

Australia's disturbing response to human rights abuses

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AUSTRALIA and East Timor have finally ended a longstanding feud, after the two countries yesterday signed a treaty defining a permanent maritime border.

But little has been said of research detailing the extent to which the Australian government trivialised severe human rights abuses against the Timorese in the 1970s, after they were invaded by Indonesia.

Over and over again, officials within the Fraser government were told of the mass killings, sexual violence, theft and bombing attacks taking place.

They didn't just deny the allegations. They mocked them unmercifully.

AUSTRALIA'S SICKENING HISTORY WITH EAST TIMOR

In December 1975, shortly after Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam was deposed, Indonesia invaded East Timor in what was the country's largest military operation, backed by Australia.

The new Fraser government believed the operation would be quick and peaceful. Not so.

By 1977, the situation was dire. Severe human rights abuses, massacres, beatings, rapes and forced starvation became the ugly reality for the people of East Timor. The conflict raged for 25 years and cost over 100,000 lives.

As [The Diplomat](#) recently reported, accounts of these events were made public by former military intelligence officer James Dunn, who served as Australia's consul in Portuguese Timor.

He published a crucial report on the atrocities taking place in East Timor in the 1970s, called *The Dunn Report On East Timor*.

The report featured interviews with Timorese refugees in Portugal, who spoke of widespread killings, sexual violence and deliberately induced famines.

Dunn's findings were published in Australian newspapers and sent to politicians, including his old colleagues in Foreign Affairs.

He described the brutality of Indonesia's invasion, stating that "refugees became prisoners in the refugee camps and none of the aid channelled via the

Indonesian Red Cross reached the refugees”.

But the Australian government, now led by Malcolm Fraser, sought to silence the report, because it was in its political interests to see East Timor incorporated into Indonesia, and to support the regime of Indonesia’s then-President Suharto.

They trivialised the findings, ignored the allegations, emphasised the report’s lack of official status and rejected criticism of Suharto’s government.

They said the report was written in Dunn’s “private capacity and it had no official status. He was not a member of the Department”.

Department of Foreign Affairs senior officials disregarded the claims as “hearsay”, despite direct eyewitness testimonies.

As Dunn was being welcomed with a platform to speak in western Europe and the United States, the Australian government continued to trivialise the findings and death toll as “highly exaggerated” and based on “second-hand evidence”.

But they went further than just silencing. According to researchers, they wrote handwritten notes mocking reports of rape, torture and execution.

For example, next to a sentence reporting “a great deal of looting and raping of girls in Baucau”, an official had written “How do you loot a girl?”

The sickening history was also well-documented by researcher Kim McGrath in her book *Crossing The Line: Australia’s Secret History In The Timor Sea*.

At one point, she refers to a media release issued by Fretilin, a pro-independence political party in Timor, which describes the “daily torturing, raping and executing (of) the captured population” in a concentration camp.

Next to the underlined text are the words “sounds like fun”, and a comment stating: “This report is internally inconsistent. If the enemy was impotent, as stated, how come they are daily raping the captured population? Or is the former a result of the latter?”

Meanwhile, the humanitarian crisis was only getting worse. The Timorese population was forced to relocate into camps, where a growing famine contributed to the majority of lives lost.

In 1978, while 140,000 Timorese were being subject to napalm and scatter bomb attacks, Australia and Indonesia were calmly negotiating a permanent seabed boundary south of East Timor.

It wasn't until 2002 that East Timor would finally gain independence, and Australia and the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) negotiated the 2002 Timor Sea Treaty — a variant split 90-10 in favour of Timor, which applied to fields in the Joint Petroleum Development Area.

Even so, the countries' relationship would continue to suffer over following years. In 2012, it was revealed Australia had been spying on East Timor's cabinet office to gather top secret information that would assist them in negotiations over the Timor Gap.

While signing the treaty in New York yesterday, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said she hoped both states could “live peacefully and prosper together” and was pleased to be personally involved.

“With this treaty, we open a new chapter in relations between Australia and Timor-Leste,” she said.