

## Hawks and doves: The United Kingdom and the Indonesian invasion of East Timor

Warren Evans

On 7 December 1975, as Indonesian forces invaded Dili, ‘a lone voice tossed by the turbulent airwaves that formed the last tenuous link between Darwin and East Timor,’ urgently pleaded, ‘we are all going to be killed... This is an appeal for international help... this is an SOS... please save us’ (Richardson 1975, 1). Despite this desperate appeal, there would be no help forthcoming from the international community for the beleaguered territory and its’ people. Consequentially, for almost a quarter of a century, while the Timorese were forced to endure what many commentators came to describe as ‘genocidal in nature’ (Nevins 2002, 636), the role played by the West and indeed many countries in relation to East Timor went far beyond turning a blind eye. Although many academics and researchers have been highly scathing of the complicit role played by Australia and the United States, it was the United Kingdom that José Ramos-Horta came to label as ‘the single worst obstructionist of any industrialised country’ (Gittings 1992, 9).

This paper, based on earlier research for a Master’s Dissertation at King’s College London, sets out to establish the nature of British foreign policy, its interest and its role in relation to the Indonesian invasion and subsequent occupation of East Timor in 1975. Ultimately, it shall be argued that Britain’s role in Indonesia’s occupation of East Timor was significant and at times of critical importance, driven by the perceived importance of her strategic, political and most critically economic links with Jakarta. While British official policy in recognising the Timorese right for self-determination represented a principled stance, such a stand was driven by its own perceived national interests and the desire to hew the line of least resistance.

Although the two nations could perhaps geographically and culturally not be further apart, that is not to say that the UK has not played a significant role throughout East Timor’s history. Long seen through the prism of British-links with the territories former ruler Portugal, Britain’s oldest ally (Gallard 2011), at one point between 1811 and 1816, the UK even occupied parts of what is now principally Indonesian-controlled West Timor (Jolliffe 1978, 31). Nor was Britain’s role in 1975, its’ only controversial foray in Timorese affairs. In 1941, in a role it too later tried to cover, it was London that requested Australian forces enter the then neutral territory, the ramifications of which would cause much suffering and loss for the people of Portuguese Timor (Fernandes 2004, 6-7).

Thus, although aspects of British foreign policy in relation to East Timor have come under close scrutiny and much criticism from certain sectors of the media, particularly the likes of John Pilger (1994, 233-294), Mark Curtis (2003, 402-413) and more recently Nicholas Tarling (2013), to date there remains no one complete study of British policy and its role in respect to the invasion and occupation of East Timor. Yet despite the UK’s significant role, just what was taking place remained largely unreported by the mainstream media (Tiffen 2001) and ‘scarcely known at all on the streets of Britain’ (Chomsky 2011). With London having been successful in not only ‘keeping the ‘Timor issue out ... of the headlines and away from becoming a major public issue’ (FCO 15/1712, 138), but also in ‘[taking] the wind out of the sails of those who wanted to trumpet atrocity stories’ (FO 810/30, 2).

It has been said, ‘[That] tyrants and their casual massacres flourish in a closed world,’ for ‘foetid secrecy is their peculiar oxygen. Opening this world is a way of changing it,’ for ‘what tyrants fear is exposure, because exposure renders no longer so easy the silent acquiescence on which the tyrant depends’ (Young 1992, 16). In December 1975, as the Indonesian invasion of East Timor loomed, the desperate appeal of the Timorese to the international community to save their beleaguered territory and its’ people fell on deaf ears. While there can, and should be no doubt, that it was the Indonesian Government, her security forces and proxy militia which were primarily responsible for the twenty-four years of often brutal occupation. As time has transpired and greater facts have come to light, it has unambiguously emerged that the role played by the West and indeed many countries around the world in relation to the Indonesian occupation of East Timor went far beyond turning a blind eye, but actively helped to provide the ‘oxygen’ that sustained it.

On Christmas Eve 1975, British Ambassador Sir John Archibald Ford cabled in a secret telegraph from the British Embassy in Jakarta to the UK’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), which was subsequently sent to No.10 Downing Street, that: ‘Confidential information ... suggests that the ... assault

on Dili...was badly mismanaged.’ The Embassy ‘gather further’ that once the Indonesian forces were ‘established in Dili they went on a rampage of looting and killing.’ Ford further going on to advise that, ‘if asked to comment on any stories of atrocities I suggest we say that we have no information’ (FCO 15/1712, 138).

With the United Kingdom’s early policy towards East Timor, framed through its alliance with Portugal, Britain never sought to actively challenge the Salazar regime’s ‘failure to develop or decolonise’ (CAVR 2005, 47). Abstaining in both 1960 and 1964 when the UN General Assembly criticised Portugal for its lack of progress in the territory (UN 1964, 32). However, in April 1974 following several years of turmoil after the death of Salazar, the status of the 450-year-old colony of Portuguese Timor was thrown into question, with the promise of ‘self-determination in its overseas territories’ (UN 1964, 32).

Meanwhile in the UK in March 1974, Harold Wilson’s Labour Government had been returned to office and according to researcher Hugh Dowson,<sup>1</sup> sought to ‘improve relations with the Suharto regime in Jakarta but also with the [US] Ford Administration’ (Dowson 2004). A particular emphasis coming to be placed on forming good relations with the then US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, whom had personally indicated ‘a desire to bolster Indonesia’s regional role and expressed worries about Portugal’s 1974 revolution and the subsequent decolonisation of its territories’ (Dowson 2004).

As the events in Portuguese Timor began to transpire and as Indonesian interest grew, the FCO began to formulate its policy in regards to the future of territory. In March 1975 the Southeast Asia Department of the FCO made clear that although ‘our interest is minimal,’ the question of the future status of East Timor ‘may impinge on our bilateral relations with both Portugal and Indonesia’ (FCO 15/1704, 22). The memorandum highlighting that it was ‘not an issue where we want to play a prominent part’ and that if ‘pressed by either side for our views, we should reinstate our support for the principle of self-determination.’ Concluding that ‘...eventually integration with Indonesia is probably the right answer in terms of regional stability’ (FCO 15/1704, 22).

Britain’s position over the future status of East Timor, however, was best exemplified by Ambassador Ford who advised senior FCO Officer Peter Male on 14 July 1975 that, ‘Certainly as seen from here it is in Britain’s interest that Indonesia should absorb the territory as soon and as unobtrusively as possible; and that if it comes to the crunch and there is a row in the United Nations we should keep our heads down and avoid siding against the Indonesian Government’ (FCO 15/1704, 54). Ford’s appraisal later gaining infamy, after a cable of Australian Ambassador to Indonesia Richard Woolcott, quoting it, was leaked (see Toohey & Wilkinson 1987, 176). Although British policy could be perceived as simply following the lead of other key actors, in fact the views of the British Embassy seem to have been quite influential. In a secret letter to Canberra on 21 July 1975, the Australian Embassy in Jakarta confirmed the British approach. An official writing that, ‘the British Embassy’s views are ...interesting...They know what is inevitable, and they attach a higher importance to their long term interests in Indonesia. They want to stand at a comfortable distance’ (DFAT 1975, 295).

If there was, however, one issue that neither the British nor Australian Governments failed to ever truly silence, it was the killing of five Australian-based television reporters commonly known as the ‘Balibo Five.’ While the story of the Balibo Five has been extensively told (see Joliffe 2009), what is often forgotten was that cameraman Brian Peters, 26, and reporter Malcolm Rennie, 29, were British nationals (Watts, 1976, 5). Along with Australia, Her Majesty’s Government (HMG) maintained for some twenty odd years that these newsmen had been ‘killed in the crossfire’ (Foster 2006) during ‘East Timor’s civil war’ (Dowson 2004). In contrast to such public statements, key British officials were all too aware that its’ own citizens had actually been ‘deliberately killed’ (Dix 2007, 125) in order to ‘sustain the myth that there were no Indonesian troops in East Timor’ (Foster 2008). As declassified documents released in 2002 show,<sup>2</sup> the FCO and HM Embassy in Jakarta, were fully aware of the extent and nature of Indonesia’s clandestine operations and indeed the true circumstance in which the journalists had died.

---

<sup>1</sup> The author is heavily indebted to British independent researcher Hugh Dawson, both for his work in highlighting the role played by the British in East Timor, but also his personal assistance in research in this subject over the years.

<sup>2</sup> In November 2002 under the terms of Britain’s 30 year rule and several years prior to the UK’s 2005 Freedom of Information Act, The National Archive (TNA, formally PRO), released 17 ‘Balibo Files’ comprising of 15 FCO Departmental Files (FCO 15/1703 to 1717) and two files from Britain’s Jakarta Embassy (FO 8210/29 & 30). Prior to these files official release, which were compiled by the FCO, they were made available to relatives of the British ‘Balibo Five’ journalists -following their long campaign backed by British MPs. \*A number of the key

On the 15 September 1975, a month before the deaths of the Balibo Five, Ambassador Ford told the FCO that Indonesia planned: to step up clandestine intervention designed to look like popular uprisings ... The only limitation on [such] clandestine activities now appears to be its fear of exposure... A particular hurdle to be got over is a plane load full of Australian journalists ... Who are due to visit Timor ... to investigate allegations of Indonesian intervention (FCO 15/1705, 115).

Ford going so far, as to stress to one Indonesian general in charge, 'the dangers of overt armed intervention particularly so far as Indonesia's position ... with public opinion in the West was concerned' (FCO 15/1705, 124). Although it remains unclear if British officials were aware of the journalist's precise location, certainly the British Embassy were well aware of when and where 'Indonesian forces ... dressed at anti-Fretilin forces were to advance' (Greenlees & Garran 2002, 11). As British MP Don Foster would later come to summarise in the House of Commons, 'Britain did nothing to prevent the planned invasion and went further by recommending that it be kept covert. Keeping something covert means keeping journalists out of the way' (Foster 2008). HMG's determination to maintain good relations with Suharto was so robust, that when two of its own citizens were viciously murdered for threatening to reveal to the world the extent of Indonesia's involvement in the territory, the government set about covering-up the true nature of their deaths. Since that time successive British Governments' cavalier approach to the truth has been driven by the fact that to divulge more about the deaths of the Balibo Five would be to as Foster proclaimed, 'reveal even more than we now know about Britain's sorry role in Indonesia's war on East Timor' (Foster 2006).

As the full-scale Indonesian invasion loomed ominously, it was reported that once the operation commenced the British Government would: wish to resist pressures which would inevitably and quickly build up ... To help contain such pressures, a statement would quickly be issued at the time (a) drawing attention to Indonesia's long and remarkable display of patience and forbearance, (b) disclaiming any notion that Timor was ever in a marginal sense a British problem, and (c) observing that those countries in the region who did have real reason to be interested in Timor were not too concerned by development (DFAT 1975, 443).

A day after the a fleeting visit by US President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger to Jakarta, described by one State Department official as the 'big wink' (Toohey & Wilkinson 1987, 143-195), the Indonesian invasion commenced. At the time Britain found itself in the uncomfortable position, given its propensity to staying quiet on the issue, as the Chair of the UN Security Council (UNSC). However, despite being all too aware of the 'rampage of looting and killing [by Indonesian forces]' (FCO 15/1708, 347), as Ambassador Ford made clear to senior officials at Indonesia's Foreign Ministry, HMG 'had tried to do our best for Indonesia in the UN and that we had successfully managed to keep the heat out of the Timor business in New York' (Cited CAVR 2005, 49). Accordingly, Britain abstained on all eight votes on East Timor in the General Assembly from 1975 to 1982, while supporting just two heavily watered-down UNSC resolutions (Nevins 2002, 632). Southeast Asian Department Head, Murray Simons, telling Britain's Mission to the UN that 'the Indonesians were evidently much gratified at the way the British delegation took account of their interests' (FCO 15/1710, 64).

While Britain did remain steadfastly determined to 'keep their heads down' over the issue and help Indonesia avoid any international backlash which may have damaged relations between Jakarta and London, HMG did not endorse the so-called 'Indonesian act of self-determination' by the People's Representative Assembly in Dili on 31 May 1976 (Vote by E Timor assembly 1976, 2). As Ambassador Ford proclaimed, the Indonesian's have once again proved 'inept stage managers' (FCO 15/1715, 279) and HMG, at least publicly, continued to attach a great importance to the principle of self-determination (Bourn 1996, 1). Such a position by HMG, owed not to any principled stand on the rights of the Timorese people to determine their own future, but rather as later diplomatic documents would reveal her 'own post-colonial interests' (Dowson 2004). Consequently, while Ford had boasted of Britain's ability to keep 'events in Timor out of ... [the] headlines and away from becoming a major foreign policy issue' (FCO 15/1712, 138), a number of government officials now feared they may well have been a little too effective. As any recognition of a large neighbour such as Indonesia using force to annex a small distant European territory, could set a dangerous precedent for the UK's own disputed territories in Belize, Gibraltar and

---

documents from these files can be found at: Dowson, H. 2004, *Declassified Documents Reveal U.K. Support for the Indonesian Invasion and Occupation of East Timor*, George Washington University National Security Archive, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB174/indexuk.htm>, viewed 22 September 2015.

the Falklands (FCO 07/3676). Consequently, the British ‘case would be seriously flawed if we’d given legal recognition of Indonesia’s forcible takeover of East Timor’ (FCO 15/1608).

Whereas the United States policy of maintaining good relations with Jakarta at the cost of East Timor was principally driven by the ‘bigger picture’ of the Cold War struggle (see Sweeny 2002), and for Australia regional security concerns (see Birmingham 2001), for the UK economic considerations seemed to take primary precedence. In a briefing for the incoming Head of Britain’s Diplomatic Service, Sir Michael Palliser, on a visit to Jakarta in October 1975, Indonesia was labelled as ‘the most important country politically and economically in Southeast Asia,’ with particular emphasis placed on ‘defence sales ... as might be in our interest’ (Confidential Briefing Paper 1975). Thus, in later years it was no coincident, that the UK became one of the largest weapons suppliers and principle quartermaster to Indonesia (CAVR 2005, 50), after the US became increasingly concerned with Jakarta’s mounting human rights record in the unipolar post-Cold War world. In response to being questioned about the controversial issue of arms exports, particularly that of BAe Hawk attack-aircraft, former Trade Minister Allan Clark famously proclaimed, ‘people don’t give a damn [what one bunch of foreigners is doing to another] ... unless those weapons are used against our own people’ (Pilger 1994, 307-308). In September 1999, the UK again played a crucial position in the UNSC, this time in gaining international backing for a multi-national peacekeeping force to enter the beleaguered territory. Ironically, as this force sailed for Dili, including a small British contingent, those very same British-made aircraft ‘adopted aggressive probing tactics’ (Dickens 2001, 223).

Britain’s sense of ‘guilt’ in the initial stages of the Indonesian occupation of East Timor has for the most part been equated to the much cited quote, widely attributed to Edmund Burke that, ‘The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing’ (Burke 1784, 106). As recently declassified diplomatic documents confirm, the UK’s role in Indonesia’s 1975 invasion and occupation of East Timor, was of critical importance. HMG not only ‘keeping her head down’ while it knew significant atrocities were taking place, but through HM’s Embassy in Jakarta, at the UN and at the domestic level actively helped to ‘take the wind out of the sails of those who wanted to trumpet atrocity stories’ (FO 810/30, 2). Even when two of its own citizens were viciously murdered for threatening to reveal to the world the true extent of Indonesia’s involvement in the territory, Westminster remained quiet. For to disclose more about the deaths of the Balibo Five would be to reveal Britain’s true complicity and substantial role in Indonesia’s war in East Timor (Foster 2006). Where British policy took a principled stand, it did so not for the rights of Timorese, but in relation to its own territorial considerations (Costa 2013, 110).

Such was UK’s effectiveness in keeping East Timor from emerging as a significant issue and out of the headlines, that one official was to remark that Britain’s low-key assistance ‘paid off handsomely’ (FCO 15/1712, 138). As a far-off middle-sized power, even had Westminster chosen to condemn Jakarta for its actions, it remains unlikely that such dissent alone would have prevented the invasion and subsequent occupation. But by crucially providing Indonesia with the ‘veil of secrecy’ for which mass violations of human rights took place under, it remains quite conceivable that at least some of the brutality evidenced by the Timorese under Indonesian occupation could have been averted. While publicly championing the principle of self-determination, behind the scenes, by actively ensuring that a veil of secrecy remained firmly draped over the territory, in later years even going so far as to provide the weaponry that actively helped sustained the conflict, Britain certainly played the role of both the ‘Hawk and the Dove.’

Andrew Stuart of the British Embassy wrote in February 1976, ‘[That] in the real world it is probably both inevitable and understandable that Timor should be incorporated into Indonesia,’ going on to state that ‘the Timorese as a whole will not lose by this’ (Parry 2005, 9). However, by October 1999, when the last Indonesian troops finally departed East Timor, British policy was shown to have been largely short-sited and inept. While with almost one-third of the pre-occupation population having perished (CAVR 2005, 6), it is certainly hard to conclude, that on the whole, the Timorese had not lost out.

## **Bibliography**

- Birmingham, John 2001, ‘Appeasing Jakarta: Australia’s complicity in the East Timor tragedy’, *Quarterly Essay* 2: 1-87.
- Bourn, John 1996, *Aid to Indonesia*, National Audit Office (NAO) Report, London.

- Burke, Edmund 1784, *Thoughts on the cause of the present discontents*, 6th edn, J. Dodsley, London.
- Chomsky, Noam 2011, Correspondence (email) with the Author, 02 August.
- Confidential Briefing Paper 1975, 'Sir Michael Palliser's visit to Indonesia: 1975 21-22 October; UK/Indonesian Relations', September 26, cited in Dowson, Hugh 2004, *Declassified Documents*, Doc. 6, George Washington University National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB174/uk06.pdf>, viewed 22 September 2015.
- Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste (CAVR) 2005, *Chega! The Report of the Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste*, CAVR, Dili, Timor-Leste.
- Costa, Anna 2013, 'Britain in the aftermath of the Indonesian invasion of Timor, 1977: The fiction of neutrality and the reality of silent help', *Pacific Affairs* 86 (1): 95-115.
- Curtis, Mark 2003, *Web of deceit: Britain's real role in the world*, Vintage, London.
- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) 1975, Wendy Way (ed.), *Document 157*, 21 July, DFAT, Jakarta.
- Dickens, David 2001, 'The United Nations in East Timor: Intervention at the military operational level', *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 23(2): 213-230.
- Dix, Robin 2007, *Statement to Glebe Coroner's Court*, typescript, 3pp, February 28.
- Dowson, Hugh 2004, 'Declassified documents reveal UK support for the Indonesian invasion and occupation of East Timor, recognition of denial of self-determination 1975-1976', George Washington University National Security Archive, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB174/indexuk.htm>, viewed 22 September 2015.
- Fernandes, Clinton 2004, *Reluctant saviour: Australia, Indonesia and the independence of East Timor*, Scribe Publications, Melbourne.
- Foster, Don 2006, *House of Commons (Hansard)*, 'Parliamentary Questions', (pt. 2), 01Column 311WH continued, 1 February, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmhansrd/vo060201/halltext/60201h02.htm>, viewed 14 April 2011.
- 2008, *House of Commons (Hansard)*, 'Parliamentary Questions', (pt. 0011), Column 97WH continued, 27 February, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm080227/halltext/80227h0011.htm>, viewed 14 April 2011.
- Gallard, Jill 2011, *New Ambassador to Portugal presents credentials*, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, <http://ukinportugal.fco.gov.uk/en/news/newambassador>, viewed 30 June 2011.
- Gittings, John 1992, 'East Timorese accuse Britain of blocking action on Indonesia', *The Guardian*, 17 June.
- Greenlees, Don and Garran, Robert 2002, *Deliverance: The inside story of East Timor's fight for freedom*, Allen & Unwin, Crow's Nest NSW.
- Jolliffe, Jill 1978, *East Timor: Nationalism and colonialism*, Queensland University Press, St Lucia.
- 2009, *Balibo*, Scribe, Carlton North, Vic.
- Nevins, Joseph 2002, 'The making of 'Ground Zero' in East Timor in 1999: An Analysis of International Complicity', *Asian Survey* 42(4): 623-641.
- Parry, Richard Lloyd 2005, 'Government lied to cover up war crimes in 1975 invasion of island', *The Times*, 30 November.
- Pilger, John 1994, *Distant voices*, Vintage, London.
- Richardson, Michael 1975, 'Indons invade Timor', *The Age*, 8 December.
- Sweeny, J K. 2002, 'A matter of small consequence: US Foreign Policy and the tragedy of East Timor', *The Independent Review* 3(1): 91-102.
- Tarling, Nicholas 2013, *Britain and Portuguese Timor 1941-1976*, Monash University Publishing, Clayton, Vic.
- Tiffen, Rodney 2001, *Diplomatic deceptions: Government, media and East Timor*, UNSW Press, Sydney.
- Toohey, Brian and Wilkinson, Marian 1987, *The book of leaks: exposes in defense of the public's right to know*, Angus and Robertson, London.
- UN Monthly Chronicle* 1964, August-September, 1 (4).
- 'Vote by E Timor assembly' 1976, *The Guardian*, 1 June.
- Watts, David 1976, 'Soldiers describe how two Britons were shot in back', *The Times*, 16 February.
- Young, Hugo 1992, 'A whitewash that deserves a backlash', *The Guardian*, 9 January.
- The National Archives (TNA) (UK): Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) Departmental Files (FCO 07/3676, 15/1608 & 15/1703 to 1717) and Britain's Jakarta Embassy Foreign Office (FO) (FO 8210/29 & 30).
- FCO 15/1704 [22] Squire, Bill to Male, Peter 1975, 'The Future of Portuguese Timor', Confidential Internal Memorandum for Ministers, 15/17 March.
- FCO 15/1704 [54] Ford, John A. to Male, Peter 1975, 'Untitled Covering Letter to Mr Duggan's Report on his Visit to Portuguese Timor', Confidential Letter, British Embassy in Jakarta, 14 July.
- FCO 15/1705 [115] Ford, Sir John A. to Bill, Squire 1975, 'Untitled', Secret Letter, British Embassy in Jakarta, 15 September.

FCO 15/1705 [124] Ford, Sir John A. 1975, 'Portuguese Timor', Secret Telegraph, British Embassy in Jakarta, 4 October.

FCO 15/1705 [124] Ford, Sir John A. 1975, 'Portuguese Timor', Secret Telegraph, British Embassy in Jakarta, 4 October.

FCO 15/1708 [347] Ford, Sir John A. 1975, 'Timor', Secret Telegram, British Embassy in Jakarta, 24 December.

FO 810/30 [2] Ford, Sir John A. 1976, 'Timor', Confidential Internal Memorandum, British Embassy Jakarta, 2 January.

FCO 15/1710 [64] Simons, Murray 1976, 'Security Council Debate on Timor,' Confidential Letter, 10 February.

FCO 15/1712 [138] Ford, Sir John A., Stuart, Andrew and Duggon, Gordon to Callaghan, James 1976, 'Timor: Indonesian Reluctant Takeover', Confidential Despatch printed by the FCO for General (but confidential) Distribution, British Embassy in Jakarta, 15 March.

FCO 15/1715, [279] Ford, Sir John A. 1976, 'My telegram No174: Timor', Confidential Telegram, British Embassy Jakarta, 4 June.

FCO 07/3676 [Part C] Beale JJ. to Wilmshurst 1979, 'East Timor,' Dispute over the Falkland Islands between Argentina and UK-Policy, Confidential Letter, 10 August.

FCO 15/1608 Duggan, Gordon A. to Flower 1979, Letter, 16 November.