

Australian Labor Party says shoot at Indonesian fishing boats

Mike Head
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When an Australian patrol boat shot across the bows of a small Indonesian fishing vessel earlier this month, it was not enough for the Labor Party. It wants the Navy to start shooting at fishing boats in the Timor Sea, between the two countries. Labor's defence spokesman Arch Bevis issued the call last week after a wooden boat reportedly rammed the HMAS *Cessnock* before fleeing into Indonesian waters.

Bevis said he would have authorised the commander of the naval gunship to fire into the boat. Even Lieutenant-Commander Colin Cooper displayed a more humane attitude, commenting: 'We do not want to go killing people over a bunch of fish.' Speaking for the Howard government, Defence Minister Ian McLachlan endorsed the commander's decision, only because deaths or casualties 'would have created an international incident with Indonesia.'

The government is equally determined to prevent boats allegedly fishing in what are claimed to be Australian territorial waters. It has applied intense pressure on the Indonesian authorities to take action against the fishing boat's owners and captain. Australian officials are now investigating alternative ways to forcibly stop fishing vessels.

McLachlan and his officials defended the Navy's record against fishing vessels, boarding about 300 each year and apprehending 133 last year, compared to about 25 to 30 a year before 1994. These military patrols, also aimed at seizing refugees from Indonesia and other Asian countries, were first stepped up under the previous Labor government. The boats apprehended are routinely seized, together with their crews, and towed to Australian ports where the crews are detained and the boats burned, destroying the livelihoods of thousands of people.

Fishermen from the Indonesian islands have worked

in these waters for centuries. It is only in recent years that their fishing grounds have been incorporated into Australia's economic zone. International treaties have extended territorial waters up to 200 nautical miles offshore amid mounting national disputes over mining and fishing rights.

Widespread hunger in Indonesia and soaring prices for fish and other foodstuffs over the past 12 months have led fishermen to risk detention and the loss of their boats. They represent no threat at all to ordinary Australian people--only to the profits of fishing and mining companies that operate in this oil-rich region. The military action against them is a prime example of the divisive role of the national boundaries maintained by the private profit system.

Labor's aggression on this issue is rooted in definite material interests. Apart from the massive investments made by Australian-based companies such as BHP in Timor Sea oil and gas projects, Australian firms have a total of \$10 billion invested in Indonesia itself, where the Habibie regime is seeking to maintain the Suharto dictatorship's repressive grip. With their Australian counterparts, the Indonesian authorities have a mutual interest in policing the waters between the countries.

Meanwhile, it has emerged that many of Bevis's former Labor colleagues are profiting handsomely from their intimate ties with the military regime in Indonesia. According to a report in the *Australian Financial Review*, ex-industry minister John Button has worked as a consultant to Habibie, and another former industry minister, Alan Griffiths, runs businesses and conducts corporate consultancies in Indonesia.

Ex-immigration minister Gerry Hand was associated with a Suharto family-backed casino on Christmas Island, while former sports and environment minister Ros Kelly heads the South East Asian office of a US

consulting firm that advises many mining companies in Indonesia. As for ex-prime minister Paul Keating, known for establishing a close personal relationship with Suharto, he is a consultant to Macquarie Bank, which finances infrastructure projects in Indonesia.

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