

Australian troops placed on alert for intervention in neighbouring countries

East Timor, Indonesia, PNG suggested as possible targets

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Citing regional instability and the possible need to send soldiers to East Timor, the Howard government in Australia has decided to assemble a new Ready Deployment Force of 3,000 combat troops in the northern city of Darwin by June 30. The total number of Australian troops on high alert--a 28-day deployment alert--will be doubled to more than 7,000, the largest figure since the Vietnam War.

The dispatch of heavily-armed units to Darwin, just 600 kilometres from Timor, demonstrates concerns in the highest echelons of the government and the military about the rapidly unravelling political crisis and social unrest in East Timor and throughout Indonesia. Thursday's announcement marks an acceleration of preparations for establishing a military presence in East Timor, most likely as part of a United Nations force.

Amid hypocritical statements of concern for the people in East Timor and other strife-torn areas of the Indonesian archipelago, military involvement is being prepared that will aim to secure the economic and strategic interests of Australian big business, including, in particular, the oil and natural gas deposits in the Timor Sea.

While government and media commentators have downplayed suggestions of sending armed troops to East Timor, the planned unit will be combat-ready and equipped for fighting and patrolling in both urban and rural areas. To cost \$270 million, it will feature all the army's Leopard tanks and its M113 armoured personnel carriers, most of the 100 eight-wheeled light-armour vehicles, and Kiowa helicopters, as well as artillery, infantry, engineering, reconnaissance and administrative support divisions. For rapid deployment and assault, the force will have landing craft, Hercules air transport and close air support. Paratroops are being considered as well, according to the Vice-Chief of the Defence Force, Air Marshal Doug Riding.

The new force will complement the existing Rapid Deployment Force, a full army brigade on constant alert in the northern Queensland city of Townsville. Supported in

addition by other air and naval units, the two brigades will be a highly mobile, front-line expeditionary force, boosting the Australian military's capacity to intervene throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

Making the announcement in parliament, Defence Minister John Moore said East Timor was one of the government's concerns, but not the only one. "This is the first occasion in over two decades that Australia has had the equivalent of two brigades at this level of readiness," he said. "The government's responsibility, and our intention, is to be in a position to be able to respond effectively to a considerable range of possibilities."

A report in the *Australian Financial Review* revealed that the government's fears of turmoil extend beyond Indonesia, and include Papua New Guinea (PNG). "Canberra has fears about the future stability of Papua New Guinea and potential dangers to thousands of Australians living there," wrote the *AFR*'s Geoffrey Barker.

Darwin, the closest Australian capital to Asia, could rapidly become a major military post and staging ground for Australian and other major power intervention in the region, with Portuguese, other European and American forces likely to form a UN interim administration in East Timor. In addition to Timor, official spokesmen have suggested various scenarios for troop involvement, including the evacuation of Australians from Jakarta, Ambon--now the scene of serious riots--and Port Moresby, and operations to prevent a mass influx of refugees into Australia.

Speaking on commercial radio on Friday morning, Prime Minister John Howard said his government was responding to a higher level of unpredictability in the region, particularly in East Timor and Papua New Guinea. "We're not under threat, but we know from the experience of the past few years that Australian forces can properly and in a very beneficial way be called upon to participate in peacekeeping and other roles," he said. "We've been in Cambodia, we of course sent very elite forces to the

Gulf--they weren't needed--we've had people elsewhere in Namibia in recent times."

Howard's comments highlight how Australian participation in the war against Iraq and in other UN operations has been utilised to prepare troops for active combat and occupation duties, and also to condition public opinion for wider military involvement closer to home. Already the government has some 250 military personnel on the PNG island of Bougainville. They are heading a 365-strong "peace-monitoring group" (with soldiers from New Zealand, Fiji and Vanuatu), which is supervising the formation of a new regional government, with a view to reopening the Rio Tinto-owned Panguna copper mine--one of the largest in the world.

For more than three decades both the Liberal-National Party coalition, currently in office, and the Labor Party, backed and helped equip the military dictatorship in Indonesia as the best guarantor of stable conditions in which multinational companies could exploit the mineral wealth and cheap labour of the region. Former Labor Party prime minister Paul Keating publicly referred to Suharto's 1965 military coup as the greatest post-war contribution to regional stability. With Suharto's fall and the inability of his handpicked successor, B. J. Habibie, to reliably maintain order and profitable conditions, Australian ruling circles have scrambled to adjust their political line, and their military capacity.

The Labor Party's defence spokesman, Steve Martin, immediately supported the formation of the Darwin force, but criticised the government for not providing the military with enough "teeth". He also urged the government to give an in-principle commitment to take part in a UN effort in East Timor. Recently, Labor's foreign affairs spokesman, Laurie Brereton called on the government to assert a "leading role" in any UN contingent.

Under the banner of a UN "peacekeeping" operation, the Australian authorities will be competing with those from Portugal--the colonial power in East Timor for four centuries--and possibly American and other European interests for economic and political hegemony over the tiny enclave. BHP, Santos and other Australian oil and gas companies have multi-billion drilling rights in the Timor Sea, and a potentially lucrative fine coffee trade is also at stake.

The oil and gas mining rights derive from the 1989 Timor Gap Treaty between Australia and Indonesia, a treaty that Portugal does not recognise and indeed challenged before the International Court of Justice in the early 1990s. The Australian government has publicly indicated its desire to cooperate with Portugal, yet if Indonesia withdraws from East Timor, the territory reverts to Portuguese sovereignty,

at least as far as the UN is concerned. Canberra would use a substantial Australian military commitment to insist on the protection of Australian corporate interests.

Prominent East Timorese spokesman Jose Ramos Horta welcomed the Australian troop announcement but demanded that Canberra put pressure on Indonesia to pull out of East Timor. At the same time, Horta has offered Portugal the dominant economic influence in any East Timorese statelet. Speaking in Melbourne on Thursday, he said East Timor would use the Portuguese currency, the escudo, perhaps in conjunction with the Euro, during an interim UN administration.

Horta has accused the Australian government of not telling the truth about what is happening inside East Timor, where the Indonesian regime is withdrawing doctors, medical supplies, food aid, teachers and administrators, creating an acute social crisis. Independent reports also indicate widespread hunger and the collapse of health facilities, as well as continuing attacks by the Indonesian regime's militia.

If Australian and other troops are sent to East Timor it will most likely be done under the claim of tackling a humanitarian disaster. This could only be described as a shameless deception. Those dispatching the troops, whether in Canberra, Lisbon or Washington, represent the very same corporate interests as those who collaborated with the Suharto regime for three decades, and supported, whether explicitly or tacitly, the 1975 invasion of East Timor. Any military intervention will be to enhance the position and profits of the major powers. It will have nothing whatever to do with meeting the needs and legitimate aspirations of the oppressed masses in East Timor, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea to live free of economic and political domination.



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