

Australia prepares military intervention in East Timor

What are the real motives?

Nick Beams
8 September 1999

Moves by the Howard government and the Australian military to lead an armed intervention in East Timor have nothing to do with protecting the interests and welfare of the East Timorese people against the terror campaign unleashed by Indonesian-organised militia forces.

Rather, the aim of the military intervention is to establish a UN protectorate in East Timor through which Australian and other imperialist powers will seek to reinforce and prosecute their business and strategic interests across the resource-rich Indonesian archipelago.

The intervention has been prepared by a sustained media campaign aimed at stampeding the genuine and legitimate public outrage at the actions of the militias into political support for the largest Australian military intervention since the Vietnam War.

For most of the past two decades, the same mass media supported the military occupation of East Timor, as well as backing the Suharto dictatorship in Indonesia. Now it is claiming to be motivated by a desire to protect the Timorese masses. In a major editorial published today, entitled "What must be done in Timor" the *Sydney Morning Herald* demanded that Australian forces intervene immediately and, if necessary unilaterally, with or without the supposed agreement of the Habibie regime in Jakarta.

"Australia, however reluctantly and without waiting for others, must lead the way—in force. Mr Howard talks of up to 2,000 Australian troops, but still the talk is conditional on receiving international support and Indonesian agreement. The time for such talks has passed. On Indonesia's past performance, its declaration of martial law yesterday must be suspected as intended more to gain time than resolve the crisis. Australia should end this dangerous period of uncertainty. It should declare its intention to move troops into East Timor if Indonesia doesn't restore order immediately and if, in that event, the UN Security Council fails to call together urgently a peacekeeping force."

Preparations for the landing of Australian forces in East Timor, possibly within the next 48 hours, have already begun. A large, high-speed navy catamaran, *Jervis Bay*, escorted by a navy frigate, is now in international waters north of Darwin. It is ostensibly on standby for evacuation, but it is carrying Special Air Service (SAS) troops.

Howard has said his government is preparing to send up to 2,000 troops to the territory, leading an international military force of around 5,000 personnel. Defence Minister John Moore told the BBC that the Australian contingent would rise to around 4,000 after the initial stage.

Troops placed on alert include the 3,000 strong 1st Brigade in Darwin and the 3rd Brigade in Townsville. The remainder of the 600-strong SAS regiment is also on standby in Perth. Initially, about 100 SAS personnel would land, using Black Hawk helicopters,

followed up by parachute battalions.

While being deployed on the pretext of peacekeeping, soldiers in the 1st and 3rd Brigades have been trained in jungle warfare, conventional operations and "short-warning conflict". They are currently receiving briefings on rules of engagement.

Today the Australian government has called for all Australian citizens to leave the territory and is sending airforce Hercules planes to Dili airport, accompanied by troops, to effect the evacuation.

The trigger for the intervention is likely to come from a five-member delegation from the United Nations Security Council which is presently in Jakarta to extract an agreement from the Habibie regime for a UN-backed force, using the threat of the withdrawal of International Monetary Fund bailout funds.

UN secretary-general Kofi Annan declared yesterday that the Indonesian authorities have 48 hours to bring the situation in East Timor under control, following the imposition of martial law. Indonesian military chief and Defence Minister General Wiranto insisted that Habibie declare a state of military emergency, despite opposition within Habibie's cabinet. Under Indonesian law, the military now has the legal power to restrict and ban movement of people, seize all telecommunications facilities, confiscate and censor all mail, cables and publications, and arrest and detain people for 50 days without trial. The generals and their thugs have, over the past 24 hours, predictably widened their reign of terror.

Having helped create the conditions for carnage, the Western powers are now utilising the tragedy to implement previously-prepared plans for military intervention. Definite troop commitments have so far come from Australia, New Zealand, Canada and several other countries, including Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines. British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook has pledged "full support" and offered the backing of a naval vessel in the area.

The Australian government has been engaged in a flurry of discussions with Washington to ensure US participation. Howard said today that he was now confident of at least logistical support from the US. The prime minister telephoned US President Bill Clinton and told him Australians would find it "very strange indeed" if the US refused assistance in what has been Australia's greatest foreign policy crisis since Vietnam. Australian government spokesmen have pointed to the support that Australia gave to US military operations, in particular the Gulf War, and urged the US to reciprocate.

While the Indonesian military has imposed a virtual news blackout on East Timor, reports continuing to filter through from Dili and from West Timor indicate that at least 200 people have been killed since last Saturday's announcement of the referendum vote to separate from Indonesia. Buildings and houses in Dili have been burned, stores looted and tens of thousands of people have been made refugees and

driven over the border to West Timor.

But aid workers and others have predicted such bloodletting for months. Indeed, militia leaders warned of “civil war” if the ballot came out in favour of secession.

Now, after 24 years of turning a blind eye to the Suharto junta's killings in East Timor, the Australian government is organising military intervention on the pretext that only an international “peacekeeping” force can halt the violence.

This concern for “humanitarianism” is merely the political cover for the continuation of the interests of Australian capitalism by other means. For almost a quarter of a century, the Australian government forged a partnership with the Suharto dictatorship as the best means to facilitate operations by Australian-based mining, construction, manufacturing and banking multinationals and to protect their strategic interests throughout South East Asia.

But with the disintegration of the Suharto regime under the impact of the Asian crisis, and the withdrawal of US support for it, the political balance of forces has begun to rapidly change. Whereas the Indonesian generals were once the best protectors of Western concerns, they have become a barrier to international corporate exploitation of Indonesia's natural wealth and cheap labour.

Some 26 years after the Whitlam Labor government was forced by popular opposition to withdraw Australian forces from Vietnam, an unprecedented common front—every parliamentary political party, the media and the trade union leaders, urged on by supporters of East Timorese separation—is advocating the dispatch of troops. Not one dissenting voice has emerged. Instead, from the Labor leaders, Kim Beazley and Laurie Brereton, to the radical protest groups, one-time critics of the Vietnam War are leading the charge for military involvement.

While workers and young people in Australia and internationally are justifiably horrified by the slaughter in Timor, they should recall that the 1975 invasion of the territory was only possible because of the endorsement of Whitlam's government. And the Liberal-National Party government of Malcolm Fraser backed the continued occupation, resulting in the murder of an estimated 200,000 Timorese people in the late 1970s.

Right until the present day, the Australian military has maintained the closest collaboration with the Indonesian armed forces. From the early 1990s, the Australian forces gave crucial assistance to the notorious Kopassus special forces, now reported to be directing the operations of the militias in Dili and elsewhere.

According to well-known Indonesia scholar Benedict Anderson, Kopassus troops are “legendary for their cruelty.” In East Timor they have been the “pioneer and exemplar for every kind of atrocity” including rapes, murders and the mobilisation of hooded gangsters.

Kopassus officers were regularly training with US and Australian forces until exposure of their operations forced suspension of these programs. David Jenkins, the Asian editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* detailed some aspects of this collaboration, on September 7:

“In 1993 an Australian Special Air Services detachment traveled to the Kopassus special forces base in West Java to exercise with their Indonesian opposite numbers, a controversial move given that Kopassus had played a key role in destabilising East Timor before Indonesia's 1975 invasion spearheaded by Kopassus troops. Not long afterwards, commandos from Kopassus began training in Australia, despite allegations that the Indonesia red beret unit continued to be involved in intimidation, torture and murder, not least in East Timor.”

The following year, an Australian army battalion flew to East Java

to take part in the first-ever combined airborne exercises with an Indonesian parachute unit. That unit, Battalion 502 of the Army Strategic Reserve, was notorious for killing and looting in East Timor. In 1994 the Keating government strengthened defence training ties with Indonesia after the US Congress ended a 40-year-old defence training program following the 1991 Dili massacre.

“By 1995, the Australian Defence Force had become the most important foreign provider of military training to Indonesia. In that year more than 220 Indonesians trained at Australian military establishments. Indonesia was also holding more military exercises with Australia than it was with any other country.”

This ever-closer collaboration led to the Keating government's signing of a mutual security agreement with Suharto and his generals in December 1995. In signing the treaty, Keating restated his view that Suharto's 1965 coup was the most important event in providing security and stability to the region.

As recently as March last year, the Australian Army Attaché in Jakarta, Brigadier Jim Molan attended a ceremony at Kopassus headquarters while “disappeared” activists were being held in its torture centre. And despite a US Congressional ban on training, it was revealed last year that Kopassus forces were still receiving instructions from US special operations soldiers in psychological warfare—training that is no doubt now being put into effect in Dili and the towns and villages of East Timor.

Neither imperialist military intervention to create an East Timorese statelet nor continued domination at the hands of Suharto's successors in Jakarta provide any solution for the East Timorese people. Only a unified struggle of the masses throughout the entire Indonesian archipelago—including the Timorese and Indonesian workers, students and peasants—in alliance with their working class brothers and sisters throughout the region and internationally can put an end to 400 years of colonial and semi-colonial oppression.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)