

# Military officer reveals Australian responsibility for Timor massacre

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A serving Australian military intelligence officer has revealed that the Howard government suppressed intelligence reports that could have averted the massacre of at least 60 people at a police station in the East Timorese town of Maliana in early September 1999.

In media interviews broadcast last week, Captain Andrew Plunkett stated that throughout 1999 the government refused to release intelligence reports showing that Indonesian authorities were preparing for mass killings at Maliana and across the island if East Timor's people voted no in the August 1999 autonomy ballot.

Plunkett commanded the intelligence section of the Australian army's leading contingent in East Timor, the Royal Australian Regiment 3rd Battalion. He arrived in Maliana shortly after the carnage, spoke to survivors and read the scrawlings left by the victims on the walls of the police compound. Some of the graffiti read: "We're about to die, why have people forsaken us?"

In the weeks leading up to the ballot, Australian and other UN police and military election observers urged local people to remain in the town after the vote and seek the protection of the Indonesian police.

Relying on their advice, several thousand people sought sanctuary in the Maliana police station when militia violence commenced. According to survivors, on September 8 1999, militia members, Indonesian police and soldiers surrounded the area. Militiamen hacked independence supporters to death with machetes in front of the assembled crowd.

Before arriving in Timor, Plunkett carried a top-secret security clearance, giving him access to data and reports flowing from the Australian military's extensive and sophisticated monitoring of Indonesian military and government communications.

This material, compiled in Canberra by the Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO), showed that the Indonesian leadership was funding and training militia gangs to carry through a bloodbath. In Plunkett's word, the DIO's analysis was that "the TNI [Indonesian army] would basically destroy East Timor and they'd use militia as proxies".

That information was not passed on to the East Timorese people or local UN personnel. Instead, it was "pushed up the chain of command, hosed down and politically wordsmithed by the Asia division of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade".

Speaking of those who perished, Plunkett told the Special Broadcasting Services (SBS) TV program *Dateline*: "If they had accurate information, they would not have trusted TNI and POLRI [police] full stop. Least of all, they would not have sought refuge in a POLRI station."

Asked how he felt when the full extent of what had happened dawned on him, Plunkett replied: "I was pretty devastated, and to be honest, I felt guilty myself, being associated with the intelligence area."

Fearing Indonesian retribution, many of Maliana's people had taken to the mountains in the leadup to the August 30 ballot, but Australian and other UNAMET observers worked closely with local leaders of the secessionist CNRT (Timor National Resistance Council) to coax them back into the town, claiming that Indonesian police would protect them

from any militia violence.

Interviewed by *Dateline*, Maliana survivors corroborated Plunkett's account. Filomena da Silva, widow of Lorenzo dos Santos Gomes, who died, said: "On the 31st [of August 1999] I came back with UNAMET and things were hotting up ... They told us that if anything happened at our house we must go to the police."

Adriano Joao, who was the CNRT vice-secretary in Maliana, said: "UNAMET also promised us and the people that we would not be harmed. If we were, then within 24 hours a peacekeeping army would come. That's why the people didn't run into the mountains."

Lucio Marques, who had been in the mountains with a clandestine group, said his group had planned to go to Maliana to vote but return immediately to their hideouts. On August 28, however, a UN-sponsored joint team of militia and CNRT leaders implored them to go home and remain in Maliana to create a sense of peace and calm in the town.

"On the 28th, they went from village to village, and those still in the mountains could come down and listen, calling people back, saying, 'Don't leave your houses when the vote is over. Whoever wins, nothing is going to happen!'"

Plunkett also alleged that he and his troops were ordered to understate the death toll. As a result, the official body count registered for Maliana was about 12, whereas an intelligence officer saw evidence of more than 60 bodies and Australian soldiers were aware that many more bodies were probably dumped at sea or in rivers.

Wayne Sievers, a former federal police officer who served with the UN in Timor before the ballot, backed Plunkett's account. He and others gathered intelligence in Maliana and elsewhere, including leaked Indonesian documents. "They were indicating that indeed it was the Indonesian military at the highest levels that were organising, arming, training and funding the militias at a time when they were supposed to be disarming them and protecting us."

Sievers said he gave an Australian diplomat "chilling" documents showing Indonesian plans for the killings in Maliana, which were intended as a blueprint for similar massacres across the country. His reports were ignored. "I could only conclude the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs knew what the Indonesians were planning and didn't want a documentary trail to show that they knew," he told Channel Seven.

Aid and church workers issued similar reports before the ballot, warning of planned massacres. Numerous leaks from within the Australian intelligence apparatus also indicated that the Howard government knew from early 1999 that the Indonesian leadership planned to unleash atrocities if the Timorese voted for independence.

These damning revelations have shaken the Australian government. They carry additional weight because they have been made by a serving military intelligence officer who felt so strongly about Canberra's role in the Maliana massacre that he was prepared to breach his confidentiality agreement and face serious disciplinary and legal charges.

Unable to refute the detail of Plunkett's account, Foreign Affairs

Minister Alexander Downer attempted to bluster his way through a press conference saying he found the allegations “offensive”. Downer baldly declared that the government had no motive to withhold intelligence information from the UN and “of course we would never do such a thing”.

He added: “I have never heard of such an allegation before and I don't think I have ever heard of any Australian government, including the present government, refusing to pass on information that might have otherwise helped save people's lives.”

Both Downer and the Howard government are counting on the fact that the mass media, which at the time threw its full support behind the Australian military intervention, is unlikely to challenge the minister's assertion of moral rectitude. So sensitive is the issue that following the initial *Dateline* program, the media has all but dropped any mention of Plunkett's allegations, after downplaying their significance.

The current Australian government, like all its predecessors—both Labor and Liberal—had every reason to suppress information about the activities of the Indonesian military, police and militia in East Timor. Following the Indonesian invasion in 1975, Canberra's sole motive has been to pursue what best served Australia's considerable strategic and economic interests.

Support for the Suharto dictatorship and the whitewash of its many crimes was, until the junta's collapse in 1998, a cornerstone of Australian foreign policy in South East Asia. Ever since the Indonesian military coup of 1965-66, Suharto was viewed as a crucial political ally, providing stability throughout the region as well as favourable opportunities for Australian investors within Indonesia.

In 1974-75 Labor prime minister Gough Whitlam held two summit meetings with Suharto, during which he indicated that Australia would not oppose Jakarta's takeover of East Timor. Following the invasion, both Labor and Liberal leaders backed the Indonesian annexation and subsequently covered up the ongoing suppression of East Timorese opposition that resulted in an estimated death toll of 200,000.

The withholding of intelligence information that might have saved people's lives began in 1975 itself when the Whitlam government refused to even warn, let alone protect, five Australian-based newsmen who were murdered by Indonesian special forces as they entered the border town of Balibo. To have warned the newsmen would have meant revealing the Labor government's advance knowledge of the invasion.

In return for becoming the only administration in the world to formally recognise Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor, the Hawke Labor government secured the 1989 Timor Gap treaty that gave Australia territorial rights over most of the rich oil and gas fields beneath the Timor Sea. Only two years later, the Hawke government did everything it could to mask the true extent of the Dili massacre, in which Indonesian troops shot down more than 120 protestors.

When the Suharto regime began to disintegrate under US and IMF pressure following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, it provoked a serious crisis for the Australian political and military establishment. The Howard government was concerned by mounting agitation in East Timor for a ballot on independence and pressure from Portugal, which Australia regarded as a rival, to resolve the international status of its former colony. In December 1998, Prime Minister Howard wrote to Suharto's successor, Habibie, suggesting that his administration propose a form of autonomy, leading in the long term to a ballot, as the most effective means of retaining sovereignty over the half island.

Jakarta reacted abruptly to the shift from Australia's previous unconditional support for the incorporation of East Timor into Indonesia. Habibie unexpectedly declared in early 1999 that his government would hold a ballot on an autonomy proposal within months, not years, warning that Indonesia would “walk away” from the territory if its plan were rejected. This was a clear threat of a scorched earth policy.

Nevertheless, the Australian government insisted that Habibie and his

military chief, General Wiranto, knew nothing of the mounting pro-Indonesian militia violence in East Timor, blaming “rogue elements” in the Indonesian military instead. Canberra sought to head off full-scale UN intervention, opposing the use of UN peacekeepers and insisting that the TNI remain in full control of the ballot. Its preferred option, as set out in Howard's December 1998 letter, was for Indonesia to retain power in East Timor.

Simultaneously, however, based on the intelligence reports it was receiving, the Howard government launched military preparations for intervention in East Timor should the Indonesian autonomy proposal be defeated. As early as April 1999, it sent intelligence and special forces units, including the SAS, to operate in East Timor clandestinely. Australian ruling circles were concerned that rival Portugal, through the auspices of the UN, could regain a foothold unless Australian troops were on the ground first.

Despite a systematic campaign of harassment and violence by the Indonesian army, police and loyalist militia units aimed at intimidating the East Timorese, the ballot went overwhelmingly against the Indonesian regime. Faced with the new situation, the Howard government rapidly moved to ensure that Australia would play the leading role in shaping events in an “independent” East Timor. It mounted an intensive diplomatic campaign, particularly in Washington, for an Australian-led intervention, in the name of protecting the Timorese people.

The Australian government's calculated failure to warn the East Timorese of what was in store from them in places like Maliana served two political purposes. Firstly, it prevented the East Timorese from taking any action either to escape or to defend themselves. Australia, with the complicity of the CNRT leaders, insisted that Falantil pro-independence fighters remain corralled in holding areas while the militia ran amok. The last thing that Canberra wanted was to confront a population in revolt against the Indonesian armed forces and their militia allies.

Secondly, once the long-predicted murders began, Howard and Downer, with the support of the Australian media and Labor opposition, cynically used the killings to drum up domestic public support for the first large-scale use of Australian troops overseas since the Vietnam War. Just as in Kosovo some months earlier, reports of massacres were used to claim a humanitarian motive for military intervention.

The full story of the Howard government's suppression of information on the Indonesian leadership's involvement in the East Timor bloodshed is still to be told. According to media reports, further leaked military intelligence documents are about to be released.

What is already clear, however, is that everything that the Howard government did in 1999 took place with the full knowledge that the top levels of the Indonesian regime and military were preparing to unleash the militia against independence supporters in East Timor. Throughout all the twists and turns in a rapidly changing situation, Downer and Howard showed not the least compunction in sacrificing the lives of hundreds of East Timorese in order to advance the interests of Australian capitalism.



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