

Leaked documents show ...

# Plan to send 15,000 US Marines to East Timor

**Mike Head**  
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Leaked Australian documents show that White House officials and US military commanders have detailed plans to send 15,000 Marines to the Indonesian province of East Timor, before or after the scheduled August 30 vote on secession, under the pretext of protecting the Timorese people from the Indonesian military.

Some idea of the preparations emerged when an Australian newspaper published extracts from a top-secret cable sent to Canberra by the Australian consul-general in Hawaii, Peter Woolcott, on June 21. The cable was considered so sensitive and important that it was addressed to the attention of Australia's highest-ranking political and military leaders—Prime Minister Howard, Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer, Defence Minister John Moore, the head of the Prime Minister's Department, Max Moore-Wilton, the head of the Defence Department, Paul Barratt, and the Chief of the Defence Force, Admiral Chris Barrie.

According to the *Melbourne Age* newspaper, the document records discussions on the same day between top US and Australian military officers in Honolulu. In attendance, apart from Woolcott, the author of the cable, were Australia's Air Vice-Marshal Treloar, the incoming commander of US Pacific Marine Forces, Lieutenant-General Lubitti, the outgoing commander, Lieutenant-General Fulford, the commander of US troops in Okinawa, Japan, Lieutenant-General Hailston, and the US Pacific commander-in-chief, Admiral Blair.

The cable describes a proposal for a massive deployment of troops from Okinawa and nearby places. They would be under US, not United Nations control, using the northern Australian city of Darwin as their initial logistical base.

Marked, "following contains sensitive information," the cable begins: "PACOM (US Pacific Command) planning for any peace enforcement operation is based on using 'overwhelming force' in order to 'stop the killing'. Once this has been achieved, PACOM envisages that operation would then revert to being a peacekeeping operation under UN auspices.

"The US is planning to use Darwin as an intermediate staging base for any operation (including peace enforcement) in East Timor. Marine Force Pacific have requested that Australia agree to the provision of Australian liaison officers to any enforcement operation in East Timor."

Top-level Australian cooperation is evident in drawing up the proposal. General Fulford told the meeting that the US was "pleased with the ... work that has been done between Australia and Marine Forces Pacific on what shape a peacekeeping operation in East Timor might look like."

Later the cable says: "Fulford said the planning work being done on a peace-enforcement operation in East Timor was on the basis of the US having to go in alone. They were aware of the Australian government's position but would still be keen for Australian involvement should circumstances change... AVM Treloar said he would take the request back to Australia and that it would require consideration at a senior level in the Government."

US Admiral Blair said the plan was "no more than prudent planning at this stage" and it was "unclear which way Washington would jump. It had

been discussed with "a number of individuals in Washington," whom Blair preferred not to name.

Senior Pentagon officers were clearly authorised to draw up detailed cost estimates. The cable says: "Jinnett (a US military planner) said a peace-making operation would require the deployment of some 15,000 military personnel. The cost of such a deployment was estimated at predeployment USD 10M (\$US10 million), deployment USD30M, USD90M per month and USD45M for redeployment."

Given that such a force could mean direct military conflict with Indonesia, which counts East Timor as its 27th province, Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon and US State Department spokesman James Rubin tried on Tuesday to dismiss the leaked cable. Bacon said: "To the best of my knowledge, and I've checked into this, no such plan was discussed."

Rubin denied the specific details revealed in the cable, but declared at his daily press briefing that: "The military of our country has plans to do everything; that's what their job is—to have plans... Our military would be making a mistake, as a global power, if it didn't have numerous contingency plans for a whole panoply of situations all over the world."

Apart from causing consternation in Indonesia's ruling circles, the leaking of the cable severely embarrassed the Australian government. Just hours before the media published the document, Downer had categorically denied the existence of any such discussion in Hawaii. After the cable surfaced, he floundered, claiming no knowledge of the document. Even though the cable was top secret and addressed to him personally, he told parliament that his department received "100,000" diplomatic cables annually, and he could not read them all.

It was the second time within 24 hours that Downer had been caught out by a leaked document. On Monday he had to make a late-night appearance in parliament to correct a statement he had made earlier in the day, denying that he or Defence Minister Moore were aware of US requests for Australian involvement in a military intervention. He had specifically declared as "nonsense" several media reports of talks—and disagreements—between US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific, Stanley Roth, and Downer's department head, Dr Ashton Calvert.

Then the *Age* and its sister paper, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, printed extracts from a record of the meeting between Roth and Calvert, which took place in February. According to the record, Roth told Calvert that "a full-scale peacekeeping operation would be an unavoidable aspect of the transition. Without it, East Timor was likely to collapse".

The record shows that a conflict erupted when Calvert expressed reservations about the plan. "One area of difference ...arose with respect to our approaches concerning the security dimension of East Timor's transition... Roth suggested that Australia's position of keeping peacekeeping at arm's length was essentially defeatist."

Roth this week admitted that the discussion with Calvert took place, yet argued that he had been merely expressing a "personal view".

The leaked documents have been given front-page treatment in the Australian media, particularly in the newspapers of the Fairfax chain, which also includes the *Australian Financial Review*. Some media owners and wider sections of big business, together with senior figures inside the Foreign Affairs and military establishment, oppose the government's refusal to accept Washington's proposal.

The Fairfax newspapers are conducting an active campaign for military intervention, invoking the precedent of the US-NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. Last Saturday, the *Sydney Morning Herald* ran a large front-page story accusing the UN of preparing to withdraw from East Timor if the UN secession ballot produces violence. "How the UN plans to abandon a people" said the headline, urging a Kosovo-style mission to protect the population from a bloodbath at the hands of the Indonesian military and pro-integrationist militias.

Yesterday's editorial in the same newspaper was even more explicit. "Obviously, Australia does not want to go to war with Indonesia," it said. "It is much easier for the US, geographically removed from the region and as the pre-eminent world power, to talk of interposing military force to ensure a peaceful vote in East Timor. But if such intervention becomes necessary, Australia can hardly refuse its support."

An editorial published simultaneously in the *Australian Financial Review* went further. It elaborated a scenario in which violence in East Timor could be exploited to claim that Indonesia had forfeited its right to national sovereignty over the territory. "Australia can't send troops into East Timor now without Indonesian agreement, because that would be an invasion. But it should be working publicly in the UN with the US and others to prepare a force that could go into the province after the [UN] vote. The UN reportedly had plans for a foreign military presence of up to 10,000 once it is in control, but that will look particularly hollow if mayhem has been allowed to occur beforehand.

"It is time the supporters of democracy in East Timor made it clear that an outburst of post-election violence will be regarded as an abdication of control by the Indonesian army, and the acknowledgement by the country's Government of the need for a UN security force."

At this point, the preferred position of the Howard government is to rely on its close links with the Indonesian military to pave the way for an Australian-led UN force in November, after the Indonesian parliament, the MPR, has formally accepted the outcome of the UN ballot, which is expected to produce a majority for secession. Australian strategists have their own contingency plans—with Australian, not American, military personnel leading a UN force, largely composed of troops from carefully selected South East Asian and Pacific countries.

The tension between Washington and Canberra has nothing to do with any genuine concern for the plight of the Timorese people, whose slaughter and oppression at the hands of the Indonesian military was backed for two decades by the US and Australia. Rather, with the ouster of Indonesian dictator Suharto, East Timor has become a considerable economic and strategic prize. Not only does it have offshore reserves of oil and natural gas worth billions of dollars, but it offers a footing for commercial, political, intelligence and military operations throughout the Indonesian islands.

Australian ruling circles have long coveted East Timor. Recently-released confidential correspondence from the 1960s shows that the then prime minister, Sir Robert Menzies wrote to the Portuguese fascist dictator Antonio Salazar to discuss the territory's future. Writing in October 1961, Menzies sought unsuccessfully to convince Salazar that the Australian government was interested in "self-determination" for all peoples, including those of East Timor. At the same time, he warned Salazar that without self-determination of some kind, there would be serious civil disorder in the colony. In his reply, Salazar essentially accused Canberra of seeking "an Australian dominion or condominium".

Today, both the US and Australian governments understand that

Portugal, which colonised East Timor for 400 years, and Portugal's fellow members of the European Union again have their eyes on the enclave. The East Timorese independence coalition has been based in Portugal for some years and has pledged to introduce the Portuguese currency if and when a UN-appointed administration is formed (and under UN rules, Portugal would resume legal sovereignty over East Timor).

The Portuguese government underlined its designs on the half island this month by announcing that Prime Minister Antonio Guterres wished to visit East Timor after the August 30 ballot. Among those quoted as welcoming the decision was former Portuguese general, Carlos Galva De Melo, who heads the Portuguese-Indonesian Friendship Association. De Melo was a leader of the Portuguese Armed Forces movement that toppled the Salazar-Caetano dictatorship in 1974.

Just as the US-led NATO forces bombed Yugoslavia under the guise of "humanitarianism" and opposition to "ethnic cleansing," now the banners of "democracy" and prevention of bloodshed are being utilised to prepare a military occupation of East Timor. In the case of Yugoslavia, the real driving motives of the American and European powers lay in definite material interests, bound up with hegemony over the resources and crucial strategic location of the Balkans, the European gateway to the Middle East and Central Asia. Likewise, in East Timor, the aims of the rival big powers are no less mercenary.

There is another parallel between Kosovo and East Timor. In the former, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) became a vehicle whereby the US-NATO operation was presented as a battle for Kosovo's independence. Like the KLA, the East Timorese national front, the National Council for Timorese Resistance (CNRT), has aligned itself with military intervention.

CNRT vice president Jose Ramos-Horta told the *Sydney Morning Herald* last Saturday: "The international community must now address the security situation in advance—taking preventative action in contingency planning in order to intervene if necessary." Horta welcomed the preparations for military engagement, saying they would put pressure on the Indonesian military. "The current discussions between Australia, New Zealand and the United States in the UN and in Washington about a possible military force can also function as preventative diplomacy in this regard."



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