

Creating “Proxy Armies”?

By Eli Clifton | May 21, 2007

Newly proposed legislation would expand existing Pentagon security and military aid programs in Iraq and Afghanistan to “coalition partners” in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The Building Global Partnerships Act of 2007 would authorize the secretary of defense, in consultation with the secretary of state, to allocate up to \$750 million to help foreign governments set up security and military forces to “combat terrorism and enhance stability.”

The White House has submitted the bill to the House of Representatives and Senate, but it has not been reviewed in committee or sent to the floor of either chamber for a vote.

The new legislation is an expansion of an existing program that initially provided funds to the Pentagon to train security forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and was renewed annually without State Department involvement. State Department involvement in funding decisions was introduced when the program expanded its reach to “coalition partners” in Algeria, Chad, Dominican Republic, Indonesia, Lebanon, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Panama, Senegal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Yemen, and Sao Tome-Principe.

The Pentagon’s ability to fund foreign aid programs has in the past been contingent on compliance with the Foreign Assistance Act, which imposes restrictions on foreign aid recipients, including strict compliance with human rights standards.

“To ensure that commanders have adequate flexibility to meet operational needs, this section also would eliminate Foreign Assistance Act restrictions,” the bill reads. “The joint approval process and advance congressional notification will ensure transparency and that respect for human rights and civilian authority remain a key component of programs under this section without sacrificing flexibility critical to United States national security.”

Last year, the Pentagon likely used a portion of its \$200-million aid budget to provide military aid that

may have been blocked, had it not bypassed the Foreign Assistance Act, which insists on basic human rights standards to be observed by military units receiving U.S. aid.

“With Indonesia, the Pentagon has one foreign policy and the United States has another foreign policy,” Ivan Eland, director of the Center on Peace and Liberty at the Independent Institute, told Inter Press Service (IPS).

The Foreign Assistance Act has limited the allocation of military and security aid to Indonesia out of concern for the human rights abuses committed by the Indonesian military in East Timor.

“Section 1206 was intended to be a pilot program. They were supposed to report back to congress about what happened, but they have an extension until next January,” George Vickers, senior policy analyst at the Open Society Policy Center, told IPS. “There’s been no reporting on if the pilot program has worked, so it’s premature to be making it permanent and expanding its scope and authority.”

Human rights advocates have expressed concern that the new legislation represents a structural shift that would allow the Pentagon greater leeway in setting foreign policy and permit it nearly complete protection from congressional oversight.

“We are very concerned that this is another way the Pentagon is encroaching on territory traditionally occupied by the State Department,” Scott Stedjan, legislative secretary at the Friends Committee on

National Legislation, told IPS. “We’re afraid this Pentagon program will bypass the Foreign Assistance Act, and specifically the human rights component.”

The new legislation would create more oversight than previous aid budgets allocated to the Pentagon because it would require State Department approval for allocation of funds, but the considerable increase in budget and its continued avoidance of congressional oversight is believed by many to give the Pentagon unprecedented freedom to distribute security and military aid with few restrictions.

Pentagon leadership would be able to more easily coordinate their military and security aid allocations with areas of interest in the “war on terror” without the congressional oversight and limitations of the Foreign Assistance Act, which have specifically limited the Pentagon’s discretionary aid allocations in various African countries.

“[The Building Global Partnerships Act] will have an impact in Latin America, but the area they’re most interested in is Africa,” said Vickers. “Sub-Saharan Africa, Somalia, and Ethiopia are areas where they’d like to be able to do more to build the capacities for local forces. The way they’ve proposed it would allow them to make proxy armies.”

The Pentagon’s desires to set its own foreign aid policy independent of the State Department and Congress has led a number of analysts to question the consequences of a Pentagon-led foreign aid policy with little or few restrictions.

“If you’re giving aid to undesirable countries, by human rights standards, it usually backfires on you,” said Eland. “It may provide short-term benefits in the ‘war on terror,’ but the long-term consequences may be unclear.”

Eli Clifton is a reporter for the Inter Press Service.

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