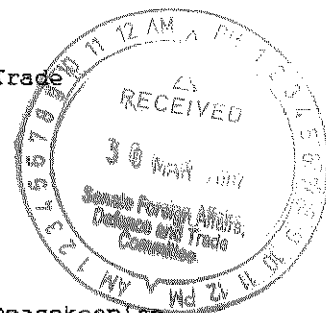


The Secretary  
Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600



28 March 2007

Submission to the Inquiry into Australia's involvement in peacekeeping operations by Bob Hanney, Secretary, Australia East Timor Friendship Association (SA) Inc.

Dear committee members

My submission to you is that Australia's peacekeeping operations in East Timor have been flawed by serious conflicts of interest. These conflicts of interest have been detrimental to East Timor and its armed forces, and also to Australian soldiers serving there. The conflicts of interest are a) the ongoing co-operation between the Australian Defence Force and the Indonesian Defence Force (TNI), and b) the Australian Government's strategic interests in the region.

AETFA and many other East Timor support groups called on the Australian Government to lobby the United Nations to send peacekeepers to East Timor from April 1999 after it became obvious that Indonesia, which was arming and supporting the militias which were terrorising the population, could not be relied upon to maintain security leading up to, during and especially after the August 30 referendum on Independence. I still believe that the Australian Government could have managed this, if it tried, because the Clinton Administration had indicated some support if Australia called for it. Nevertheless an Australian-led peacekeeping force went in (too late) to clean up the mess after many deaths and massive dislocation and destruction wreaked on East Timor by the departing TNI and their militias. The Australian forces were justifiably praised for their efforts.

My brief does not concern this period, however, only in so far as it sets the tone for what was to follow. The Bulletin article: "Betrayal by Fire" by Paul Daley, 6 June 2006 describes how Government policy and differences between Defence and Foreign Affairs Department not only left Australian soldiers unarmed and in a precarious and frustrating position, but resulted in the nascent East Timor Defence Force, now the F-FDTL, being almost totally untrained and undisciplined. In a nutshell, the Australian Government did not want the ETRDF to be trained to assuage Jakarta, following the rift between the two countries after the InterFET deployment. In the words of Major Steve McCrohon, who lead the first training team from Australia in 2001:

"I had a briefing before deployment where I was told by a senior public servant (from Defence) that they actually wanted this mission to fail. I don't know exactly why that is, but they did their best to ensure that it did fail."

Furthermore, from ADF threat assessment notes obtained by The Bulletin it is clear that the ADF was very aware of the potential for the ETRDF to fracture and become corrupted. The threat from ex-Falintil (Resistance) fighters was one example. And so Paul Daley notes:

"Despite these well-held fears, Australia did nothing to enhance a culture of unity and cohesion with the ETRDF. On the contrary, for all intents and purposes it seems to have deliberately bungled that opportunity - a mistake for which East Timor is paying a heavy price."

When Warrant Officer Wayne McInnes' training advisory team deployed to Los Palos they came across appalling conditions for the EITDF's 600 soldiers there. About a quarter had been struck down with severe illnesses; there was little fresh water, no medicines and totally inadequate toilets. No medical support was sent for two months. One has to question what happened to the \$6m provided by the Australian Government for the purpose of training the East Timorese forces. Adding to the danger already faced by the unarmed four-member training team they were ordered to undertake surveillance on Indonesian units which had crossed the border into East Timor: peace-keeping troops were not called in to confront them. According to McInnes:

"We were actually told that it was important to take a softly, softly approach to appease the Indonesians."

Regarding the (training):

"Was it ever going to work? No. They never wanted it to. That was clear and it was stated many times."

Dovetailing the Australian Government's determination not to offend Jakarta is the Government's interpretation of 'the national interest': in the case of East Timor it appears to be control and influence over its government and defence force. A classified ADF minute, obtained by The Bulletin, to the Chief of the Defence Force, dated 10 May 2001, advises:

"The first objective... is to pursue Australia's broad strategic interests in East Timor, namely denial, access and influence. The strategic interest of denial seeks to ensure that no foreign power gains an unacceptable level of access to East Timor, and is coupled with the complimentary objective of seeking access to East Timor for Australia, in particular the ADF. Australia's strategic interests can also be protected and pursued more effectively if Australia maintains some degree of influence over East Timor's decision-making."

This neo-colonial approach to East Timor and the Australian Government's close relations with Indonesia and its military compromises the effectiveness of our peacekeepers and defence trainers there. In fact Australia must accept some of the responsibility for the fracturing of the East Timor Defence Force, the F-FDTL, which sparked the violence still ensuing in this fledgling, traumatised nation.

And now, by refusing to place its armed forces under the control of the United Nations, as was called for by the UN Secretary-General, the East Timor Government and the other member countries of the peacekeeping force, the Australian Government has further compromised our efforts there. By taking this unilateral approach the Government has drawn anger and enmity from East Timorese who correctly see Australia pushing its 'interests' in their country. As a result our soldiers in East Timor are at greater risk. In the Region, too, neighbouring countries are becoming more wary of Australia.

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