

Evidence surfaces that Indonesian military executed ‘Balibo Five’ Australian newsmen in 1975

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The Howard government is trying to block the release of vital intelligence reports showing that the Indonesian military regime ordered the execution of five Australian-based newsmen in the lead up to the 1975 invasion of East Timor.

Federal Attorney-General Philip Ruddock said on December 10 that the classified material was unlikely to be made available to a belated coronial inquiry into the killings at Balibo, East Timor, on October 16, 1975. The Defence Department and its electronic surveillance agency, the Defence Signals Directorate (DSD), are refusing to hand over the documents to the inquest, claiming “public interest immunity”.

The New South Wales Coroners Court inquest, scheduled for early next year, will for the first time hear evidence from a senior lawyer, George Brownbill, that directly contradicts the official inquiries carried out by successive Australian governments over the past three decades—all of which suggested that the journalists were inadvertently caught in crossfire involving Indonesian troops and Timorese factions.

According to a report on December 9 in the Sydney *Daily Telegraph*, Brownbill will testify that during an inquiry into Australian intelligence and security services in 1977 he saw a crucial telexed intelligence report. Marked Top Secret, it recorded covertly-intercepted radio traffic between an officer commanding Indonesian forces in East Timor and his superiors in Jakarta. Monitored by the DSD just hours after the killings, it said: “In accordance with your instructions” the five had been located and shot.

The officer then asked his commander for orders about what to do with the bodies and the journalists’ personal effects. The bodies were looted and burned. Ian Cunliffe, who was with Brownbill in 1977, said the message made clear that the young newsmen had been “taken and executed”.

The victims, who have become known as the Balibo Five, were Channel 9 reporter Malcolm Rennie, 28, and cameraman Brian Peters, 29, Channel 7 reporter Greg Shackleton, 27, cameraman Gary Cunningham, 26, and sound recordist Tony Stewart, 21.

The evidence is doubly incriminating because it shows not only that the Suharto junta murdered the newsmen, in order to prevent any on-the-spot coverage of its preparations for a full invasion of East Timor two months later, but also that the Australian government—of Labor prime minister Gough Whitlam—knew about

the executions, via the DSD, within hours.

The existence of the DSD document has been known since at least 1979, when the *National Times* newspaper in Australia first reported that the agency had intercepted radio messages about the killings. It has been long suppressed because it confirms the complicity of Canberra and its allies, particularly the US, in the Indonesian occupation.

Brownbill was secretary to the Fraser government’s Hope Royal Commission into the intelligence agencies when he visited the DSD electronic spying base at Shoal Bay near the northern city of Darwin in 1977. In a statement suppressed by a previous Balibo Five inquiry, he said a young man showed a piece of paper to him and Cunliffe, a fellow royal commission official, saying, “You people should know about this.”

In 1999, Brownbill and Cunliffe gave their evidence to former National Crime Authority head Tom Sherman, who was commissioned by Howard’s Liberal-National Coalition government to conduct his second closed-door inquiry into the Balibo deaths (the Keating Labor government arranged the first in 1995). While Cunliffe’s evidence was made public, the contents of the cable seen by Brownbill was not. Instead, Sherman played down its significance, suggesting it was a mistranslation.

Yet another inquiry, conducted for the Howard government by Bill Blick, inspector-general of intelligence and security in 2001-02, said it could not locate the report in the DSD archives or find the “young person” who showed it to Brownbill and Cunliffe. Blick’s inquiry was convened to smother new evidence produced in the book, *Death in Balibo, Lies in Canberra*, by Des Ball and Hamish McDonald, that the Whitlam government knew in advance from DSD intercepts that the five would be killed.

On Friday, lawyers for the journalists’ families applied to the NSW Deputy Coroner Dorelle Pinch to allow them to call Whitlam and his senior ministers from 1975 to testify. Pinch ruled that Whitlam could be required to give evidence about the “knowledge and intentions of the Indonesian government” at the time, but not about what his own government knew. Pinch claimed that this would widen the scope of the inquest to include whether the Australian government was obliged to protect the men.

The inquest is the first-ever public inquiry held into the fate of the Balibo Five with powers to compel witnesses. The lawyers who campaigned for the inquest argued successfully that NSW

jurisdiction applied to the unexplained death of Brian Peters, as he was a Sydney resident, even though a British citizen.

Shackleton's widow, Shirley Shackleton, told reporters she was not surprised that evidence had emerged exposing 31 years of lies and cover-up by both Liberal and Labor governments. "We always knew it was a pack of lies; it was really quite obvious from day one that they were murdered and that they weren't killed in crossfire. There's been a lot of eyewitnesses who have tried to give evidence and successive Australian governments have refused to take their evidence."

Another journalist who investigated their deaths was also murdered. Roger East, an Australian-based AAP-Reuters reporter who travelled to Timor, published an article in November 1975, accompanied by three eye-witness accounts, that Indonesian forces had executed his five colleagues. East was killed by the Indonesian military in Dili, the East Timorese capital, on December 8, 1975, a day after the ultimate invasion.

Since 1975, no less than five official reports have sought to whitewash the murders in the face of a growing mountain of evidence. In effect, the Balibo Five and East were sacrificed as collateral damage of the Whitlam government's fulsome support for the Indonesian takeover of the former Portuguese enclave, together with the estimated 200,000 East Timorese people who died fighting, or because of, the occupation over the ensuing 25 years.

Whitlam personally assured Suharto of his support at two meetings, one in Jakarta in September 1974 and the other in the Australian city of Townsville in April 1975. At the same time, as documents leaked in 1999 revealed, Whitlam forewarned Suharto that the Labor government would have to make token noises of dismay to placate domestic opposition. US President Gerard Ford and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who were in Jakarta the day before the invasion, also gave Suharto the green light, while asking him not to use US-supplied weaponry.

Whitlam has always denied any advance knowledge of the invasion, or the assault on Balibo. But documents leaked in 1998 showed that Canberra was so intimately briefed on the Suharto dictatorship's planned invasion that it knew the three precise locations, including the border town of Balibo, where the offensive would begin. The seizure of Balibo was a preparation for the full-scale naval bombardment, aerial bombing and troop influx of December 7, 1975.

Indonesian intelligence officials gave Australian embassy officers in Jakarta final details of the impending Balibo attack in mid-October, and the embassy relayed the information to Canberra on October 13, three days before the killings. The Foreign Affairs Department knew that Australian news crews were there, but passed on no warnings to the TV networks.

When the Whitlam government was ousted on November 11, 1975, the incoming government of Malcolm Fraser pursued exactly the same policy—supporting the invasion and covering up the Balibo murders. It refused to even allow the charred remains of the men to be brought back to Australia for forensic testing. Instead, they were buried in a single coffin at a service in Jakarta on December 5, watched over by Australian officials.

In 1998 and 1999, a series of eye-witnesses, some of whom had

fought on the Indonesian side and some who served with Fretilin, the secessionist movement, came forward to confirm that the Balibo Five were killed in cold blood by Indonesian troops acting on orders from Jakarta. The soldiers were led by Captain Mohammed Yunus Yosfiah, who later became a general and cabinet minister. The Howard government's response was to re-activate the Sherman inquiry, in order to prevent any public or judicial inquiry.

Behind Canberra's ongoing cover-up lies three inter-linked purposes. First, to camouflage the criminal complicity of the Whitlam and Fraser governments, as well as the White House, in the 1975 invasion. Second, to deflect attention from the deeply reactionary character of the intimate relations maintained with the Suharto dictatorship, from 1965, when it was installed with US and Australian backing, right through to its downfall in 1998. Third, to fully restore the ties with the Indonesian military and political establishment, which were severely strained in 1999 when Canberra, backed by Washington, militarily intervened to help set up a nominally independent statelet in East Timor. The Indonesian military remains a central force in the current administration of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, a Suharto-era general who once served in East Timor himself.

After backing the brutal repression of the East Timorese people for a quarter century, Australia shifted its position in 1999, not out of any new-found humanitarian concern, but to head off renewed claims by the former colonial power Portugal and to protect multi-billion dollar investments in the vast oil and gas fields under the Timor Sea. The Howard government intervened militarily a second time, earlier this year, to orchestrate the removal of Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri, the Fretilin party leader, in favour of Jose Ramos Horta, who is regarded as a more pliable instrument.

Since 1999, the Australian government has also been working assiduously to restore its close ties with Jakarta, efforts that eventually led to the signing of a fresh security treaty between the two governments last month. The pact commits Australia to suppressing support for separatist movements in West Papua and other Indonesian provinces, closer military, intelligence and police cooperation, joint maritime border patrols and assistance in developing nuclear power.

The treaty parallels the one signed by Keating with Suharto in 1995, which Jakarta repudiated in 1999. On signing it, Keating lauded Suharto's "New Order" junta as a linchpin of Australian security. Today, the Australian ruling elite still regards the Indonesian regime as an indispensable partner in securing its own strategic and corporate interests. The Balibo murders and their continuing whitewash stand as a warning of the lengths to which Australian governments, both Labor and Liberal, are prepared to go to protect these interests.



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