

Leaked spy intercepts prove Australian complicity in Timor massacre

Mike Head
25 March 2002

Documents leaked from one of Australia's premier military intelligence agencies have further exposed the dirty lie behind the Howard government's ongoing armed intervention in East Timor. They demonstrate that throughout 1999 Prime Minister John Howard's cabinet knew that Indonesian cabinet ministers and senior generals were orchestrating militia killings across East Timor, but kept this information from the Timorese and Australian people.

In order to protect their long-standing relations with the Indonesian military and political leadership, Howard and his Foreign Minister Alexander Downer blamed the militia violence on "rogue elements" in the armed forces. In the lead-up to the August 1999 UN-conducted ballot on secession from Indonesia, they opposed the deployment of UN monitors on the basis that security should be left in the hands of the Indonesian military and police—the very forces organising the violence.

The Australian government insisted that the UN ballot proceed, encouraging the East Timorese masses to participate, while knowing full well that the Indonesian regime was preparing an all-out massacre if the vote for secession succeeded. Despite feigning concern for the plight of the East Timorese people, Howard and Downer worked hand-in-glove with the Jakarta authorities, calculating that a post-poll bloodbath would provide the pretext for Australian-led intervention to secure the considerable strategic and economic interests at stake in the territory.

Unnamed "defence sources" have given the *Sydney Morning Herald* copies of Australian Defence Signals Directorate (DSD) transcripts of secretly intercepted telephone conversations between Indonesian ministers and top-ranking officers who organised mass killings, beatings, forced re-locations and other violence throughout 1999. The DSD intercepts show that from early February 1999, the Howard government was told that leading figures, notably General Feisal Tanjung, co-ordinating minister for politics and security, and former generals A.M. Hendropriyono and Mohammad Yunus Yosfiah, were personally directing the mayhem.

Previous intelligence leaks have indicated that the Howard government knew of high-level Indonesian involvement by early March 1999. But this is the first time that raw DSD data, classified as top secret, has been handed to the media. The revelations are new in two respects. In the first place, they show that the massacres were organised from the very top—from within the cabinet of the former president B.J. Habibie. Secondly, they establish that Howard and his key ministers knew of this chain of command in great detail.

The Howard government's active intervention into the events in East Timor commenced in December 1998, when Howard wrote to Habibie suggesting that he propose some form of autonomy, leading

to an eventual ballot, as the best means of retaining control over the half island. Successive Australian governments had supported General Suharto's 1975 occupation of the territory, which had been a Portuguese colonial enclave since the 17th century. After Suharto's fall in 1998, Howard was anxious to head off discontent among Timor's people and to prevent the revival of territorial claims by Portugal, which was still recognised by the UN as the sovereign power.

Habibie reacted by unexpectedly issuing an ultimatum. He declared that within months the East Timorese would have to decide between autonomy and a swift Indonesian withdrawal. He warned that Indonesia would "walk away" if its autonomy plan were not accepted—an obvious threat of a scorched earth policy.

Less than a fortnight later, on February 9, 1999, DSD intercepted messages revealing that two Indonesian special forces units, codenamed Tribuana and Venus, had arrived in East Timor to join undercover operations. DSD already knew that the Indonesian military command in East Timor, referred to as Korem 164, had been using armed local auxiliaries and militia since the latter months of 1998 to quell unrest that had been growing since the toppling of Suharto.

Between February and August, DSD intercepts produced abundant evidence of direct involvement of senior Indonesian generals. An Indonesian general described a militia group as "his crew," while army commanders closely supervised the activities of pro-Indonesia militia leader Eurico Guterres. The military intelligence agency organised flags and T-shirts for militia demonstrations against the UN mission preparing the ballot, and military headquarters in Jakarta allocated radio frequencies to militia groups.

As early as April 1999, media outlets in Australia reported that the Defence Intelligence Organisation, which collates DSD material, had informed the Howard government of senior Indonesian involvement. According to a later report, "20 or so people, including the Prime Minister" were given access to the DSD reports and assessments. Howard and Downer, however, continued to deny any knowledge of the intelligence reports and claimed there was no evidence of official Indonesian political or military participation.

On May 3, Charles Scheiner, the UN Representative for the International Federation for East Timor, wrote to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan reporting that, during April alone, more than 100 civilians had been murdered by Indonesian-organised paramilitary groups. But the Howard government was determined to head off calls for UN military intervention, which was likely to assign a leading role to Portugal.

After September 4, when the results of the UN ballot were announced—a 78.5 percent vote for secession from Indonesia—the pre-

planned policy of murder and destruction was unleashed. DSD intercepted numerous telephone conversations involving the cabinet generals, Tanjung, Hendropriyono and Yunus, discussing the mass removal of people to Indonesian West Timor and assigning special hit squads, code-named Kiper-9, to hunt down pro-independence figures.

Later that month the Howard government cynically used the mayhem in East Timor to dispatch Australian troops as “peacekeepers” to the island. By then, however, the damage had been done.

Neither Howard nor Downer has responded publicly to the latest DSD leak. Downer’s spokesman claimed that “information based on classified intelligence” had been passed onto UN officials, as well as “responsible authorities” in the Indonesian government. If this is true, it is a remarkable admission. It means that the DSD reports indicting the Indonesian ministers and generals were handed to the very same authorities. This also demolishes the Howard government’s claims that DSD reports cannot be released publicly for fear of compromising intelligence operations and permitting Jakarta to evade DSD monitoring. The reality is that the Indonesian regime is perfectly aware of the information supplied by DSD surveillance.

The only people not warned about the high-level Indonesian involvement and Jakarta’s plans for bloody retribution after the ballot were the Timorese masses. The Howard government, with the complicity of the East Timorese leaders, told the population to trust the Indonesian military and militia, and peacefully submit to the Indonesian voter registration process. Canberra was preparing its own plans to intervene. From April 1999, intelligence and special forces, including the SAS, were operating in East Timor clandestinely, and the Australian armed forces were placed on high alert. No one wanted Timorese resistance to develop that could upset those plans.

The Howard government’s manoeuvres continued a 30-year policy of pursuing Australia’s strategic and economic interests in Timor and across Indonesia at the expense of the archipelago’s people. From 1965, when General Suharto seized power in a bloody coup, Liberal and Labor governments alike regarded his dictatorship as a regional linchpin, suppressing political unrest and providing favourable investment opportunities. In 1975, Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam personally gave Suharto the green light to invade East Timor.

A primary consideration was the discovery in the early 1970s of extensive oil and natural gas deposits beneath the Timor Sea between Australia and Timor. Given the proximity of the exploration fields to Timor, Portugal had refused to partition them with Australia. Suharto, however, was much more amenable to striking a deal, culminating in his 1989 Timor Gap treaty with the Hawke Labor government. It gave Australia the lion’s share of the reserves in return for formal recognition of Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor—a share that the Howard government has been determined to protect.

The DSD revelations point to sharp tensions within the military and intelligence apparatus, reflecting tactical differences in ruling circles more generally over the timing of Australia’s military intervention in East Timor. Those who pushed for an earlier dispatch of troops were no more concerned than Howard over the fate of the East Timorese but saw an opportunity for Australia to play a more aggressive role in the region. Above all both sides wanted to ensure that no independent action be taken by the East Timorese themselves to counter the attacks by pro-Indonesian militia.

The latest disclosures appear to have been timed to coincide with the March 14 opening of trials in Jakarta, conducted by the Indonesian

government, of 18 people charged over four militia rampages in Dili, Liquica and Suai. Three army and police generals are among the accused, but not the top-level generals who feature in the transcripts. The trials are a blatant bid by the Indonesian regime to pay lip service to punishing those responsible for the killings, while sweeping the evidence under the carpet as quickly as possible.

The Howard government supports this charade. Like the Bush administration, it is restoring full relations with the Indonesian military, whose commanders conducted the Timor massacres. Hendropriyono, for example, one of the named Habibie cabinet ministers, was recently appointed head of Indonesia’s National Intelligence Body. Visiting Jakarta last month, Howard accepted an Indonesian proposal to step up intelligence exchanges with this agency, as part of an agreement with President Megawati Sukarnoputri to collaborate in the “war on terrorism”.

From the standpoint of strengthening Australia’s hand in Timor and Indonesia, some media commentators, including the *Herald’s*, advocate the establishment of an international war crimes tribunal, similar to that in The Hague prosecuting former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic. The Howard government, however, is anxious to leave matters under Jakarta’s control and not allow the slightest possibility that its own role will be scrutinised.

To cover its tracks, the government has conducted a massive federal police and intelligence operation since 1999 to pinpoint the officers responsible for leaking the highly classified material on Timor. On March 17 it was revealed that the government had asked the domestic spy agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), to illegally bug the offices of Labor’s former foreign affairs spokesman Laurie Brereton as part of the investigation. ASIO’s director-general claimed that the agency had declined to conduct the surveillance, which would have breached parliamentary privilege.

Brereton appears to have been targetted because over the past three years he has shifted Labor’s policy from unconditional support for the Indonesian regime to one of a more assertive pursuit of Australian strategic and economic interests in Timor and elsewhere in the Indonesian archipelago. Labor’s realigned policy has focused on working with the East Timorese leadership to secure Australian-based investments in the Timor Gap. While this turn reflects the interests of sections of corporate Australia, it has also threatened to cut across the Howard government’s cover-up.

Last September, police raided the home of one of Brereton’s advisers, as well as military and intelligence officers and a former diplomat, and the government announced that employees of six intelligence agencies would be subjected to lie detector tests and intensive surveillance. So far, these investigations, estimated by media outlets to have cost about \$1 million, have reportedly ruined several military careers, although no charges have yet been laid. These operations underscore the lengths the government is prepared to go to suppress the truth behind the 1999 massacres.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact