

Political storm over Australian Labor's coverup of Dili massacre

Mike Head**26 November 1998**

A political tempest has erupted in Australia over leaked official documents showing that the leaders of the former Labor government covered up casualty figures from the 1991 massacre carried out by Indonesian troops in the East Timorese capital of Dili.

The revelations have provoked vigorous denials by ex-foreign minister Gareth Evans, threats of libel action by former prime minister Paul Keating and quick action by the present conservative government to defend the Labor leaders and rule out any inquiry. Clearly, the issue is sensitive.

The facts are that more than 200 people, mostly pro-independence demonstrators, were slaughtered in Dili in November 1991. The then Labor government supported claims by an inquiry set up by the Suharto regime that only about 50 were killed and that the deaths were the responsibility of a few individual officers and soldiers.

Philip Flood, the Australian ambassador to Indonesia at the time, this week added to the controversy by stating that he immediately passed on to Canberra the substance of information that he received from two senior Indonesian military officers about follow-up killings carried out after the initial shootings in Dili's Santa Cruz cemetery on November 12, 1991. General Suharto's son-in-law, Lieutenant-Colonel Prabowo Subianto and another officer told Flood in December 1991 that soldiers and intelligence agents killed 20 to 25 people after the main massacre, with their bodies then burnt or dynamited to hide the evidence.

Flood's statement proves that Evans and other Labor leaders knew of this information within weeks of the atrocities. It is all the more incriminating because a second document emerged this week showing that on January 15, 1992--two months after the Santa Cruz massacre--Evans sent a letter to Labor MPs saying it was 'not unreasonable' for an Indonesian inquiry to conclude that about 50 people had died.

This contradicts the statement issued by Evans last week, in which he denied concealing 'any knowledge I had about the nature or scale of the killings that occurred in or around Dili in November 1991'.

Evans went on: 'I have never denied that other killings may have occurred in and around Dili in the immediate aftermath of the Santa Cruz shootings, including at the cemetery itself.'

The documented record shows otherwise. In May 1994, Evans wrote an article in the *Melbourne Age* newspaper denying Pilger's report of a second massacre in scathing terms. Evans loftily asserted that, on the basis of 'multiple sources of information' the 'balance of available evidence' was against reports that a second massacre occurred.

The most telling aspect of Evans' statement of denial was its concluding paragraph. 'There was then and is now absolutely no Australian national interest or party political interest, to be served by covering up or minimising the extent of what were obviously horrendous and indefensible actions by the Indonesian military,' he said.

The truth is that the Labor leaders had compelling reasons of both 'national interest' and 'party political interest' for whitewashing the Dili massacre, and every other bloody crime carried out by the Suharto regime. For 'national interest' read the profit interests of Australian big business.

In the case of East Timor, the Labor leaders backed the regime's repressive grip over the former Portuguese colony in order to provide BHP and other oil companies with guaranteed access to the immense resources of the Timor Gap--estimated to hold up to 1 billion barrels of crude oil. Just two years before the Dili massacre, Evans and his Indonesian counterpart, Ali Alatas, signed the Timor Gap Treaty in a champagne drinking ceremony as they flew over the Timor Sea, making Australia the only country in the world to legally recognise the Indonesian occupation of East Timor.

This partnership extended far beyond East Timor. Under both Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, the Labor leaders established the closest economic, political and military ties with the Suharto dictatorship in order to secure the interests of corporate Australia. Companies such as BHP, Rio Tinto, CC Amatil, Transfield, Pacific Dunlop, ICI and Boral invested more than \$10 billion in Indonesia during the 1990s to take advantage of the cheap labour and mineral wealth made available by the Suharto regime.

The bond between the Laborites and Suharto was formalised by the signing of a security treaty in December 1995, which envisaged the Australian military assisting the Jakarta junta in the event of 'adverse challenges'. Prime Minister Keating went to Jakarta to sign the treaty, accompanied by Evans, the current Labor leader Kim Beazley and Australia's top generals. Keating told a media conference that 'the emergence of President Suharto's New Order Government in the 1960s was the event of most positive strategic significance to Australia in the post-war years'.

In other words, contrary to Evans' belated denial of shared interests between the Labor government and the Indonesian regime, Keating identified the Australian national interest completely with that of Suharto's military, even to the extent of solidarising with the 1965-66 coup, in which the armed forces and their supporters slaughtered up to one million workers and peasants.

As for 'party political interest' spoken of by Evans, the Dili massacre threatened to expose the bloody implications of the Labor leaders' support for the Suharto regime, including their embrace of the annexation of East Timor dating back to 1974 and 1975 when the then prime minister Gough Whitlam assured Suharto of his backing.

It is not that the Laborites need fear political exposure by the current Howard government, which has sprung to their defence. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer has swiftly ruled out any inquiry into the Dili massacre or what the Labor government knew about it. 'With the greatest of ill-will towards the Labor Party, I don't think I could ever claim that Gareth Evans would have deliberately gone out and covered up material,' he said.

Downer accepted that strong evidence existed of follow-up killings in Dili but displayed his own contempt for the victims by saying it would be 'emotive' to describe the events as a massacre, rather than as 'people being killed in a more ad hoc way'. His comments only serve to demonstrate that there exists a bipartisan agreement on defending the national interests of Australian capitalism in

Indonesia, regardless of the human cost.

Keating has threatened to sue journalist John Pilger for asserting that Keating knew of the Dili coverup. Ironically, Keating was speaking from Jakarta where he addressed a business investment conference, held discussions with current Indonesian President Habibie and emphasised his personal intimacy with Suharto by visiting the ex-military dictator at his residence.

Keating saw Suharto even though troops surrounded the residence, keeping back student demonstrations that were demanding that Suharto be placed on trial for corruption and the crimes of his regime. In the days before Keating's visit, investigators appointed by Habibie reported that they had uncovered secret holdings held by Suharto worth \$US15.2 million in central Sumatra alone, plus 21 billion rupiah in 74 bank accounts.

At the investment conference, Keating chastised Australian companies for not taking advantage of the upheaval in Indonesia to build up their presence. Instead they were allowing their European competitors to move into the country, he complained. Thus, even as Evans was trying to deny the material interests at stake in the Dili coverup, Keating was baldly urging business leaders to further exploit the social misery of the Indonesian masses.

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