New Zealand's role in 1975

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Declassified documents from Australia, the United States and New Zealand spell out the level of collusion among western nations in Indonesia's plans to invade and occupy Timor-Leste. Australia's Prime Minister Gough Whitlam has the dubious distinction of being the first to lay his pro-Indonesia cards on the table publicly. New Zealand made a less conspicuous but still vital contribution to Indonesia's diplomatic offensive.

Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam met President Suharto met in early September 1974, at Wonosobo, Java. Whitlam told Suharto that he believed an independent East Timor would be 'economically unviable' and would be 'unwelcome' to Australia and other countries in the region. Mr Whitlam went on to offer Australian support for an approach to Portugal to urge its leaders to support integration (Way 2000). Suharto then sanctioned the propaganda campaign *Operasi Komodo*, designed by key military and intelligence operatives to create a climate of fear among Timorese political forces. *Operasi Komodo* also targeted the top government circles in western capitals, where the ground was fertile

Former Australian defence analyst Paul Monk, summed up Whitlam's role from this time on:

He wanted to see incorporation take place - by an 'act of genuine self-determination'. He persisted in believing that this was compatible with the 'grand design'. The policy, therefore, remained set on autopilot, as Australia flew with Indonesia towards the bloody invasion on 7 December 1975. (Monk 2001, 20)

Mr Whitlam's outspokenness prompted New Zealand officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to consider New Zealand's stand on the future of East Timor. New Zealand officials were well aware that there was a low level of East Timorese support for integration with Indonesia. An early New Zealand Embassy dispatch to Wellington described Jakarta's propaganda pressure as 'crude', while hoping that in 'due course' Indonesia might succeed in gaining majority support: 'New Zealand lacks the direct interest in what happens in Timor which Australia must feel but presumably we would tend to give much the same weight to the general desirability of supporting Indonesia.' New Zealand would share Indonesia's concerns about having an unstable independent country in its midst: a 'scruffy mini-state in the middle of the Indonesian archipelago' (NZE 1974).

When New Zealand Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Frank Corner, met with his counterparts at the November 1974 Official Talks with Indonesia, he explained that New Zealand was not directly involved with East Timor so had yet to formulate a position. But his 'personal thoughts' would have been well-received:

[O]ne only needed to look at a map to see which way the solution should go: it seemed to him unthinkable that Portuguese Timor could have a future except with Indonesia. Geographically this was just a fact of life. At the same time, the international aspects of the situation had to be taken into account - the requirement of self determination, the insistence of the United Nations that the wishes of the people must be primary in determining the future of the territory. The problem therefore was how to bring about the only sensible result within the framework of international expectations (MFA 1974).

Jose Ramos Horta, then the diplomatic representative for the newly formed liberation party, Fretilin, didn't have maps on his mind when he met with a New Zealand representative in Canberra in December 1974. He gave the High Commissioner a full account of the BAKIN (Indonesian Intelligence Service) disinformation broadcasts into East Timor, and requested that New Zealand tell Indonesia of its support for self-determination (Heenan 1974). In July 1975 the New Zealand Ambassador to Indonesia, accompanied by the Counsellor and Defence Attaché, visited East Timor. Portuguese officials confirmed that a destabilisation campaign was under way.

The UDT coup attempt spurred New Zealand Foreign Affairs into action to ensure that Prime Minister Rowling was not caught out if he was questioned by the media:

If the press ask about Indonesia's position, you might refer them to President Suharto's remarks in recent days. These confirm that Indonesia would be concerned at having an unstable independent East Timor in its midst. This is understandable. President Suharto has indicated that his Government would be prepared to see Timor merge with Indonesia. He has not suggested that Indonesia has any intention of taking concrete steps to achieve this. It would be desirable however for you to re-iterate New Zealand's support for the principle of self-determination - leaving it for the Timorese themselves to determine their future (MFA 18 August 1975).

In the months before the invasion Fretilin made appeals to the United Nations Decolonisation Committee as well as individual appeals to the heads of governments, including New Zealand. The appeals were for an end to the military incursions but concluded with an offer to cooperate with neighbouring countries such as Australia and Indonesia. Ministry officials advised the New Zealand Prime Minister against any direct reply to the Fretilin plea.

Indonesian intelligence and military officials were given a much better hearing. On October 8 the New Zealand Defence Attaché in Jakarta, Colonel A. G. Armstrong, reported in great detail on Indonesian clandestine operations 'on and over the border', on the deployments of troops, and the positioning of planes and naval vessels within striking distance of Portuguese Timor. One informant described the Indonesian troops as 'emotional and full of patriotism'- an unsubtle hint that military action was imminent. He joked that the Attaché was in his words 'an official spy' so he would 'probably know...what Indonesia has done, is doing and must do. The volunteers are the main hope and they will carry the day. I think you know what I mean' (NZE 8 October 1975).

New Zealand ducked for cover after the Balibo killings. In the Ministry of Foreign Affairs documents of the time references to murdered NZ journalist Gary Cunningham's death were included almost as afterthoughts. Prime Minister Rowling was advised at the time to say if a journalist asked him, that enquiries had been made of Australia and Indonesia (MFA 23 October 1975). Nine months later a Ministry briefing urged that the Government not become involved in the controversy about the deaths because Gary was an Australian resident and working for the Australian media at the time of his death (MFA 29 June 1976).

Since no rebuke was forthcoming, Indonesia concluded that its plans for annexation had the green light. Indonesia was emboldened by the acquiescence of its western allies. The tipping factor was the assurance given to President Suharto that America would allow him to use their weapons. Indonesia was utterly reliant on its friends to keep it supplied with weapons and equipment. Ninety per cent of the weapons used by Indonesia in the invasion came from the United States (Chomsky 1978). New Zealand's Washington Embassy was in close touch with the United States administration. Days before the invasion they cabled: 'We have checked with the State Department who confirmed Indonesians are in a position to move in 'any time they want...The State [Department] think the Indonesians will not move until after President Ford's visit to Jakarta' (NZE 2 December 1975).

New Zealand did nothing. We did not offer a peacekeeping contribution as one newspaper editorial suggested (Herald 27 August 1975), or call on the UN Security Council to prevent a threat to peace. If we had it is possible that other nations, alerted to the issue would have decided to join us. New Zealand actions would certainly have had an impact on the political forces in Australia and in Indonesia that were opposed to military intervention.

In the immediate aftermath of the December invasion, New Zealand's Jakarta Embassy sent back detailed accounts of the military situation in East Timor. While the account of events broadly parallels the information from East Timorese accounts, the casualties have been almost entirely airbrushed out of the account. 'Casualties reported as negligible, included 1 2Lt Co Pilot killed by a stray bullet and six others.' So-called 'enemy' deaths were said to be 328 (NZE 11 December 1975).

Details were given about the chain of command all the way up to General Panggabean, and military units and troop numbers were also given. By 22 December some problems with the campaign are related including 'looting, indiscipline and misconduct' but 'we would discount reports of massacres by Indonesian troops' (NZE 22 December 1975).

The Embassy staff sent a telegram to Wellington warning that Malik, the Indonesian Foreign Minister, continued to 'maintain that only volunteers are involved in Timor...If Indonesia retreats from this fiction it will presumably only be to acknowledge that regular forces were sent in response to a four party [UDT, Apodeti, Kota and Trabalhista] request to assist with the restoration of order and security' (NZE 13 December 1975). The 'only volunteers involved' story provoked the Defence Attache to

comment: 'Evasion and half-truths are accepted diplomatic coinage but outright lying is less easy to overlook' (NZE 10 January 1976). However, two days before Christmas the Ministry served this 'fiction' up to Foreign Affairs Minister Brian Talboys newly in office following the change of Government. The briefing said that the 'integrationist forces' of UDT and Apodeti had succeeded in 'driving the Fretilin forces into the hills.' Perhaps the most significant deception was to assure the Foreign Minister that Indonesia's 'best stated' intentions were 'to facilitate and not hinder the free expression of the will of the people of East Timor about their own future, in an atmosphere of normality, order and peace' (MFA 23 December 1975).

New Zealand has always been proud of its role as one of the fifty-one founder members of the United Nations, and of wartime Prime Minister Peter Fraser's role in chairing the Committee that wrote the Trusteeship Chapter of the United Nations Charter. Yet, when the General Assembly voted to condemn the Indonesian invasion on 12 December 1975 New Zealand abstained. Officials explained to the new Foreign Affairs Minister:

Our best assessment, taking not only diplomatic but also intelligence commentaries into account, is that the stability in the Indonesian archipelago is most likely to be assured if Portuguese Timor is integrated into Indonesia' (MFA 23 December 1975).

Of the eight UN General Assembly resolutions, critical of Indonesia between 1975 and 1982 New Zealand abstained on the first four and voted against the last four.

New Zealand accepted an invitation sent in the name of the 'Provisional Government of East Timor' to attend the 31 May 1976 'Act of Integration' an Assembly held in a former Dili sports hall. In the event, New Zealand was one of only seven nations, and the only western nation to accept the invitation Only Iran and India sent their Ambassador. Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Thailand, Malaysia and New Zealand sent lesser ranked diplomats. The lower rank of the New Zealand representative was intended to send a subtle signal of disapproval (Lynch 2003). Other nations and the United Nations declined the invitation altogether out of a reasonable assessment that their attendance would be taken as giving the event a legitimacy it did not merit. Although Foreign Minister Talboys had made it public that New Zealand was sending a representative, the report of visiting diplomat Alison Stokes remained under wraps for the next 12 years. The report was however, promptly passed on to the British Embassy in Jakarta and presumably to other western embassies.

New Zealand's representative, Alison Stokes, was in Dili less than two hours, but that was time enough to observe the Peoples Representative Council since it only lasted for one hour. The Indonesian-appointed 'Ministers of the Provincial Government' signed a petition requesting Suharto to grant integration. Some of the East Timorese who had been press ganged into helping the visiting journalists and diplomats told their story later when they had fled the country. Hand-picked representatives were taken by the army from their homes for several weeks of indoctrination. Their task was to convince the journalists that the Assembly was genuine; and they were threatened that if they made any 'mistakes' in the meeting they would be executed. Just to be sure there were Indonesian soldiers in East Timorese dress lining the roads behind the East Timorese, watching them.

Alison Stokes also recorded the 'serious flaws' in the 'act of self-determination'. It was not clear that the 'representatives' had been elected from their communities and they were being given only one choice - integration. In low-key diplomat-speak she describes 'disappointing' aspects to the day, such as being given a leaflet on the plane flying in that announced the outcome of the Assembly before it had been held. Observers did not get a full translation or the chance to talk to delegates. The report also notes that the street carnival and cheering were 'over-organised and lacked spontaneity' (NZE 1 June 1976).

New Zealand declined a subsequent invitation to accompany a delegation of Indonesian parliamentarians on a visit to the territory to talk to the people about integration. Officials were dismayed that Indonesia had not 'hoisted in the lessons' of the May 31 exercise and were going ahead in another event supposedly about self-determination, with no UN participation. The bilateral relationship should not suffer since 'New Zealand made its run on the 31 May exercise, and the Indonesians could hardly regard us as being unhelpful or 'holier than thou' (NZE 16 June 1976).

In 1978 New Zealand's Ambassador Roger Peren was invited to visit post-invasion East Timor. This New Zealand visit was considered by officials to be a 'major concession' on the part of Indonesia. It was almost certainly the first time that Indonesia had hosted a diplomatic visit at Ambassadorial level to East Timor since it took control over the territory (MFA 18 January 1978). It is clear from the letters

sent to campaigners around this time that the Government was looking for a way to be able to say that the self-determination issue could be set aside. Helpfully, Mr Peren concluded his report with a confident assertion that the 'bulk of the population was firmly on the side of the authorities'. His evidence was 'the numbers of people who were coming down from the mountains, who were 'voting with their feet' (Peren 1978).

Mr Peren was not totally blinkered about the extent of the militarisation of East Timor. He noted, for example, that his questions about the size of the Indonesian military presence always went unanswered, and that deliberate attempts had been made to give the impression of a civilian administration, by 'moving troops and equipment where we were unlikely to spot them' and by keeping the delegation well away from strategic bases and airfields.

There is a respectable case for saying that the people of East Timor are likely to have better opportunities in the future as citizens of the Republic of Indonesia than if they were independent, whether or not one is concerned on the score of long range security and the ambitions of either China or the Soviet Union (Peren 1978).

Mr Peren dismissed as 'highly improbable' the contention that napalm was being used. However, postliberation, the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste interviewed witnesses, tabled military documents and even viewed Indonesian military propaganda film of the time to confirm that incendiary weapons were used. These weapons destroyed crops, poisoned the water supply and scorched everything within range.

The Foreign Minister presented his Ministerial colleagues with a summary of Mr Peren's report. It began with appalling statements in which the East Timorese are effectively reduced to the status of 'non people' whose interests can be disregarded. Mr Peren's undisguised distaste for the people even extended to the country itself that he described as 'by no means an attractive piece of real estate'. He was happy to interpret what he was shown as it was presented by his hosts, commenting on the starving and dispirited people he met as though their condition was somehow their fault:

in sum...poor, small, riddled with disease, and almost totally illiterate, very simple and, we were told again and again, 'primitive'...Considered as human stock they are not at all impressive - and this is something that one has to think about when judging their capacity to take part in an act of self-determination or even to perform as responsible citizens of an independent country (Peren 1978).

Mr Peren's conclusion that all that remained of Fretilin was a 'hardcore communist organisation' led him easily to his conclusion that '[i]ntegration of East Timor into the Republic of Indonesia is plainly irreversible'. Foreign Minister Talboys told the Cabinet that this 'squares with my own feelings on this matter...There is nothing to be gained, least of all for the Timorese people, by dwelling on the past, the incorporation of East Timor into Indonesia has already been accepted as a reality by a number of countries, including the five ASEAN nations and Australia' (Talboys 1978a).

Talboys subsequently told activists that because of Mr Peren's visit Government could now accept 'that the occupation of East Timor was irreversible', but he denied that this was a departure from the established position (Talboys 1978b). The irreversibility doctrine would guide government policy for the next 18 years.

The East Timor solidarity movement had a very different agenda in 1978 – a months' long campaign to get the Government to back down from a decision to refuse a visa to resistance leader Jose Ramos Horta. It was the year of the 'Let Horta Speak' campaign which probably attracted far more attention to the cause than would have been the case had there been no visa bar. The government backed down in September, but unfortunately by this time Ramos Horta was unable to include a New Zealand visit in his hectic schedule.

The Ministry had meanwhile been fully engaged with its damage limitation strategy. It was not an easy task to explain to Indonesian officials that public opinion and an independent media could not be ignored. For a while there was even a possibility that Foreign Minister Mochtar Kusumaatmadja might put off his visit to New Zealand for fear of demonstrations.

The Wellington Ministry offered helpful advice to the diplomats in the Jakarta Embassy:

You might stress that the government has incurred a good deal of unpopularity by trying to limit Horta's propagandising. At the same time, you could point out that this is a democratic country and the government is committed to upholding human rights, including the right to travel and the right of free speech (MFA 17 August 1978).

The Foreign Minister was advised:

Although its [New Zealand Government's] decision to admit Horta was taken on domestic grounds, as full an account as possible was taken of Indonesia's position. The government has weathered the storm in the interests of protecting New Zealand's good relations with Indonesia (MFA 15 September 1978).

In 2002, Hon Phil Goff, at the time Minister of Foreign Affairs released official documents relating to the New Zealand Government's East Timor position in the years 1975 to 1976 around the time of the Indonesian invasion. These include a number of documents referred to here. He said 'Australia, the United States and New Zealand to varying degrees explicitly indicated to Indonesia acceptance of its intention to invade. Their comments after the invasion similarly failed to condemn that action. Our countries must share some responsibility for the suffering subsequently endured by the people of East Timor' (Goff 2002).

While that is an acknowledgement of wrong and an apology of sorts, it does little to compensate the people of Timor Leste for their 24 year-long agony. We were after all one of the key nations along with the United States, Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Japan- which provided essential backing for Indonesia's control over East Timor (Nevins 2002). In my view New Zealand is repeating the same error now with respect to its foreign policy concerning West Papua, as it continues to prioritise Indonesian viewpoints over those of West Papuan leaders.

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