

US approved 1975 Indonesian invasion of East Timor

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Previously secret documents published by the National Security Archive at George Washington University prove that the United States government gave the green light for the 1975 Indonesian invasion of East Timor, which resulted in the deaths of some 200,000 Timorese people over the ensuing quarter century.

At the Archive's request, the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library released two key declassified documents revealing the role of President Ford and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. The Archive posted them on its web site on December 6, accompanied by five previously unpublished State Department documents.

The documents expose the official silence and outright lies advanced over the past 26 years to deny that Ford and Kissinger were involved in, and ultimately responsible for, the atrocities carried out by the Indonesian military dictatorship.

It had been known previously that Ford and Kissinger held a discussion with General Suharto in Jakarta on the day before Indonesia's full-scale invasion on December 7, 1975. But the precise content of the meeting has never been revealed. It was always obvious that Ford and Kissinger must have sanctioned the invasion, yet Kissinger explicitly denied this.

By the time that Ford and Kissinger visited Jakarta, the Indonesian military had already made several incursions into East Timor, the most notorious being in the border town of Balibo on October 16, 1975. Five Australian-based journalists in Balibo had been killed by the Indonesian military in an effort to prevent wide reportage of the attack.

According to a briefing note accompanying the documents, written by William Burr and Michael L. Evans from the National Security Archive, the final invasion, code-named operation Komodo, was originally scheduled for early December 1975, but was apparently delayed until after Ford and Kissinger's visit.

The released documents, dating from July 1975 to June 1976, reveal a series of exchanges between Ford, Suharto and Kissinger and a number of internal US discussions concerning East Timor, following the 1974 collapse of the Caetano dictatorship in Portugal, the colonial ruler of the half island for four centuries.

They show that as early as July 1975, Ford had given Suharto a clear enough signal that if the Indonesian regime annexed the territory, Washington would stand by its ally, its most valued in South East Asia. The subsequent documents confirm this secret understanding, which became increasingly explicit.

Document 1, dated July 5 1975, is the record of a discussion between Ford and Suharto held at Camp David in the United

States. The two leaders met just two months after the final US defeat in Vietnam, discussing their joint interests in suppressing political and ideological ferment in South East Asia. Suharto sought increased US military and intelligence assistance. He also bluntly declared that there was no alternative to incorporating East Timor, and labelled the Timorese political groups calling for independence as "Communist-influenced".

Apparently encouraged by his meeting with Ford, Suharto returned home to make his first public statement declaring that an independent East Timor was not viable.

Document 2, dated August 12 1975, outlines a discussion held by Kissinger and some of his senior staff. A coup had been reported in East Timor but it was unclear whether the pro-Portuguese Democratic Union of Timorese or the pro-independence Fretilin had taken control. Kissinger commented: "It is quite clear that the Indonesians are going to take over the island sooner or later."

Documents 3 and 3a, from November 1975, are memoranda that Kissinger prepared for Ford. After outlining the full extent of the Indonesian manoeuvres to take control of East Timor, Kissinger clearly anticipated an Indonesian invasion, and alerted Ford to a potential problem—the use of US-supplied weaponry (US law required such arms to be used only for "self-defence").

"A merger with Indonesia is probably the best solution for the colony if the inhabitants agree," he advised. "Indonesian use of US-supplied weapons in an overt occupation of the territory, however, would contravene US law. We have quietly pointed this out to the GOI (Government of Indonesia), and it appears to have been a restraining factor."

Document 4, dated December 6, is perhaps the most revealing. It is the official transcript of the discussion in Jakarta between Ford, Suharto and Kissinger on the day before the full invasion. It clearly records Suharto requesting, and receiving, Ford and Kissinger's agreement to the takeover.

"Suharto: We want your understanding if we deem it necessary to take rapid or drastic action.

"Ford: We will understand and will not press you on the issue. We understand the problems you have and the intentions you have.

"Kissinger: You appreciate that the use of US made arms could create problems. ... It depends on how we construe it, whether it is in self defense or is (it) a foreign operation. It is important that whatever you do succeeds quickly. We would be able to influence the reaction in America if whatever happens happens after we

return.”

Kissinger’s remarks make it clear that he and Ford were not opposed to the use of US arms. Their only concern was that the attack be delayed until after they had left Indonesia and that it be carried through as quickly and effectively as possible. They undertook to manipulate public opinion in the US.

Document 5, dated December 5 and 6, provides a schedule of Kissinger’s two days in Indonesia. He met Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik, yet no record of that meeting has been found.

After the invasion, the Ford administration ostensibly delayed new arms sales to Indonesia, pending a six-month State Department review. In their briefing note, Burr and Evans document how military equipment already in the pipeline continued to flow to Suharto during the review, and the US made four new offers of military equipment.

At a meeting on December 18, 1975 Kissinger chastised his staff for writing a memo recommending that arms sales to Indonesia be cut off. Kissinger was angry that word might leak out that “Kissinger overruled his pristine bureaucrats and violated the law”.

Document 6 is a transcript of a June 17, 1976 staff meeting between Kissinger and his State Department bureau chiefs. The meeting recommended against sending a representative to accompany an Indonesian parliamentary delegation to East Timor. Philip Habib, under secretary of state for political affairs, commented that “there’s no need to take this action ...We’ve resumed, as you know, all of our normal relations with them; and there isn’t any problem involved.”

Cynically, Kissinger responded: “Not very willingly. Illegally and beautifully.” Kissinger did not elaborate, at least according to the transcript, but the context made his meaning plain. While Suharto’s use of American weaponry caused some temporary political problems, the administration had overcome them “illegally and beautifully”. As Burr and Evans note, Kissinger’s remark was an “apparent reference to the continuing arms sales, his deception of Congress, or possibly to Indonesia’s bloody invasion and occupation”.

An estimated 20,000 Indonesian troops were deployed in East Timor in the first month of the invasion alone. Casualty estimates vary, but 60,000 to 100,000 Timorese were probably killed within 12 months. By 1980, some estimates put the number who died from military action, starvation or disease as high as 230,000.

In January 1976, an unnamed US State Department official told the *Australian* newspaper that “in terms of the bilateral relations between the US and Indonesia, we are more or less condoning the incursion into East Timor ... The United States wants to keep its relations with Indonesia close and friendly. We regard Indonesia as a friendly, non-aligned nation—a nation we do a lot of business with.”

For two decades, however, Kissinger and Ford maintained a complete public silence on their role. It is not mentioned in their memoirs. When finally forced to answer a question at a 1995 press conference in New York, Kissinger lied brazenly. “Timor was never discussed with us when we were in Indonesia,” he claimed. He then qualified this comment by stating that he learned about the

invasion plans at the airport as the presidential party was about to leave. He made a similar statement in a March 1999 radio interview.

East Timor was not an isolated chapter in US policy. In 1965-66, at the onset of the Vietnam War and fearing the development of social revolution in South East Asia, the US government and the CIA backed and help organise Suharto’s bloody coup. Up to one million workers and peasants were murdered within months. US ambassador Marshall Green and the CIA supplied the death lists of top Communist Party members and supporters.

Suharto’s repressive regime became one of Washington’s most vital strategic and political assets. Apart from being a highly lucrative source of oil, gas, rubber and other raw materials, and sitting astride the shipping lanes between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Indonesia was regarded as a bulwark against political unrest among the Asian masses. In 1975, its critical importance was heightened by the US defeat in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

The documents show Kissinger making only one passing reference to the Australian government, another regional ally, but their contents shed further light on the part played by the Whitlam Labor government. In two summit meetings with Suharto in 1974 and 1975, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam made it crystal clear that his government would turn a blind eye to any invasion of East Timor. It is inconceivable that he would have done so without knowing Washington’s stance and acting accordingly.

Neither Ford nor Kissinger has issued a statement on the latest documents. The mass media has barely mentioned the revelations. Brief reports appeared without comment in the *Washington Post* and several Australian newspapers. Prominent liberal newspapers such as the *New York Times* have written nothing. None of the media have called for Ford or Kissinger to be indicted for war crimes.

To raise the issue would undermine the ideological basis of the current Bush administration’s so-called “war against terrorism”. The White House and Pentagon claim to be motivated by concerns for the security, liberty and democracy of ordinary people in America and internationally. The Timor documents demonstrate that US governments pursue their strategic and commercial interests with brutal indifference to the fate of the masses of people, whether in Timor, Afghanistan or anywhere else.

The East Timorese leadership, totally dependent on aid and investment from the Western powers, including the US and Australia, is also keen to bury the past. Xanana Gusmao, who is touted in the media as the territory’s future president, rejected suggestions that he should ask for a US apology. “East Timor, in the situation it faces, must be engaged in looking towards the future, not to the past,” he stated. He insisted that the US had played “an important role” in East Timor. Gusmao was on his way to a so-called donors’ conference in Oslo where the major powers were to determine what aid, if any, they would give East Timor.



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