

East Timor claims it knows which Australian spies bugged its offices

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East Timor's government believes it has identified the members of a team of four Australian spies who allegedly bugged its government offices, describing it as "very disturbing" that they apparently used the cover of an aid program.

The revelations came as intelligence and development experts expressed their deep misgivings that aid was apparently used as the pretext for installing and then removing the eavesdropping equipment, saying it jeopardised important aid projects and potentially put Australian aid workers at risk around the world.

"We think we have identified the team of people who came in to do the bugging. We have their names," said Alfredo Pires, East Timor's Natural Resources Minister. "They are males, along with a possible lady spy."

East Timor would keep the names secure, he said. But he noted that at least one of them was still working overseas under the same name and may be at risk "if the names get out over the internet".

"Australian authorities may have to check on them," Mr Pires said.

He said the names were uncovered by going through flight and other records. The investigation had also uncovered that the listening devices were smuggled in by "diplomatic couriers".

The alleged bugging was done in 2004 under the auspices of an aid program to renovate East Timor's dilapidated government buildings.

The listening devices were allegedly installed in the prime minister's office and rooms used for cabinet discussions.

At the time, Australia and East Timor were negotiating the terms of a treaty governing the massive oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea. The claims of spying come from a former Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) agent who turned whistleblower.

East Timor wants the Treaty on Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea (CMATS), declared invalid and the retired ASIS agent has sworn an affidavit detailing the alleged spying operation, which he led. Premises of the ex-agent and the lawyer representing the East Timorese government in arbitration over CMATS, Bernard Collaery, were raided by ASIO last week.

Mr Pires said East Timor wanted the seized documents returned, at least those that do not relate directly to security matters.

He said the alleged espionage by spies undercover as aid workers had ruptured trust.

"The allegation that aid was used as a cover for espionage is very disturbing," Mr Pires said.

"I know many aid workers from Australia. They are good people and this doesn't help them."

It was a sentiment endorsed by Stephen Howes, director of the Development Policy Centre at the Australian National University.

"It's obviously not good for aid agencies, for the relationship of trust required for an aid program."

He pointed to the CIA using a fake polio vaccination drive as part of its attempt to track down terrorist leader Osama bin Laden.

After it was disclosed, at least nine Pakistani health workers involved in polio eradication were killed and the United Nations withdrew its program.

Clinton Fernandes, a former army intelligence officer now with the University of NSW, said an inquiry was necessary.

"The use of the aid program to facilitate espionage, if true, is so serious that the person who is responsible for it ought to resign," he said.

The former ASIS officer has alleged former foreign affairs minister Alexander Downer ordered the operation, Mr Collaery said.

Mr Downer has declined to comment on intelligence matters, citing long-standing practice.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/east-timor-claims-it-knows-which-australian-spies-bugged-its-offices-20131209-2z1tk.html>