

How Australia Ignored East Timor's Suffering

The 1977 Dunn Report outlined grave human rights abuses in East Timor. Too bad Canberra ignored it.

By **Peter Job**

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As **announced by the Permanent Court of Arbitration** on February 25, there appears to be hope at last for a settlement of the prolonged legal battle between Australia and Timor-Leste over the Timor Sea. In this context, it is worth noting that 2018 marks 41 years since the publication of an important document which recorded a different struggle in East Timor, one also with a significant element of Australian involvement.

In 1977, over a year after the Indonesian invasion of December 7, 1975, the situation in East Timor was dire. As the Timor-Leste Commission for Truth and Reconciliation later documented, the invasion, which met strong resistance from the Fretilin independence movement, was accompanied by severe human rights abuses, including massacres from the first day aimed at terrorizing the population into compliance. In its wake, large numbers of Timorese had fled to areas in the countryside controlled by Fretilin, where Indonesian tactics of destroying crops and targeting food supplies were leading to increasing privation and loss of life.

In Australia, relations with Suharto's New Order were considered vital to the then-Fraser government's foreign policy agenda. The regime had overthrown Sukarno and destroyed the Communist Party of Indonesia the previous decade, actions which, although costing upwards of half a million lives, the **Australian government had supported** through Radio Australia and other means. In the wake of the unification of Vietnam and the fall of Laos and Cambodia to Marxist regimes in 1975, the Fraser government viewed support for pro-Western anti-communist regimes in the region as vital. These goals were also strongly encouraged by the United States. The Fraser government also saw Indonesia as central to its goals of strengthening ties with ASEAN nations and with the wider Asian region. The desire to negotiate an agreement to allow the exploitation of Timor Sea oil resources provided further impetus to this position. Military aid to Indonesia accordingly continued after the invasion, including the provision of Nomad aircraft, which were used in East Timor (despite assurances to the contrary by the Indonesian ambassador).



East Timorese gather at Santa Cruz cemetery in Dili during a commemoration of the 23rd anniversary of Indonesia's invasion (Dec. 7, 1998).

Image Credit: AP Photo/Sam Martins

It was in this context that James Dunn, a former military intelligence officer and diplomat who had been consul to Portuguese Timor in the early 1960s, published *The Dunn Report on East Timor* in February 1977. The report, based on interviews Dunn conducted with Timorese refugees in Portugal, detailed accounts of severe human rights abuses, including massacres, sexual violence, deliberately induced famine, and other abuses. Dunn concluded that claims from Catholic sources of 100,000 deaths were “credible” due to widespread killing in the mountains.

The Fraser government and the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) greeted the report with consternation. Although the Fraser government had not at that stage recognized the incorporation of East Timor into Indonesia, it was on an unambiguous trajectory to do so. The domestic and international reactions to the revelations in the Dunn Report constituted a threat to this, and to its goal of supporting and protecting the Suharto regime in the international arena. The Fraser government therefore worked to publicly deny the reality of the situation in East Timor and to neutralize the work of Dunn and other activists.

In response to a question in parliament on the report on March 16, Foreign Minister Andrew Peacock ignored the actual allegations, emphasized the report’s lack of official status, and warned against allowing the matter to create “misunderstanding” with Indonesia. DFA officials also displayed a bias toward reflexively supporting the Suharto regime and rejecting criticism of it. Even though the report was based upon the direct testimony of eyewitness who had expressed a willingness to speak to international inquiries, notations on a DFA copy of the report by Jakarta embassy officers Woolcott and Hogue describe it as “hearsay.” Amongst a number of cynical notations on the margins of the report itself is the question, “How do you loot a girl?” transcribed next to a sentence reporting “a great deal of looting and raping of girls in Baucau.”

In early 1977, Dunn took his message to a number of European countries, including France, Britain, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Portugal, as well as to the United States. In each he gained some media attention and was received at a high level, including by senior foreign ministry officials in the Netherlands, France, and Sweden, concerned parliamentarians in Britain, and their counterparts in the U.S. Congress.

With Australia seen as an authority of the Timor situation by much of the international community, the Fraser government chose to use this position to lobby for the Suharto regime, relaying to its missions in the countries Dunn visited instructions as to how to discredit his claims. A cable to the embassy in Sweden, for example, directed it to convey the Australian belief that there was “no information” to substantiate allegations of rape or abuses against civilians, that the scale of atrocities had been “highly exaggerated,” the death rate greatly overstated, and the Dunn allegations were merely “hearsay and second-hand evidence.”

Dunn’s allegations had a significant impact in the Netherlands, with the report published in the press and the second chamber of Dutch parliament calling for an international inquiry on March 10. The Dutch government approached the International Red Cross to inquire about such an investigation. Apparently respecting its expertise, it also requested the Australian government to supply its own assessment of Dunn’s allegations.

In response, DFA officials in both Canberra and The Hague provided the Australia-supported narrative, arguing to the Dutch ambassador and the Dutch minister for foreign affairs respectively that “very little would be achieved” by an investigation, that it would be deeply resented by the Indonesians and that Dunn’s findings were “hearsay.” The Dutch subsequently abandoned support for an inquiry. The Australian efforts appear to have been a significant element in this decision, with the Dutch director general of political affairs telling the Australian ambassador that his government “greatly appreciated” the Australian attitude to East Timor, “which was very close to that of the Dutch.”

Arguably the Dunn Report had its most significant impact in the United States, with Dunn invited to speak to the Congressional House Committee on International Relations on March 23, 1977. In the leadup to the hearings, U.S. and Australian officials saw a common interest in working together to minimize the impact of Dunn's testimony. The U.S. ambassador to Indonesia advised Australian Ambassador Woolcott that anything the Australian government could do to put Dunn's report into "proper perspective" would be helpful. The Indonesian ambassador to the UN also asked his Australian counterpart if Australia could "do more in Washington." DFA complied, with a cable from Canberra to Washington of March 16 repeating that Dunn's allegations were "hearsay" and claiming that a "thorough study of all the information... available to us" had failed to corroborate his claims. Given that Australia had not substantially investigated Dunn's findings, the basis of this contention is unclear. Dunn's testimony was also preceded by that of State Department official Robert Oakley, who presented a distorted outline of the situation similar to the narrative promoted by Indonesia and Australia.

Nonetheless, Dunn's testimony, which outlined the findings of his report and corrected Oakley's misrepresentations, proved influential. While the Carter administration continued relations with the Suharto regime as normal, including the provision of arms, in the longer term it galvanized the U.S. solidarity movement and led to a series of further congressional investigations in subsequent years which proved important in keeping an awareness of the situation in East Timor alive.

As Dunn published his report, the humanitarian crisis in East Timor was accelerating. In the following years the bombing, napalming, defoliation, deliberate destruction of rural resources, and the forced relocation of the Timorese population into camps would instigate the famine that would take the majority of the lives lost during the occupation. The occupation would ultimately cause the destruction of up to a third of the population, making it proportionally one of the major human-caused tragedies of the 20th century. With the Suharto regime dependent upon international goodwill and domestic and international aid, significant international attention, such as the investigation originally proposed by the Dutch, would have been likely to have at least mitigated the most severe abuses and saved many lives. Australian lobbying on the Suharto regime's behalf proved a significant factor in keeping the issue off the international agenda and allowing it to continue its bloody program of "encirclement and annihilation" unimpeded.

Nevertheless, the impact of the Dunn Report was significant. It revived the issue in the Australian media and parliament and provide activists with a valuable evidence-based tool as increasing evidence of the humanitarian crisis in East Timor emerged in the following years. By taking his evidence to the U.S. Congress, Dunn put the issue on the agenda of U.S. politicians and activists, ensuring it would be an issue in the following years and decades. By bringing the matter to the attention of international civil society it was also responsible for laying the groundwork for long term campaigns in Europe and elsewhere. The Dunn Report can therefore be seen as an essential milestone in the history of the struggle for East Timorese independence, without which events well may not have eventuated as they did.

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