

# Documents reveal that Australia urged Indonesia to invade East Timor in 1975

By Mike Head  
18 September 2000

Official documents released by the Australian government last week confirm that the Whitlam Labor government actively encouraged the Suharto regime in Indonesia to invade East Timor in 1975, a policy that led to the deaths of an estimated 200,000 Timorese people in the following years.

The previously secret files, released from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade archives, also show that the official transcript of a meeting between President Suharto and Prime Minister Gough Whitlam in 1975 was “sanitised” as part of a cover-up to prevent the Australian public from knowing of Canberra's support for the invasion.

The 484 cables and reports from 1974-76 are published in a book, *Australia and the Indonesian Incorporation of Portuguese East Timor*, released by Foreign Minister Alexander Downer at parliament house on September 12.

The papers reveal that as early as July 1974—two months after Portuguese military officers overthrew the Caetano fascist dictatorship and began to withdraw from East Timor—Whitlam, through his private secretary Peter Wilenski, had suggested to the Suharto regime that it launch undercover operations in East Timor to ensure incorporation into Indonesia.

Australia's ambassador in Jakarta, Robert Furlonger, sent a dispatch to Canberra on July 3, 1974 reporting that high-ranking Indonesian officers had given Suharto plans for a “clandestine operation” in East Timor, adding that the plans had been initiated after a discussion with Wilenski. Furlonger wrote that the “extreme frankness” of Indonesian officials in divulging their plans to the Australian embassy, “indicate the Indonesians are confident we would favour an independent Portuguese Timor as little as they do”.

When Whitlam met Suharto in central Java in September 1974 he told the Indonesian dictator that East Timor was “too small to be independent” and that its

independence would be “unwelcome” to Indonesia, Australia and regional countries because it would invite attention from outside the region.

The Australian prime minister proceeded to give Suharto tactical advice, based largely on Whitlam's desire to deceive the Australian people. The official record of the meeting goes on: “The Prime Minister noted that, for the domestic audience in Australia, incorporation into Indonesia should appear to be a natural process arising from the wishes of its people.”

Officially, the Whitlam government's policy called for an act of self-determination in East Timor, but this was for public consumption only. Whitlam made this clear to Richard Woolcott, a deputy secretary in Foreign Affairs, who relayed it in a minute to his departmental head, Alan Renouf. “I am in favour of incorporation but obeisance has to be made to self-determination,” Woolcott quoted Whitlam as saying.

Whitlam held a second meeting with Suharto in Townsville in April 1975. The official record shows that he barely mentioned self-determination and assured Suharto that Australia's Timor policy would be guided by the principle that relations with Indonesia were “paramount”.

This record was later altered to give the impression that Whitlam had raised self-determination. On June 30, 1975, the South-East Asia branch head in Foreign Affairs, Lance Joseph, wrote to an official in the Jakarta embassy, Malcolm Dan, who had reported that the Indonesians were unhappy with the Australian record of the Townsville talks.

Joseph said the Indonesians had most likely been shown the “sanitised version... For presentational purposes, it was felt important in the sanitised version to highlight Australia's commitment to self-determination in a way which is not reflected in the exhaustive record.”

The files prove that Whitlam did not simply acquiesce

to the invasion plans, he helped convince Suharto to proceed. One Indonesian general is quoted as saying that the September 1974 meeting crystallised Suharto's thinking on the matter.

The records show that Suharto, who in 1974-75 faced health problems, a crisis in the state oil company Pertamina and internal dissension, was unsure of the wisdom of moving into the Portuguese colony. Just a month before the final invasion in December 1975, Woolcott, by then the Australian ambassador in Jakarta, cabled Canberra: "I still do not think the President will agree to outright invasion, although the pressure on him to do so is continuing to mount."

Other documents confirm that from late 1974, following the first Suharto-Whitlam meeting, Indonesian officials regularly supplied the Australian embassy with information relating to Indonesia's covert operations in East Timor and its intention to seize the territory by force. These operations included an attack on the border town of Balibo in October 1975, in which five Australian-based newsmen were murdered by Indonesian commanders to prevent them from reporting on the incursion.

Indonesian intelligence officials gave Australian embassy officers in Jakarta final details of the Balibo attack in mid-October 1975. The embassy relayed the information in a cable to Canberra on October 13, 1975, three days before the Balibo operation. The Foreign Affairs Department knew that Australian news crews were in East Timor but no warning was passed onto the management of the two TV stations or to the five news crew—Brian Peters and Malcolm Rennie of Channel 9 and Gary Cunningham, Greg Shackleton and Tony Stewart of Channel 7.

The Howard government has published the records, six years ahead of the normal schedule under the 30-year secrecy rule for the release of sensitive materials, in an attempt to distance itself from the previous policy, blaming the Labor leaders for the duplicity that surrounded it.

The government has chosen to exclude later documents showing that the Liberal government of Malcolm Fraser, which took office when Whitlam was dismissed on November 11, 1975, maintained the same stance. By 1979, despite reports of widespread Indonesian killings in East Timor, the Fraser government had given de jure recognition to the Indonesian annexation, in return for the opening of negotiations on the oil and gas fields beneath the Timor Sea between Australia and Timor.

The published documents do not include Cabinet and

intelligence records, which may reveal even closer collaboration with the Indonesian generals. Defence officials intervened at the last minute to delete the slightest reference to intelligence sources, such as intercepts of Indonesian military radio signals.

For 25 years, both Labor and Liberal governments maintained close relations with the Suharto dictatorship. They regarded the military junta as the most reliable instrument for suppressing the Indonesian masses and protecting the strategic and investment interests of Australian business.

This support only began to waver when the Suharto regime started to crumble in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis and when Portugal revived its claims over East Timor. As late as December 1998, Prime Minister John Howard wrote to Suharto's successor Habibie urging him to offer autonomy to East Timor as the best means for retaining control over the half-island. When Habibie responded by agreeing to an early ballot, the Howard government sat on intelligence reports of an imminent rampage by the Indonesian military and militias, in order to use the ensuing violence as a pretext to send in troops.

Canberra's publicly-stated position favours "self-determination" for the East Timorese people and professes concern for their welfare. But behind closed doors, as in 1974-75, the real discussion will focus on how to secure the interests of the Australian ruling elite, whatever the consequences for the East Timorese.

In an unusually candid editorial, the *Australian Financial Review* noted: "The documents underline the old, sad truth that diplomacy is seldom driven by moral imperatives."

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