

Australian special forces operating in East Timor months before UN ballot

Peter Symonds
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Australian special forces and navy divers were involved in clandestine operations inside East Timor months before Indonesia gave the go-ahead for the Australian-led Interfet troops to land in the territory, according to an article published yesterday in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Based on information from “a senior Australian Defence Force (ADF) special forces and intelligence officer,” journalist Ian Hunter wrote that Special Air Services (SAS) and Navy Clearance Diving Team (CDT) units were dispatched to East Timor shortly after the Australian government put the Darwin-based 1 Brigade on 28-day standby in April.

The purpose of the clandestine mission was to observe the Indonesian military “as a necessary precursor to full-scale deployment. The same tactics were used by the British SAS during the 1982 Falklands and the 1990-91 Gulf wars”.

The SAS troops, who were dispatched by submarine and picked up by helicopter, surveyed military infrastructure in and around Dili, the deployment of the Indonesian army in the hinterland and movements of military traffic across the border with West Timor. The divers searched Dili harbour for mines, explosives and other obstacles, and examined possible sites for an amphibious landing.

The report confirms that the Australian government had advanced plans for a large-scale military operation in East Timor well before the UN-sponsored referendum over the future of the province was held in August. To maintain its links with the Indonesian regime, the Howard government continued to maintain that Jakarta was responsible for security in East Timor. At the same time, however, a substantial number of troops were being prepared to ensure that Australia, not Portugal or another power, would lead any military

operation in the territory.

The timing of a military intervention was not based on any consideration for the fate of the East Timorese who were increasingly under attack by Indonesian-backed militia groups. The *Sydney Morning Herald* article is further evidence that Canberra had detailed information about the brutal attacks of the militia forces and were well aware that a vote for East Timorese independence would result in an upsurge of militia violence directed against those who had voted for independence.

“The SAS and CDT cells transmitted constant reports on the TNI and militia activities to ADF headquarters and the ultra-secret Defence Signals Directorate (DSD), also in Canberra. Only 20 or so people, including the Prime Minister, were allowed access to these reports and attached assessments... The covert surveillance gave the ADF the most comprehensive intelligence survey of the Indonesian military and paramilitary activity as the East Timor situation deteriorated mid-year,” Hunter wrote.

At the time that these operations were authorised, Australia not only had close diplomatic relations with Indonesia, including a mutual defence pact, but was also one of the few nations that had formally recognised the Indonesian annexation of East Timor. The deployment of SAS units, therefore, took place with scant regard for the fact that Canberra considered the territory a sovereign part of Indonesia.

Moreover, the clandestine dispatch of Australian troops to East Timor also risked an armed clash with the Indonesian military, which quickly became aware of the helicopter flights. On June 9, Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) chief General Wiranto ordered stepped up naval and sea surveillance to halt any intrusion.

Thousands of Australian troops are now in East

Timor, utilising the intelligence gathered by SAS and naval teams, and the first clash has taken place with Indonesian security forces along the border with West Timor. Just over a week ago, Australian Defence Minister John Moore stated that Interfet troops were authorised to cross into Indonesian West Timor if in “hot pursuit” of militia forces. On Sunday an Australian platoon clashed with Indonesian police near the border town of Motaain killing one and wounding two others.



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