

Spies, lies, trade and aid: What are friends for?

Kirsty Sword-Gusmao

Published: December 28, 2013 - 9:38AM

As a citizen of both Australia and Timor-Leste, I feel saddened and disgusted by the recent actions of the Australian government and their national intelligence agency. I see the raid on the home and office of a Timor-Leste Canberra-based lawyer as an act of hostility towards the people of my adopted homeland.

This is not the way I expect the country, land of my birth, to behave towards a poor and fragile neighbour. The Australia I hope my children will be proud to call their second home is a caring, open-minded and tolerant country, conscious of its wealth and privilege and keen to share its vast resources with other less fortunate Peoples.

It is not the mean, self-serving and inward-looking place that the government seems to be intent on making it.

How can Australia look Timor-Leste in the face and offer advice and technical assistance on good governance, democracy and the rule of law when, within Australia itself, commercial interests are allowed to ride roughshod over international and national laws?

Is the reasoning that “everyone else does it, why shouldn’t we?” sufficient to explain why Australia would bug the offices of a friendly, fledgling government? The fact that the alleged wiring by ASIS of the cabinet office was carried out under the guise of aid to the new government and that, in order to be successful, it relied on the inexperience and institutional weaknesses of the Timor-Leste authorities, makes it all the more a cynical and reprehensible act.

These sorts of actions make me wonder what sense of its responsibility to the community of nations, particularly its neighbours in our region, the Australian government thinks it has. Education initiatives in this country, including our Ministry of Education’s mother tongue pilot program, which has been strongly supported by Australia’s wonderful AusAID project has been left high and dry now that this part of the aid budget has been cut.

Health programs addressing the needs of Timor-Leste’s women and children and other vulnerable people are also in line to be defunded. Ausaid has now ceased to be an independent agency and as of this year, was rolled into DFAT. This is the department where spies, trade and aid came together as one to commercially and economically disadvantage a poor nation with more questions than answers emerging of late in response to Timor-Leste’s good faith request for clarity, rectification and reasonable attempts for friendly resolution.

The Australian Government, however, is now avoiding justifying its appalling actions by invoking

national security arguments – a final blow to a People who have been steadfast allies to Australia.

It is worth recalling that Australia's invasion of Timor-Leste in December 1941, provoked the landing of Japanese troops less than an hour from the shores of Australia and began a subsequent period of brutal occupation between 1942-1945. As a result of the shelter and care offered by ordinary Timorese to the Australian diggers, Australia suffered only 40 casualties in Timor, in contrast the loss of life by East Timorese civilians was between 40,000 and 60,000.

Is the Australian government's conduct any way to repay this "debt of honour"? The many thousands of Australians who enjoy deep and abiding friendships with the people of Timor-Leste know well that what our nation needs just as desperately as oil and gas revenues. What Timor-Leste needs is understanding, patience and respect for our dignity.

Ironically, as this ghastly business unfolded in Canberra, my husband was in the midst of a visit to the Republic of South Sudan, extending the hand of friendship and support to another young and poor nation, struggling to get on its feet and rebuild.

In spite of its painful recent history, Timor-Leste and its People have moved forward with dignity to rebuild the nation, taking their place on the international stage as a good global citizen.

In light of recent activity, I feel compelled to tell a story of my own experience. In February 2002, an episode of "Australian Story" featuring my work for the East Timorese liberation struggle was broadcast on ABC TV.

The documentary revealed how I assisted the East Timorese leader, now my husband, to communicate with the world about the atrocities being committed against his people and about their aspirations for freedom. Since for much of the time that I was carrying out this work I was resident in Jakarta and working part-time for Australian Volunteers International (AVI) as a Liaison Officer, the story led to much public comment and much to my surprise, some suggestions that I had acted as a "spy" or "under-cover agent" for the East Timorese. Some commentators went so far as to accuse me of having endangered the lives of other aid workers by supporting the independence cause whilst in the employ of an Australian aid agency.

In fact, the unpaid work I did out of office hours consisted of compiling human rights reports, smuggling medicine and funds to prisoners and helping students persecuted by the Indonesian military regime to get their tales of torture, arbitrary detention and disappearances out to the world. I was merely one member of a vast global network of friends of Timor-Leste's legitimate quest for self-determination.

At the time of the "Australian Story" documentary going to air in early 2002, I was working as an Administrative Assistant in the offices of the National Council of Timorese Resistance, the umbrella body headed by my husband, representing the people of Timor-Leste in negotiations with the United Nations as to the establishment of a transitional administration.

Within days of the broadcast on Australian TV of the *Australian Story* documentary, I received a phone call from the then Executive Director of AVI, Bill Armstrong. With great sadness in his voice, Bill informed me that he had received a phone call from a senior Government official acting in concert with what was believed to be the wishes of the Foreign Minister's Office. The Foreign Minister was Alexander Downer. In light of the information on my activities contained in the documentary film, it was made clear that AVI cease support for my volunteer assignment.

Mindful that the lion's share of funding for the AVI program came from the Australian government and, not wanting to jeopardise the vital contribution of Australian volunteers to Timor-Leste's nation-building efforts into the future, I reassured Bill that I respected the decision that he needed to take. At the time I decided to stay silent on the matter as I was keenly aware of our new nation's

dependence on Australian aid and the importance of constructive diplomatic relations.

If today I am divulging details of this affair it is only to lay open to public scrutiny the hypocrisy and double standards of previous and present government leaders. It would seem that it's okay to use the aid dollar to back espionage against your neighbours if you are a rich, white nation.

It never occurred to me to invoke national security interests at the time of having my human rights advocacy on behalf of Timor-Leste branded as "spying". Perhaps I should have done so, particularly since two decades of Australian collusion with the Indonesian military regime could be seen as a very plausible threat indeed to the security of the people of both Australia and Timor-Leste, resulting as it did in unimaginable suffering and loss of life.

In the interests of fostering constructive and forward-looking relations with its neighbours, Timor-Leste has opted to let bygones be bygones in its dealings with former foes. Timor-Leste has successfully rebuilt its relationship with Indonesia on a foundation of mutual respect, trust and transparency. It is unfortunate that the Australian government's own actions have caused many East Timorese and Australians alike to question this policy of appeasement and to reopen the Pandora's Box of past grievances and pain.

The conduct of the Australian authorities in the course of the past week or so is also hugely out of step with public sentiment, the goodwill, friendship and solidarity that exists in abundance within the Australian community. So many friends have written to me over the past week or so to say how ashamed they feel to be Australians and to express their dismay at their government's conduct.

I thank all those who continue to express their solidarity and support and especially those who fearlessly seek to expose the truth for the good of both Nations.

Viva Timor-Leste and long live the bonds of solidarity and true friendship that unite the peoples of our two great nations!

These comments are of a personal nature and do not reflect the views or positions of the government of Timor-Leste.

Kirsty Sword-Gusmao is a Goodwill Ambassador for education of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste and Chair of the Alola Foundation

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-opinion/spies-lies-trade-and-aid-what-are-friends-for-20131228-3004m.html>