

Eye-witness says Indonesian minister shot newsmen in Timor

By Mike Head
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According to front-page reports in two Australian newspapers, a former East Timorese militia commander has accused the Indonesian Information Minister, Lieutenant-General Yunus Yosfiah, of personally participating in the murder of five Australian-based newsmen in the leadup to the 1975 invasion of East Timor.

In a disclosure that brings new pressure on the Habibie regime in Indonesia, Jill Jolliffe, a formerly Portuguese-based East Timor journalist and activist, reported the witness saying that he saw General Yunus, together with other key officers and soldiers under their command, open fire on the unarmed TV journalists outside a house in the town of Balibo on October 16, 1975. The witness, identified only under the pseudonym Carlos Santos, said Yunus ignored the reporters' pleas as they fell in a flurry of bullets.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Melbourne Age*, both owned by the Fairfax group, on Monday gave prominence to Jolliffe's report. It substantially corroborates, and also adds to, previous accounts by three other witnesses, who said Yunus was directly involved in the shooting of the newsmen—Greg Shackleton, Gary Cunningham and Tony Stewart of Channel 7, and Brian Peters and Malcolm Rennie of Channel 9.

In his interview with Jolliffe, Santos said Yunus and the other soldiers were only 10 metres from four of the newsmen, who asked for help and protection. They were shot “immediately, without mercy”. He rejected the official claim that the TV crews were killed in crossfire between local pro-Indonesian supporters and guerillas of the Fretilin secessionist movement. Fighting with Fretilin forces had ended before the reporters were executed. “They were murdered,” he said. He did not see how the fifth journalist was killed.

That night, Santos said, Yunus gave he and others a warning. “He told all present never to say to anyone that the journalists had been killed... if anyone asks, he said, say: ‘It was war, we found some white bodies and we didn't know their nationality.’”

Santos, a supporter of the pro-Indonesian APODETI party, fled Timor two months ago after refusing to command one of the militia groups currently terrorising independence supporters. He is now in an Asian country, seeking political asylum in Australia. He said that evidence he had given to an inquiry by an Australian diplomat, Allan Taylor, in Balibo in 1976, was false, made under Indonesian pressure.

The Indonesian regime, supported by successive Australian governments, has repeatedly denied any part in the deaths. Two weeks ago, however, Yunus admitted for the first time that he had led the Balibo raid. The admission came in an interview with Lindsay Murdoch, the Fairfax correspondent in Jakarta. At one point during the interview, Yunus referred to reports “that I asked the journalists to stand against the wall and I shot them”. Yunus simply said: “That is another story. Which will you follow?”

Yunus, now 54, personifies the close ties between the Habibie regime, the Indonesian military and the annexation of East Timor in 1975. At the time of the invasion of the former Portuguese colony he was a Special Forces captain. He did five more tours of duty in East Timor, where leading generals and associates of the Suharto family have sizeable business interests. In the Habibie cabinet, Yunus has the key responsibility of supervising the media and managing the regime's own propaganda.

Jolliffe's new witness also named those who joined Yunus in shooting the newsmen. They included Lieutenant Slamet Kirbiantoro, now a

Brigadier-General in military intelligence in Jakarta, and a Captain Ali Mussa, as well as other officers known as “Kris”, “Marcos” and “Yusuf”.

The identity of some of these officers was recently revealed in *Eyewitness to the Integration of East Timor*, a book by Indonesian war correspondent Hendro Subroto, who was at Balibo soon after the attack. Among them are Jakarta Governor Sutiyo, the Indonesian Ambassador to China Kuntara, and prominent medical specialist Tommy Marzuki.

Over the past year the Howard government in Australia has orchestrated a second whitewash of the Balibo murders. Last October it responded to two fresh eye-witness accounts, aired on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation TV program, *Foreign Correspondent*, by reopening a 1996 inquiry conducted by Tom Sherman QC for the previous Keating Labor government. Despite the new evidence, Sherman, a former National Crime Authority chairman, essentially reiterated his initial finding—that the journalists died in “circumstances of continued fighting”.

In fact, the Australian government knew of the Balibo executions within hours of them being carried out. Not only was the Australian Defence Signals Directorate monitoring Indonesian military communications, but also, as was revealed last August, the Whitlam Labor government in 1975 was closely briefed by Indonesian intelligence on the Balibo operation, as part of the preparations for the full Indonesian invasion in December 1975.

The ongoing official cover-up has three purposes. First, to protect Canberra's continuing intimate ties with the Indonesian military and political establishment, which is still seeking to retain control over East Timor. Second, to hide the complicity of the Whitlam government in the 1975 invasion. Third, to deflect attention from the crucial support that both Labor and conservative governments gave to the Suharto military dictatorship in Indonesia for three decades.

The prominence now given to Jolliffe's evidence in the Fairfax media reflects somewhat of a shift in ruling circles towards backing East Timorese secession in the wake of the meltdown of the Indonesian economy and Suharto's resignation. Other sections of the media, however, notably the Murdoch-owned press, have barely mentioned the latest revelations, and the Howard government has yet to comment.

This ambivalence reflects tensions over attempts to assert a greater role for Australia and other Western powers in East Timor through the current United Nations referendum on autonomy. There are fears that allowing an East Timorese breakaway could trigger wider unrest across Indonesia.

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