

Sydney inquest produces new evidence

Australian governments covered up 1975 execution of “Balibo Five” newsmen

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21 April 2007

A coronial inquest, due to resume in Sydney next month, has produced telling new evidence of a cover-up, orchestrated by every Australian government since 1975, of the facts surrounding the execution of five Australian-based newsmen in the lead-up to the Indonesian invasion of East Timor.

The evidence confirms that Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam knew within hours that the journalists had been murdered at Balibo, East Timor, on October 16, 1975 by the Indonesian military regime. But, because of its support for the impending invasion, Whitlam’s Labour government instigated a whitewash.

Successive governments organised inquiries that suppressed the truth. Five closed-door investigations—including two by former National Crime Authority head Tom Sherman in 1995 and 1999, and one by Bill Blick, inspector-general of intelligence and security, in 2001-02—each suggested that the newsmen died inadvertently in crossfire between Indonesian troops and Fretilin separatist fighters.

Thanks primarily to the persistence of Maureen Tolfree, the British sister of Brian Peters, one of the murdered men, the Sydney inquest has begun to publicly document the executions for the first time, after more than 30 years. When, in 1998, Tolfree initially revived the question of how her brother had been slain, the British Labour government refused to assist her. “I was labelled a do-gooder with dubious Left-wing connections back in the colony,” she told journalists last month.

“My belief is that the journalists got caught up in the intrigue of the Whitlam and Indonesian governments,” Tolfree said. “We were made to suffer over 32 years because nobody in the federal government—both Liberal and Labor—had the guts to call for a proper inquiry.”

Two years ago, however, the New South Wales coroner finally accepted a legal argument that Peters had been a resident of the state in 1975, and therefore came within the court’s jurisdiction. The inquest has become the first inquiry into the killings to hear key witnesses in open court. Even so, some sessions have been conducted in secrecy, at the Howard government’s request, allegedly for “national security” reasons.

The young men executed, without any objection from Canberra, have become known as the Balibo Five. They were Peters, a 29-year-old Channel 9 cameraman, Channel 9 reporter, Malcolm Rennie, 28, and three Channel 7 workers—reporter Greg Shackleton, 27, camera operator Gary Cunningham, 26, and sound recordist Tony Stewart, 21.

Another Australian-based journalist, Roger East, was also murdered by the Indonesian military without any Canberra protest. East was killed in Dili, the East Timorese capital, on December 8, 1975, after publishing a report, accompanied by eye-witness accounts, that Indonesian forces had executed his five colleagues.

The most incriminating new evidence is that Whitlam’s office was given the text of an Indonesian military message on the day of the

shootings, within minutes of it being intercepted by the Australian Defence Signals Directorate (DSD). Retired Australian Navy linguist Robin Dix, who was on duty at the DSD base at Shoal Bay near Darwin on October 16, 1975, testified that a radio message was picked up that said: “Five Australian journalists have been killed and all their corpses have been incinerated or burnt to a crisp.”

Dix, now 67, told the court that the Indonesian text of the message used the word “dibunuh” for killing, indicating deliberate intent. “I will never forget it. I remember it word for word,” Dix said. Within seven minutes Dix gave the translated message to Petty Officer Helen Ourer, who sent it via secure channels to the DSD headquarters in Melbourne, from where it would have been immediately relayed to the DSD’s “customers”. These included the prime minister, defence minister and foreign affairs minister, and their department heads.

Within another hour, Dix’s colleague, Ray Norton, received a telephone call, and handed the receiver over to Dix, mouthing the words, “PM’s Department”. The voice at the other end asked: “Is this report true?” Dix said he replied: “You are on an unsecure line. Goodbye.” A day later, Dix’s section had a visit from DSD deputy chief Mos Williams, who briefly congratulated them on their work.

Dix’s testimony indicates that the Whitlam government became complicit in the five murders. Far from protesting and demanding action against the perpetrators, which would have threatened its close relations with General Suharto’s military dictatorship, Canberra smothered the news. No official inquiry has ever seen the DSD intercept mentioned by Dix.

A retired senior army intelligence officer and Defence Department official, Alan Thompson, testified that he had seen a similar DSD intercept. During an internal inquiry ordered by defence minister Kim Beazley in 1986, Thompson had been shown a file of 20 to 30 DSD documents. He recalled one intercept, in which an Indonesian officer reported in words to the effect of: “We have dead Europeans. What do we do?” The reply was “burn them” or similar words.

Two former government officials testified that they had also seen a signals intercept, sent by an Indonesian officer at Balibo to Jakarta soon after the killings. Both George Brownbill and Ian Cunliffe were involved in Justice Robert Hope’s 1975-77 royal commission into Australian intelligence services. They were shown the message when they visited the DSD’s Shoal Bay base on March 4, 1977.

They recalled the intercept saying that the officer’s troops had located and shot the five journalists on orders from Jakarta; they had been shot in the back of a shed or room; and orders were sought about what to do with their bodies and effects.

Cunliffe told the inquest that the failure to produce the intercept to official inquiries meant it had either been destroyed, or that the searches

“had not been conducted, but subverted”. It was “entirely possible” given Canberra’s interest in good relations with Jakarta, that the intercept had been pulled from normal circulation, and discussed orally by ministers and senior officials.

Another ex-intelligence official, Colonel Geoff Cameron, told the inquest he wrote an internal Defence Department memo only two days after the killings, naming Captain Yunus Yosfiah as leading the Indonesian special forces attack on Balibo and thus holding direct command responsibility.

These accounts expose the claims of Whitlam and his ministers in the days following the deaths, when they said they were still trying to confirm the deaths. Other testimony at the inquest, given by eye-witnesses, demolished the official line that the Balibo Five were killed in crossfire.

An East Timorese witness who trained with the Indonesian military, known by the codename “Glebe 2”, said that when Indonesian troops entered Balibo’s town square he saw four white men raise their arms in the air to surrender. He then saw soldiers start firing at the journalists. “I saw them shoot. A lot of them were firing,” he said.

Like several other witnesses, Glebe 2 had his identity protected for fear of reprisal from pro-Indonesian elements.

Another former East Timorese auxiliary in the Indonesian army, codenamed Glebe 3, said he had entered the village at the rear of special forces led by Yunus. Later, after hearing five white people had been killed, he went to a shophouse in Balibo’s central square. Inside, “I saw three people dying, sitting there, and two more lying there,” he said, then correcting himself that all five were dead. Later that day, he saw smoke billowing from the building.

A former Fretilin soldier, codenamed Glebe 5, said he saw the five trying to surrender outside the shophouse. “I saw one fall, one bald-headed man,” he said, identifying the man as Brian Peters from a photograph. He saw the other four newsmen running back into the house as he himself started running away. “I didn’t see them [any further] but I still heard screaming, ‘Australian, Australian,’ he said.

Manuel da Silva, who was a 16-year-old Fretilin soldier in 1975, said he saw Indonesian soldiers standing outside the shophouse while others dragged out three of the journalists, who fell to the road. He could not see if they were wounded or dead, but the soldiers “were pushing them from the back”. Augusto Pereira, a conscript with the attacking Indonesian forces, said he saw soldiers “jump” on and punch the journalists. Later, he went back to see three bodies lying in the shophouse, “in a pool of blood”.

Another Timorese conscript, known as Glebe 7, said he had been ordered three days after the attack to burn the charred remains of five bodies in the shophouse. “Once we burned the bodies, they told us not to tell anything to anybody,” he said.

After hearing the witnesses, deputy state coroner Dorelle Pinch issued a warrant for the arrest of Yunus, who became a general and, later, an Indonesian MP and information minister. Yunus has poured scorn on the warrant, raising the possibility that Pinch could recommend a war crimes prosecution against him.

Whitlam and the long cover-up

When the inquest resumes, Whitlam may be required to take the witness stand for the first time. So far, however, he has only been required to give a private statement to coronial officials, the contents of which have not been released.

In his 1997 book, *Abiding Interests*, Whitlam virtually blamed the Balibo Five for their own deaths. He said they had ignored his government’s warning that it could not protect them in East Timor. He

admitted only that his government was “able immediately to learn that five men had been killed” but was “advised” not to reveal how it knew.

Reports of the officially-denied DSD intercepts have circulated for some years, including in the book, *Death in Balibo, Lies in Canberra*, published by academic Des Ball and journalist Hamish McDonald in 2000. In a 2002 speech, Whitlam branded the book “notorious” for its “misinformation which has been peddled by abandoned partners, remote parents, novice diplomats, conniving archivists and a few Fairfax fanatics”.

This vitriol is a measure of what is at stake in the three-decade Balibo coverup, not just for Whitlam personally but for the continuing strategic, commercial and military interests of the Australian corporate and political elite in Indonesia and East Timor.

Proof that Whitlam’s cabinet knew within hours of the Balibo murders would definitively expose Canberra’s approval of the Indonesian invasion, which led to a 24-year occupation at the expense of an estimated 200,000 East Timorese lives. Like US President Gerald Ford, Whitlam had met with General Suharto in the lead-up to the invasion and made clear that there would be no objection to the takeover, despite paying public lip service to “self-determination” for the East Timorese after four centuries of Portuguese rule.

Whitlam’s complicity underscores the intimate and highly profitable relations maintained with the Suharto regime, from its installation in an American- and Australian-backed coup in 1965, through to its downfall in 1998. Suharto signed the 1989 Timor Gap Treaty with the Hawke Labor government, handing most of the oil and gas fields beneath the Timor Sea to Australia.

The evidence also highlights the reactionary content of the Howard government’s efforts to fully restore ties with the Indonesian military and political elite. These relations were temporarily ruptured in 1999 when Canberra, backed by Washington, decided to protect its interests in East Timor by sending in troops to help set up a nominally independent statelet. The current Indonesian president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, is a Suharto-era general who, like Yunus, once served in East Timor.

The revelations raise critical questions as well about the Howard’s current military intervention in East Timor, which is designed to secure a more reliable pro-Australian regime, with Jose Ramos-Horta installed as president and Xanana Gusmao as prime minister. Canberra’s willingness to sacrifice the lives of journalists, as well as ordinary East Timorese, to pursue its interests in 1975 points to the hypocrisy of the present claims to be acting out of humanitarian concern for the plight of the long-suffering East Timorese.

For all these reasons, the Howard government and the intelligence agencies are doing everything they can to limit the coronial inquest and keep sensitive evidence behind closed doors. For several days before it adjourned last month, the inquest was conducted in secrecy, with regular court transcribers and attendants replaced by Defence Department staff, who rigged up their own recording system.

Representing the federal government, Alan Robertson led a bevy of lawyers in insisting on the new rules after handing the coroner two confidential letters from Clive Lines, the DSD acting director. Lines objected that evidence about DSD’s “sources and methods” could compromise the agency’s present capabilities.

The coroner accepted the intervention, ruling that “the prejudice to Australia’s national security and defence interest is real and is current”. But intelligence experts dismissed the DSD claim, pointing out that both the DSD and its targets, like the Indonesian military, have moved on to a new generation of satellite surveillance and computerised encryption and decryption programs.

What really concerns the political and military establishment is that the evidence graphically illustrates the guiding thread of Australian policy toward East Timor for three decades—securing control over Timor Sea oil and gas and maintaining a strategic grip over the region—at the expense of

the Balibo Five Australian newsmen and the Timorese people themselves.



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