Australian Labor leaders knew of Timor massacre coverup

Mike Head
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According to documents leaked this week, Australian Labor leaders, including former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, have been involved in a seven-year coverup of the true extent of the Indonesian military regime's massacre of East Timorese demonstrators in Dili on November 12, 1991.

The documents show that the then Australian Labor government was told just weeks after the mass shootings in Dili's Santa Cruz cemetery that many victims were secretly executed and buried in the days following the initial killings. Yet Evans and the entire Labor leadership repeatedly denied reports of the follow-up killings and supported a whitewash inquiry staged by the Suharto regime.

Two eye witness accounts--one from Indonesia's then governor of East Timor--have this week also confirmed that Indonesian soldiers and intelligence agents murdered dozens more people, including those injured in the cemetery, and dumped their bodies in mass graves.

Dili residents have always insisted that some 271 people were killed and 302 wounded in the cemetery shootings and the terror that followed. The Indonesian military, assisted by the Hawke and Keating governments, put the death toll at 19, then 54.

On November 12, 1991, about 5,000 people gathered in the Dili cemetery for a memorial service for Sebastian Gomez, a youth slain by soldiers two weeks earlier during a demonstration outside a church. Flags and banners of the independence movement Fretilin were prominent, opposing the continuing Indonesian occupation of the former Portuguese colony.

Troops opened fire with machine guns and the bodies were taken away in army trucks. Journalists who attempted to photograph the shootings were beaten with rifle butts. Nevertheless, some reportage, including film footage, made its way into the world media, providing a rare first-hand view of the methods used by the Suharto regime. Altogether, 200,000 East Timorese are estimated to have died under Indonesian rule since 1975.

Mario Carrascalao, the ex-governor of the province, has now admitted the truth of the reports that immediately appeared of further mass executions in the wake of the cemetery carnage. He told Australian journalists this week that several days after the first slaughter, 20 to 50 wounded demonstrators were taken to a site on a river south of Dili, where soldiers killed and buried them.

Carrascalao said he had evidence that several weeks later soldiers executed and buried the bodies of a second truckload of Timorese prisoners near a rubbish tip 13 kilometres west of the town. In early 1992, villagers living nearby had complained to Dili authorities about a terrible stench coming from the site, but soldiers refused to allow people into the area.

Carrascalao said the Indonesian commission of inquiry that investigated the killings was a whitewash. Now an adviser to the government headed by Suharto's anointed successor, Habibie, he called for the reopening of the investigation so that there could be a 'peaceful settlement' in East Timor.

The day before Carrascalao broke his silence, a survivor of the massacre told Reuters that troops shot at people 'like shooting at goats'. Alex Santino Da Costa said that after being shot he fainted and was placed on a truck with dead bodies. Later, many of the victims' bodies were never found. 'We will never know where the bodies are. We learned they were dumped in the sea.'

The Labor government in Australia was fully informed of these atrocities within weeks by a senior Indonesian military commander, but shielded the Suharto regime by calling on the generals themselves to 'investigate' the reports--a suggestion subsequently taken up by Suharto.

Leaked documents, apparently from within the Australian Foreign Affairs Department, prove that on December 24, 1991 Australia's ambassador in Jakarta, Philip Flood, was briefed on the follow-up killings by then Lieutenant-Colonel Prabowo Subianto, Suharto's son-in-law. Prabowo told Flood that the armed forces had lied to the token Indonesian parliament about the death toll, destroyed many bodies by burning and dynamiting, and attributed blame along military faction lines.

Indonesia's then Armed Forces chief, General Try Sutrisno, initially reported that only 19 people had died at Dili. Flood's record of his conversation with Prabowo notes that Prabowo and another military officer estimated the death toll at 54, with a further 20 to 25 killed by soldiers and intelligence agents in subsequent killings. 'Of the bodies surplus to 19, some had been burnt and some dynamited,' Flood's note stated. 'Given the

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physical effort involved in loading bodies onto trucks and destroying them, many officers knew about this.'

Flood reportedly noted that the conversation had taken place on the basis that its content would not be reported. But clearly this information was known in Canberra. Two and a half years later, another ambassador, Allan Taylor, retrieved the report of the conversation from embassy files and it was circulated to several offices in Canberra, including that of Evans.

Just at that time, journalist John Pilger was releasing a TV documentary on Timor, in which he reported Timorese, including Bishop Carlos Belo, alleging that a 'second massacre' had occurred at Dili. Pilger claimed that Evans was covering up Australian knowledge of the events in the interests of oil exploration in the Timor Gap between Australia and Timor.

Ten days after the information was sent to Evans' office, with a covering note from ambassador Taylor noting its relevance to Pilger's claims, Evans wrote in the Melbourne *Age* newspaper: 'As to Pilger's claim, in 'Death of a Nation,' that a second massacre occurred in November 1991, it continues to be the case that--whether he likes it or not--the balance of available evidence is against this.'

Evans claimed that this assessment was based on 'multiple sources of information, including contacts made over a long period, not only with Indonesian government ministers and officials, but with East Timorese opposed to integration; with independent organisations such as the International Red Cross; with local and international human rights groups; and with senior churchmen.'

Evans continued to defend Suharto's rigged inquiry, which had been headed by Supreme Court Judge Djaelani, previously a military lawyer with major-general rank. The judge dismissed claims of top-level involvement in the shootings and of a military cover-up. He ruled that the shootings were a 'spontaneous reaction [by soldiers] to defend themselves, without command, resulting in excessive shooting'.

At the time of the Dili massacre, the Socialist Labour League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party in Australia, condemned the role of the Labor government. An editorial in the party's newspaper, *Workers News*, on November 22, 1991 said: 'The widespread reports of a further mass execution of 70 people three days after the Dili massacre expose the cynical fraud of the Labor government's call for the Indonesian military butchers themselves to conduct an inquiry into the November 12 atrocity. Far from 'investigating' the massacre, the Indonesian occupiers are putting the witnesses to death.'

The Labor leaders had a long record of supporting the Indonesian junta. In 1974 and 1975 the then Labor prime minister Gough Whitlam held two personal meetings with Suharto, in Yogyakarta and Cairns, to give the green light for the Indonesian invasion of East Timor in December 1975. The Labor leaders backed Suharto in the interests of Australian big business, and specifically in order to gain secure access to the immense oil and natural gas reserves of the Timor Gap. Whitlam's ambassador in Jakarta, Richard Woolcott, spelled out the position of Australian capitalism in a cable to the Labor government in August 1975. A treaty to divide up the spoils of the Timor Gap 'might be more readily negotiated with Indonesia than with Portugal or an independent Portuguese Timor,' he wrote.

The Hawke Labor government realised Whitlam's vision in December 1989 when it signed the Timor Gap Treaty. In return for the lion's share of the undersea oil and gas, it became the first government in the world to formally recognise the Indonesian annexation of East Timor. The emergence of renewed opposition to Indonesian rule in East Timor just two years later threatened that relationship.

Under Keating, the Labor government openly embraced Suharto's bloody US-backed military coup of 1965, in which a million Indonesian workers and peasants were killed in anti-communist pogroms. Keating described the coup as the most favourable strategic development for Australia in the Southeast Asian region. His assessment was largely based on the interests of Australian companies, which have more than $10 billion invested in Indonesian factories and mines, taking advantage of the regime's low wages.

Today with the Indonesian economy shattered, Suharto gone and his successor clinging precariously to power with the aid of the military, sections of Australian and international business are looking for new relations, including with the Timorese leadership, in order to protect their Timor Gap operations and other investments. Hence the belated appearance of leaked documents and apparent shifts by the likes of Mario Carrascalao.

But whatever the reasons for these revelations coming to light, they are a damning exposure of the Labor leaders and a graphic demonstration of how far capitalist politicians of all stripes are prepared to go to satisfy the ruthless requirements of corporate profit.

See Also:
Australian government seeks new cover-up on Timor deaths
[27 October 1998]
Tensions mount over oil-rich Timor
[5 September 1998]
Secret Timor documents implicate former Whitlam government in Australia
[25 August 1998]

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