

Once again, East Timor is betrayed

Ten years ago, I filmed secretly in East Timor, a small country in south-east Asia whose brutal occupation was largely unknown to the outside world. The title of the film, *Death of a Nation*, was hardly an exaggeration. The Suharto military dictatorship in Indonesia, having invaded the Portuguese colony in 1975, caused the death of “at least” 200,000 East Timorese, according to a study by the foreign affairs committee of the Australian parliament. This represented a third of the population; proportionally, it was an act of genocide greater than the Jewish Holocaust. The governments of the United States, Britain and Australia were not only forewarned, but supported and equipped the invaders. Henry Kissinger personally gave General Suharto the go-ahead.

In East Timor, I found a landscape of graves and black crosses that spilled down valleys and crowded the eye, evidence that whole communities had been slaughtered by the Indonesian army. In a handwritten record compiled by a priest, 287 names were listed, including those of entire extended families, from the elderly to infants such as “Domingo Gomes, aged two... shot”. For me, the most telling and shocking sequence in *Death of a Nation* had been filmed five years earlier on board an Australian air force plane. A party was in progress; champagne corks popped and there was much false laughter as two fawning men in suits toasted each other. One was Gareth Evans, then Australia’s foreign minister. The other was Ali Alatas, his Indonesian equivalent and Suharto’s mouthpiece. “This is an historically unique moment,” waffled Evans, “that is truly, uniquely historical.” Flying over the Timor Sea, they had just signed the Timor Gap Treaty, which allowed Australian and other foreign companies to exploit the seabed belonging to the land of black crosses and to their victims. The ultimate prize, as Evans put it, could be “zillions” of dollars.

From the day Suharto’s paratroopers invaded, Australian governments eyed

JOHN PILGER | ONCE AGAIN, EAST TIMOR IS BETRAYED

East Timor's natural wealth. Richard Woolcott, the Australian ambassador in Jakarta in 1975, who, like the British and American ambassadors, had been tipped off about the invasion, recommended that Canberra adopt "a pragmatic rather than a principled stand [which] is what national foreign policy is all about". Australia, he urged, might "more readily" negotiate a carve-up of the Timor Gap with the Indonesian dictatorship than with the captive East Timorese. With this in mind, he proposed that "we act in a way designed to minimise the public impact in Australia [of the invasion] and show private understanding to the Indonesians". There was not a word of concern for the fate of the Timorese.

The "historically unique" treaty signed by Gareth Evans with a genocidal regime was, wrote Professor Roger Clark, a world authority on international law, "the same as acquiring stuff from a thief. The fact is that [Australia and Indonesia] have neither historical, nor legal, nor moral claim to East Timor and its resources."

For more than 60 years, Australia's relations with its tiny, vulnerable neighbour have been distinguished by enduring betrayal, bullying and greed, the antithesis of the self-adulating Australian myth of "fair go". During the Second World War, more than 40,000 East Timorese were slaughtered by the Japanese for siding with and protecting Australian commandos, after the Australians suddenly withdrew. When, in the 1970s, General Suharto sought Australia's tacit approval of his long-planned invasion and annexation of Portuguese East Timor, he got it; the East Timorese were, it was argued in Canberra, too poor for a "viable" independence - forget the "zillions" of dollars in potential oil revenue.

In 1985, Australia became the first western country formally to recognise Indonesia's bloody conquest, which Evans infamously described as "irreversible". On a visit to Jakarta in February 1991 to finalise the Timor Gap Treaty, he said: "The truth of the matter is that the human rights situation [in East Timor] has, in our judgement, conspicuously improved, particularly under the present military arrangements." Nine months later, the Indonesian military killed or wounded more than 450 young mourners at the Santa Cruz cemetery in Dili, the capital. Evans described this as "an aberration, not an act of state policy". Soon after the massacre, the joint Australian-Indonesian board overseeing implementation of the treaty awarded 11 contracts to Australian oil and gas companies. Asked about the international principle of not recognising and exploiting territory taken by force, Evans said, "The world is a pretty unfair place."

Little has changed for the present Australian government of John Howard, whom George W Bush recently appointed America's "sheriff" in the South

JOHN PILGER | ONCE AGAIN, EAST TIMOR IS BETRAYED

Pacific. This would have been an embarrassment to most prime ministers, but not to Howard. Indeed, Sheriff Howard and his perilously gormless deputy, Alexander Downer, the foreign minister, are on a “mission”. It is to take charge of the “failed states” that make up what Washington calls an “arc of instability” in the Pacific region. Last year, Australian troops were despatched to the Solomon Islands: to “police the chaos”, meaning to secure the country for Australian business. Something similar is under way in Papua New Guinea, where a regime of privatisation, deregulation and “free trade” is being directed by a team from Australia.

In Indonesia, the military has quietly regained the power it enjoyed under Suharto, and members of its bloodthirsty special forces unit, known as Kopassus, are once again being trained in Australia. These uniformed criminals (armed and equipped by Britain) are currently terrorising the people of the provinces of Aceh and West Papua, just as they tortured and murdered thousands in East Timor.

In 1999, when the East Timorese people demonstrated extraordinary bravery by voting overwhelmingly for independence in a UN plebiscite, they were betrayed once again by Australia. Both Howard and Downer had been told by Australian intelligence that the Indonesian military were planning to sabotage the vote with attacks using a murderous “militia”. In Canberra, the sheriff and his deputy denied knowledge and did nothing. It was only when tens of thousands of ordinary Australians, long shamed by their country’s brutal duplicity in East Timor, protested spontaneously in cities and towns across Australia, that the government agreed to lead a UN force enforcing the result of the plebiscite.

The self-congratulations for this “proud stand for peace”, as Howard called it, apparently with a straight face, also served to cover his government’s continuing theft of most of East Timor’s seabed resources. Since 1999, Australia has received more than a billion dollars in taxes on oil extracted from a field fully situated in East Timorese territory; East Timor has received nothing from the same field.

According to international law, the sea boundary between countries close to each other is the median line, or halfway point. The Howard government rejects this, demanding that the old border, agreed illegally with Suharto, should apply. In keeping with the duties and ethics of a Bush-appointed sheriff, Howard has refused to recognise the jurisdiction of both the International Court of Justice and the Tribunal for the Law of the Sea. Instead, Australia today occupies the East Timorese seabed and is poised to rob the tiny nation of roughly \$30bn over the next three decades. With the Australian senate’s recent approval of a new

JOHN PILGER | ONCE AGAIN, EAST TIMOR IS BETRAYED

treaty, Howard's and Downer's tactic is to pressure the East Timorese on the seabed issue by constantly threatening to pull out of negotiations, thus denying a stricken people money they urgently need for reconstruction. In this way, East Timor is proclaimed a "failed state" and becomes dependent on and controlled by Canberra.

Howard is doing much the same in Iraq. Of the token hangers-on who make up the Anglo-American "coalition of the willing", Spain, Honduras, Poland and the Netherlands are about to recall their troops. Only Australia remains true to the uber-sheriff in Washington. This begs the question: when will decent Australians again make their voices heard? **JP**