

Secret Timor documents implicate former Whitlam government in Australia

Mike Head
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Previously suppressed official documents show that the Whitlam Labor government in Australia was closely briefed on the preparations for the Indonesian invasion of East Timor in 1975, including a preliminary attack on Balibo where five Australian television newsmen were murdered by Indonesian or Indonesian-backed forces. The government then covered up its knowledge of the Balibo deaths to hide its complicity in the invasion.

The revelations were published yesterday on the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Its report focussed on the government's detailed prior knowledge of the assault on the border village of Balibo, but the documents point to wider questions about the Labor government's active involvement in the invasion, and the cover-up maintained by both Liberal and Labor governments since.

Effectively, the five members of the Channel 7 and Channel 9 news crews became victims of the Labor government's policy, together with the estimated 200,000 East Timorese people killed over the past two decades. The revelations indicate that Canberra was so intimately briefed on the Suharto dictatorship's planned takeover of the former Portuguese colony that it knew the three precise locations, including Balibo, where the offensive would begin. The seizure of Balibo was a precursor to the full-scale naval bombardment, aerial bombing and massive troop influx of December 7, 1975.

Indonesian intelligence officials gave Australian embassy officers in Jakarta final details of the Balibo attack in mid-October 1975. The embassy relayed the information in a cable to Canberra on October 13, 1975, three days before the Balibo operation. The Foreign Affairs Department knew that Australian news crews were in East Timor but no warning was passed onto the management of the two TV stations or to the five news crew--Brian Peters and Malcolm Rennie of Channel 9 and Gary Cunningham, Greg Shackleton and Tony Stewart of Channel 7.

Before yesterday's revelations it was known that the Whitlam government had encouraged the Indonesian invasion. Whitlam had personally told General Suharto

during a meeting in Jakarta in September 1974 that the Australian government supported the incorporation of East Timor into Indonesia. It was also known that Whitlam had held a further meeting with Suharto to discuss the Timor issue in the northern Australian city of Townsville in April 1975. However, in a book published last year, Whitlam maintained his government's public line that it had no advance knowledge of the invasion. 'We did not know of the incursion across the border at Balibo,' Whitlam wrote in his volume *Abiding Interests*.

The material presented by the newspaper's foreign editor Hamish McDonald now demonstrates that from late 1974, following the first Suharto-Whitlam meeting, Indonesian officials regularly supplied the Australian embassy with information relating to Indonesia's intention to seize the territory by force.

For months before the invasion, two Australian officers, the embassy's deputy-chief Malcolm Dan and its political section head, counsellor Allan Taylor, met regularly with officials of the Indonesian Centre for Strategic and International Studies, a conduit for Indonesian intelligence, to discuss the plans. The meetings were held daily from August 1975, when fighting broke out in East Timor following the rapid withdrawal of Portuguese troops. Woolcott also held top-level meetings with the Indonesian armed force intelligence chief General Benny Murdani.

On October 13, Dan and Taylor were told that some 3,200 Indonesian soldiers, mostly commandos of the elite special forces (now known as Kopassus) would attack across the Indonesia-East Timor land border in three places. They were informed that the troops would wear Portuguese-style uniforms to maintain the fiction that those involved were members of the pro-Indonesian UDT and Apodeti parties, local forces that had opposed the seizure of power by the pro-independence Fretilin party two months earlier. A force of 800 troops would concentrate on the area of Balibo, near an old Portuguese fort, and nearby Maliana.

But to have revealed this information to the Australian media would have pointed to how closely the Indonesian

regime had consulted the Labor government about the buildup to the invasion. This cover-up is still continuing. It now appears, from McDonald's report, that the official record of Whitlam's September 1974 meeting with Suharto is missing from the files of the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Until now, it was also known that the Australian military intelligence service, Defence Signals Directorate (DSD), had monitored reports from Timor on October 16, 1975 indicating the deaths of the five newsmen. They were killed and their bodies incinerated to prevent eyewitness accounts of the invasion being broadcast. The Whitlam government kept the news of their deaths secret until reports emerged in the Jakarta press on October 20. However the reason for this silence was not merely to protect the secret sources and operations of the DSD, the rationale previously hinted at by Labor leaders, but to shield the government itself.

After the Whitlam government was dismissed by the Governor-General in the 'Canberra Coup' of November 11, 1975, the newly installed Liberal government headed by Malcolm Fraser continued to whitewash the Indonesian invasion and the murder of the five newsmen. Acting on departmental advice, Foreign Affairs Minister Andrew Peacock opposed suggestions that the charred remains of the newsmen be returned to Australia for forensic testing to determine their causes of death. In its submission to Peacock, the department said it 'must not favour this' because it could lead to an 'anti-Indonesian campaign' and cause 'public outrage'. Accordingly, the remains were buried in a single coffin at a funeral in Jakarta on December 5, 1975 watched over by departmental officials.

Peacock presided over the first official inquiry into the deaths, which dutifully reported that it was not possible to come to firm and final conclusions about the circumstances and manner of the deaths. The Sherman Inquiry organised by the Keating Labor government in 1995-96 took essentially the same line. The Minister responsible for that inquiry, Gareth Evans, now deputy opposition leader, has quickly denied the existence of a cover-up, insisting that the Sherman inquiry had examined all existing documents.

Both Labor and Liberal governments established extremely supportive relations with the Suharto dictatorship. Indeed, they were the only governments in the world to formally recognise the Indonesian annexation of East Timor. They long regarded the military junta as the most reliable instrument for suppressing the Indonesian masses and protecting the strategic and investment interests of Australian big business. Moreover, in 1989 the Labor government signed a deal with Jakarta to share the vast oil and natural gas deposits in the Timor Gap between Australia and East Timor.

Shirley Shackleton, the widow of one of the newsmen, Greg Shackleton, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that she blamed successive Australian governments for covering up the truth about the Indonesian invasion and the suffering inflicted on the Timorese people.

In particular, the latest revelations raised major questions about Whitlam's role. 'You have to wonder about Gough Whitlam's part in this,' she said. 'I used to think that he had simply made a mistake in supporting the Indonesian invasion, but he has done everything to cover up for the Indonesians. It now turns out that he knew exactly what was going on all along.'

She continued: 'Whitlam had the nerve to give East Timor to the Indonesians. Then he went to the UN to urge them to accept it.' Shackleton made it clear that her concern was not simply the death of her husband but the plight of the Timorese people. 'Whitlam and others liked to call it an annexation but it was an invasion. People were bludgeoned to death and children starved. Even the estimated death toll of 200,000 over the past 23 years is likely to be far too low.'

Shackleton has been calling for a full judicial inquiry since 1975. She told the *WSWS* she was demanding an international inquiry, conducted under the auspices of the UN, because neither the Indonesian nor Australian authorities could be trusted.

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