

## The 'Balibo affair', East Timor, October 1975

### Events in Timor, 1975

In 1975 Timor, which lies to the northwest of Australia and on the eastern extremity of the Indonesian archipelago, was a divided island. West Timor (formerly a Dutch colonial possession) was part of Indonesia while East (or Portuguese) Timor was a Portuguese colony on the path to independence. Two popular political movements had developed in East Timor – the *Uniao Democratica Timorese* (UDT), which favoured a gradualist move to independence, and the left-leaning Fretilin, which sought independence at the earliest opportunity.

Indonesia had become concerned at growing instability within East Timor and in particular at the increasing popularity of Fretilin. A UDT-led coup in August 1975 against the colonial administration was met with seeming disinterest from Portugal. In this power vacuum and with Indonesian forces undertaking military incursions into East Timor, Fretilin declared the territory's independence on 28 November. Indonesia's response was an invasion of East Timor beginning on 5 December – an invasion that had the tacit approval of the United States and other western powers.

### Events at Balibo

In October 1975 five Australia-based television journalists arrived in the East Timorese border town of Balibo to cover events for Australia's Channel 7 and Channel 9 networks. The group comprised two Australians (Greg Shackleton and Tony Stewart), two Britons (Malcolm Rennie and Brian Peters) and a New Zealander (Gary Cunningham). The men were reported missing on 16 October, and while reports of burnt bodies of Europeans being found in East Timor gave an indication of their fate it was not until 12 November that their deaths were confirmed when Indonesian officials handed the remains of the men and some personal belongings to the Australian Embassy in Jakarta, Indonesia.

How the journalists met their deaths has become known as the 'Balibo affair'. The deaths and events surrounding them have had a significant impact on public sentiment in Australia towards Indonesia and on diplomatic relations between the two countries. Many questions have continued to be raised about the Balibo affair. Were the journalists killed in crossfire during a skirmish between UDT and Fretilin forces – as the official Indonesian line suggests? How much did the Australian Government know about the attack on 16 October? Could the Australian Government have exerted pressure in 1975 to stop the Indonesian invasion? Why did the Australian

Government not push for self-determination of East Timor, instead giving de jure recognition to Indonesia's incorporation of East Timor?

## Inquiries into the Balibo affair

A series of Australian Government inquiries have sought to answer some of the questions raised about the Balibo affair. In 1976 a team headed by Allan Taylor (a counsellor with the Australian Embassy in Indonesia) visited East Timor to inquire into and report on the incident. As the controversy continued into the 1990s, Tom Sherman, then Chairman of the National Crime Authority, was appointed to conduct inquiries in 1996 and 1999. The most recent government inquiry was undertaken in 2002 by the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security. Other inquiries have included the investigation by the International Commission of Jurists that culminated in a colloquium held in 1997, and the NSW Government's 2007 coronial inquest into the death of Brian Peters, which answered a number of remaining questions about the Balibo incident.

## Records relating to the Balibo affair

Records held by the National Archives relating to the Balibo affair include those of the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Australian Embassy in Jakarta, as well as records of other key departments. A selection of these records is listed below.

Under an arrangement approved by the prime minister in 2000, over 300 files relating to the Balibo affair recorded by the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister and Cabinet in 1975 and 1976 were released using accelerated access provisions of the *Archives Act 1983*. Material exempted on these records will be subject to the standard access and review provisions of the Act once it enters the open access period.

### Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>East Timor – activities of Australian journalists</u>	1975–76	A1209, 1975/2257

### Department of Foreign Affairs

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Indonesia – protection of Australian interests and citizens</u>	1952–77	A1838, 3034/10/12/1 part 1
<u>Australian – Timor relations – Jose Martins</u>	1974–76	A1838, 3038/10/13/1 part 1
<u>Australian – Timor relations – Jose Martins</u>	1974–76	A1838, 3038/10/13/1 part 2
<u>Relations with Australia and foreign policy towards Portuguese Timor – general – ministerial correspondence</u>	1975	A1838, 3038/10/1/1 part 1
<u>Relations with Australia and foreign policy towards Portuguese Timor – general – ministerial correspondence</u>	1975	A1838, 3038/10/1/1 part 2
<u>Relations with Australia and foreign policy towards Portuguese Timor – general – ministerial correspondence</u>	1975	A1838, 3038/10/1/1 part 3
<u>Relations with Australia and foreign policy towards Portuguese Timor – general – ministerial correspondence</u>	1975	A1838, 3038/10/1/1 part 4

<u>Relations with Australia and foreign policy towards Portuguese Timor – general – ministerial correspondence</u>	1975	A1838, 3038/10/1/1 part 5
<u>Relations with Australia and foreign policy towards Portuguese Timor – general – ministerial correspondence</u>	1975	A1838, 3038/10/1/1 part 6
<u>Relations with Australia and foreign policy towards Portuguese Timor – general – ministerial correspondence</u>	1975	A1838, 3038/10/1/1 part 7
<u>Relations with Australia and foreign policy towards Portuguese Timor – general – ministerial correspondence</u>	1975	A1838, 3038/10/1/1 part 8

### **Department of Foreign Affairs, office of Legal Adviser**

<b>Title or description of record</b>	<b>Date range</b>	<b>Series, item number</b>
<u>Consular miscellaneous – Legal Adviser – Timor – five journalists</u>	1976	A10461, LA5/2

### **Australian Embassy, Jakarta**

<b>Title or description of record</b>	<b>Date range</b>	<b>Series, item number</b>
<u>Jakarta – Portuguese Timor – Balibo affair</u>	1975–76	A10463, 801/13/11/5 part 1
<u>Jakarta – Portuguese Timor – Balibo affair</u>	1975–76	A10463, 801/13/11/5 part 2

### **The Taylor report, 1976**

<b>Title or description of record</b>	<b>Date range</b>	<b>Series, item number</b>
<u>Visits by Australian officials to Portuguese Timor (contains original signed copy of Taylor report)</u>	1976	A1838, 3038/10/11/2 part 2
<u>Tape recordings and some partial transcripts of 1976 interviews with East Timorese witnesses concerning the deaths of the Australian-based journalists</u>	1976	A11683
<u>Colour photographic negatives and contact prints of East Timor, 1976</u>	1976	A11692
<u>Visits to Balibo, April/May 1976 (report of Allan Taylor submitted on 26 May 1976)</u>	1976	A11697