

WikiLeaks' cables reveal:

Portugal's intelligence chief accused Australia of "fomenting unrest" in East Timor

Patrick O'Connor
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Leaked diplomatic cables sent from the US embassy in Lisbon, Portugal in June 2006 have revealed that a leading Portuguese intelligence official told American diplomatic officials that the Australian government had repeatedly "fomented unrest" in East Timor, in order to advance its "geopolitical and commercial interests." The extraordinary exchange occurred two weeks after Canberra had dispatched a military intervention force to the oil and gas rich state, as part of its "regime change" campaign against Timorese Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri.

The Australian government, then led by John Howard, targeted Alkatiri because of his perceived alignment with rival powers, especially Portugal, Timor's former colonial ruler, and China. The Fretilin party leader was also despised by Canberra for his extraction of unwelcome concessions during negotiations over the division of the Timor Sea's energy resources.

In February and March 2006, about 600 Timorese soldiers, known as the "petitioners", mutinied. President Xanana Gusmao then issued a provocative speech on March 23 in which he denounced the Alkatiri government as corrupt and dictatorial. In April, various criminal and ex-Indonesian militia elements joined the petitioners and staged a series of violent attacks on soldiers and security forces who remained loyal to the state. The Australian government seized on the unrest to demand Alkatiri's removal.

An Australian occupation force, comprising 1,300 troops and police backed by armoured vehicles and attack helicopters, was ordered into Timor on May 24. At the same time, the Australian media went into a frenzy, demanding Alkatiri's resignation. The ABC's "Four Corners" broadcast a lurid report featuring bogus accusations that the prime minister had formed a "hit squad" to assassinate Fretilin's opponents. On June 26, Alkatiri capitulated, handing power to Canberra's favoured candidate, Jose Ramos Horta.

Concurrently with these developments, the *World Socialist Web Site* characterised what had happened as an Australian-inspired

political coup. The WWSW concluded that there was no doubt that Australian military and intelligence operatives in Dili had advance knowledge of, and likely encouraged, the petitioners' mutiny and violent protests. (See: "How Australia orchestrated 'regime change' in East Timor")

The WikiLeaks-released diplomatic cables from the US embassy in Lisbon, published in the Portuguese weekly newspaper *Expresso*, have provided important new evidence confirming this analysis.

The key cable was sent by the US ambassador to Portugal, Al Hoffman, on June 12, 2006, i.e. 19 days after Australian troops were sent into Timor and 14 days before Alkatiri resigned. Headed, "Portugal: An Intel View of East Timor", the cable reports on a discussion between a US embassy official (identified only as "Pol/Econ DepCouns") and Jorge Carvalho, chief of staff of Portugal's Intelligence Services (SIRP). The cable—which noted that Carvalho is Portugal's equivalent to the US Director of National Intelligence—was marked "priority" and was widely circulated. Copies were sent to the US embassies in East Timor, Australia, New Zealand, and Malaysia; in Washington, to the Secretary of State, Defence Secretary, National Security Council, and Central Intelligence Agency; and to the US military's Pacific Command and Joint Intelligence Centre in Hawaii.

The cable read: "Carvalho commented that Australia had not played a productive role in East Timor, underscoring that Australia's motives were driven by geopolitical and commercial (e.g. oil) interests while Portugal's main interest was to maintain stability."

The analysis presented by the Portuguese intelligence chief was clearly self-serving—Lisbon was and is just as preoccupied as Canberra with geostrategic and commercial concerns in East Timor. Carvalho's remarks underscore the long-standing and bitter rivalry between Australia and Portugal over who would play

the dominant role in so-called “independent” East Timor. However, his frank exchange with the US embassy official also demonstrates that the real motivations of Australia’s military intervention in 2006 were clearly understood by those in power internationally. The Howard government’s claims of a “humanitarian” operation aimed at providing security for the Timorese people were purely for domestic consumption in Australia.

The US diplomatic cable continued: “He [Carvalho] explained that SIRP [Portuguese intelligence] followed the situation on the ground very closely, stating ‘we even know what type of shoes the rioters wear and where they buy them’, and implied that Australia had previously fomented unrest for its benefit. He cited two instances—demarcation negotiations of the maritime border between East Timor and Australia and demarcation negotiations of oil exploration boundaries off the shore of East Timor—where Australia had fomented unrest to put the pressure on the Government of East Timor.”

One of the striking features of the cable is the cordial and business-like tone of the reported discussion. There was certainly no outrage or shock on the part of the American embassy over Portuguese intelligence suggestions that Canberra had staged numerous provocations to strengthen its hand in oil negotiations with the East Timorese government. On the contrary, the American ambassador concluded his cable with a warm assessment of Jorge Carvalho, describing him as “an important pro-American Embassy contact who is not only knowledgeable in intelligence matters but well connected to political parties across the spectrum”, and whose “analysis of the situation in East Timor was dispassionate—even his criticism of Australia was delivered in a matter-of-fact manner.”

Provocations, destabilisation campaigns, and intelligence “black ops” aimed at undermining impoverished states are clearly standard matters for discussion as far as imperialist diplomacy is concerned.

Carvalho’s remarks shed fresh light on the East Timor’s post-independence history. Unrest erupted within months of the tiny statelet being formally recognised as an “independent” nation in May 2002. In December 3 and 4, 2002, riots erupted in Dili that targeted Fretilin government symbols, as well as the homes of Alkatiri and his family. Opposition parties, the Catholic church, and criminal gangs were among those involved in what senior Fretilin figures alleged was an orchestrated attempt to oust the government.

But what was the role played by the Australian military and intelligence apparatus that was active in East Timor at the time? Only a week before the riots, on November 27, Australia’s Foreign Minister Alexander Downer had a highly acrimonious discussion with Alkatiri in Dili. Downer insisted that the Timorese government agree to cede the lion’s share of the Greater Sunrise oil and gas reserves to Australia. Under international law, an

equidistant maritime border between the two countries would see Australia receive about 20 percent of Greater Sunrise. But Downer demanded 80 percent, threatening that unless this was conceded, Canberra would sabotage another development in the Bayu-Undan field, leaving Dili without any energy royalties.

“If you want to make money, you should conclude an agreement quickly,” Downer declared. “We are very tough. We will not care if you give information to the media. Let me give you a tutorial in politics—not a chance.”

With the publication of the leaked Lisbon cable from 2006, there can now be little doubt that Canberra’s “tutorial” involved instigating provocations against the Fretilin government.

Australian journalist Maryann Keady has previously reported that in late 2002, Australian and American officials indicated that “they were wanting to get rid of this ‘troublesome’ prime minister.” She also noted that after the December riots, a UN representative “unofficially” went to Alkatiri’s office and asked him to resign. On December 9, 2002, the *Australian Financial Review* called on Xanana Gusmao to take over.

Gusmao was identified as Australia’s man in Dili, whereas Alkatiri was more aligned with Portugal. The 2006 diplomatic cables reveal that at the height of the crisis, just a fortnight before Alkatiri stood down, Portuguese government officials were urging the US to keep him in power. According to the cable, Jorge Carvalho “underscored the need to recognize the Fretilin Party’s popularity and the important role Prime Minister Alkatiri played in it.” He added: “The fact remained that the Fretilin Party would win if elections were held today and Alkatiri would remain in a position of power. Any plans to resolve the conflict would need to take his influence into account.”

Portugal also deployed Republican National Guard personnel to Timor during the 2006 unrest, but refused to place this force under the command of the Australian-dominated Joint Task Force. Another cable, sent from Lisbon on June 2, 2006 by Ambassador Al Hoffman, stated that this was due to “historical bad blood between the two countries in East Timor.”

Australian imperialism’s economic and strategic interests in East Timor and the South Pacific remains a taboo subject in official political and media circles in Australia. Unsurprisingly, not a single media outlet has reported on the contents of the 2006 Lisbon embassy cables.



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