and it lies at the heart of Indonesia's troubles. Rich in natural resources, the province of Papua, known formerly as Irian Jaya, is a major theater for the military's economy of conflict. It is also an example of Washington's flawed approach to countering terrorism. In towns like Manokwari in Papua, military units are actively supporting the spread of Laskar Jihad, a radical Islamicist militia with suspected ties to Al Qaeda. The aim is to instigate sectarian clashes between Papuans, many of whom are Christians or animists, and migrant Malay Muslims, so that the military can entrench itself and expand moneymaking operations in the area.

This would be a reprise of events in the province of Maluku last year that left more than 6,000 civilians dead. There are other ominous signs of military provocation in Papua. Special Forces soldiers have been charged with assassinating Theys Eluay, leader of the peaceful branch of the Papuan independence movement. His murder derailed a reconciliation process, making it easier for the military to argue that its presence in Papua should be increased. The recently appointed regional commander of the armed forces in Papua, General Mahidin Simbolon, was previously a commander in East Timor, where the military's role in fomenting bloody conflict is well documented.

Rather than providing a solution to terrorism, the military is helping to spread terror within Indonesia's borders. The armed forces are contracted by Freeport to provide security around the mine site. After the attack on the company employees, the military was quick to accuse local Papuan "separatists" of responsibility and reinforce

deployments in the region.

But given that bullet casings found at the scene match standard Indonesian military issue M-16s, and given that the attack was committed scarcely three kilometers from an army base, the ambush may well have been covertly engineered by the authorities to ensure that their lucrative security contract with Freeport is renewed. After Secretary of State Colin Powell met top Indonesian military officials in Jakarta in early August, he said Washington would be "watching carefully and expecting action to be taken with respect to past abuses that might have occurred." A few days after that warning, a military tribunal acquitted officers involved in East Timor atrocities.

The United States should be extremely cautious how it invests in Indonesia's military. Without clear civilian controls, legal accountability and an end to off-budget business by the military, the Bush administration may find itself financing conflict and the spread of radicalism.

The writer, an anthropologist at Columbia University in New York and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations Task Force on Papua, contributed this comment to the International Herald Tribune.