

"Shoot-to-kill" mandate

Vietnam War veteran to command Australian forces in Timor

Mike Head
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The Australian government decided yesterday to name a decorated Vietnam War veteran to head the Australian and United Nations force to be dispatched to Indonesian-occupied East Timor. His selection highlights the aggressive nature of the operation being prepared under the disguise of humanitarianism.

Even before the UN Security Council, meeting in New York, had decided on the composition, functions and orders to be assigned to the force, the Howard government preempted negotiations by naming Major-General Peter Cosgrove to head the UN contingent. It also informed the mass media that his troops would have "shoot-to-kill" orders.

The Howard government has selected Cosgrove because of his experience in hand-to-hand combat and other frontline military engagement in the last major war fought by the Australian military. His reputation is one of war hero, not "peace keeper".

Cosgrove "earned his reputation as a leader storming enemy bunkers in Vietnam 30 years ago," according to the potted biography featured on the front page of this morning's the *Australian*, the national newspaper run by Rupert Murdoch.

The general gained one of the Australian armed forces' highest awards—the Military Cross—for his conduct in three actions in 1969. Cosgrove's citation for the medal hailed him for twice leading his men into a Vietnamese bunker system, killing at least four enemy troops and forcing others to flee.

Retired Lieutenant-General John Sanderson, who headed the Australian troops in the UN occupation of Cambodia in the early 1990s, and was later appointed Chief of the Army, praised Cosgrove as a "straight-talking soldier". Cosgrove did a "terrific job" and

"really sharpened the place up" as commander of the army's officer training institution, Royal Military College, Duntroon in the mid-1990s.

Cosgrove's latest appointment has clearly been prepared for some months. In March last year, he was promoted to Commander of the 1st Division and Deployable Joint Force Headquarters, taking overall charge of the 7,000 troops and other forces that were placed on alert five months ago for rapid deployment to Timor.

The 4,500 Australian troops set to land in Timor, possibly starting as early as tomorrow, will be joined initially only by forces from other Western powers. Canberra's plan is to include soldiers from New Zealand and British Gurkha troops, backed by US logistics and communications personnel.

Under guidelines proposed by the Australian cabinet yesterday, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer will urge the UN to arm the force with rules of engagement that authorise soldiers to open fire under the widest possible circumstances, permitting them to shoot to kill if necessary.

These troops will not wear the blue berets of UN peacekeepers. Instead they will engage in so-called peace enforcement operations, with orders to disarm and pacify hostile elements. Australian Prime Minister John Howard emphasised this when speaking on national television last night. "There is no way I will allow Australian forces to be exposed to an unreasonable level of risk," he said. "They will be given adequate legal authority to defend themselves and take whatever action is necessary to implement their mandate."

The Australian government is proposing a UN

mandate under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, which allows troops to carry and use arms, rather than under the more restrictive Chapter 6 that constrained UN forces in Bosnia in the mid-1990s.

Conflict has erupted between Australia, Portugal and Indonesia over the composition of the UN force, with Indonesian cabinet ministers and generals publicly objecting to the dominant participation of the two Western powers.

At a media conference in New York, Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas declared that Australia was not the only country that could send in troops quickly. He argued that any force must have greater Asian participation. Speaking from Jakarta, Major-General Sudrajat was even more blunt. He insisted that Australia would not necessarily be “the major force” in the UN contingent. Other Indonesian military and political figures said the arrival of Australian troops might provoke retaliation and armed conflict in Timor.

To bolster the Indonesian position, Philippines President Joseph Estrada intervened with an offer to immediately send two battalions (about 500 troops). Interviewed on radio, he said he had made the offer at Indonesia's request. South Korea's Kim Dae Jung government also offered 300 anti-guerilla troops and the Goh administration in Singapore volunteered military observers, logistic support units and medics.

The Australian government claims to be motivated by the worsening plight of the hundreds of thousands of Timorese people who are facing death, starvation, ethnic cleansing and forced entry into concentration camps at the hands of the Indonesian military and its militias. Yet these claims have been further dented by the continued delay of proposed relief flights to East Timor to drop food and shelter parcels to refugees in the mountains.

Equally revealing has been the speed with which the planned Australian intervention has led to calls by the media and politicians of all stripes for a dramatic increase in military spending. In just one example, the *Sydney Morning Herald* today published a story on its front page under the headline: “Crisis exposes hole in our defences”.

It quoted Dr Paul Dibb, the “military strategist” who wrote the Hawke Labor government's defence plan in the 1980s, saying that Australian military spending had fallen to levels not seen since the Great Depression. A

senior analyst at Canberra's Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Stewart Woodman, added that the East Timor emergency had prompted the realisation that the Australian Defence Force is “quite small”.

Opposition leader Kim Beazley told the newspaper that the Labor Party would give bipartisan support to extra defence spending, not just for East Timor but for the longer term. Later on radio he said military spending may have to increase at the expense of health, education and other social spending. Not to be left behind, the Australian Democrats, who have in the past questioned the insulation of the military from the Howard government's savage spending cuts, said they would consider backing a boost. “We have identified this as an issue,” a spokesman for their leader, Senator Meg Lees, told the *Sydney Morning Herald*.



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