

# Why is Australia fighting in New York to keep control of the Peacekeeping Force in Timor-Leste?

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# Why is Australia fighting in New York to keep control of the Peacekeeping Force in Timor-Leste?

Helen Hill [\\*](#)

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## Introduction

Helen Hill of Victoria University reports on the current debate in the UN Security Council on Kofi Annan's recommendation to establish a new UN mission in East Timor,

"described as 'multidimensional' and 'integrated', the same words used by Jose Ramos Horta in his letter of 4th August to the UN requesting the mission following the recent

violence."

Hill asks

"why then is Australia trying to sabotage the Secretary General's proposal for a UN Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT), a proposal which has the full support of the East Timorese Government and President?"

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## **Essay - Why is Australia fighting in New York to keep control of the Peacekeeping Force in Timor-Leste?**

When violence began to rock Dili in April this year, one of the first questions journalists would ask me, when interviewed would be 'Did we leave too early?' In reply I always said 'it depends on who you mean by 'we', the UN or Australia. I have always believed the UN left too early in 2002; they were so desperate for a 'peace-keeping success story' and too fearful of leaving with 'blood on their hands' to be able even to wait for an 30th August 2002 Independence day. So they urged the newly elected government to set an independence day in the first half of 2002, and ended up with 20th May 2002, the anniversary of FRETILIN, a much less unifying day than the anniversary of the historic ballot would have been. They also left before giving the Timorese time to fully develop their constitution in several areas, the most important being local government and laws for land tenure.

Australia, on the other hand, never really left. In addition to its Embassy, Australia continues to have a substantial bilateral aid program (including a project for capacity building in the police) and a considerable defence co-operation program with the Timorese army. In addition many Australians have been working with government departments, non-governmental organizations or community groups since independence.

When the violence erupted in April 2006, one of the first responses from Kofi Annan was to despatch Ian Martin (who had been the organiser of the 1999 referendum and who is highly respected by all Timorese) to Dili to analyse the nature of the problem, and to get the Security Council to work out an appropriate response. His report recommends a mission much smaller than the original United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) which departed at independence, but equally comprehensive and interdisciplinary 'to support the Government of Timor-Leste and relevant institutions with a view to consolidating political stability, enhancing a culture of democratic governance and facilitating political dialogue among Timorese stakeholders.' [\[1\]](#) The mission is described as 'multidimensional' and 'integrated', the same words used by Jose Ramos Horta in his letter of 4th August 2006 to the UN requesting the mission following the recent violence.

Why then is Australia, with the backing of some powerful friends, trying to sabotage the Secretary General's proposal for a UN Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT), a proposal which has the full support of the East Timorese Government and President? The original date of cessation of the current UN Mission in East Timor UNOTIL, was 20th May 2006; it was extended by one month, and then two more until 20th August 2006, as the UN grappled with how to deal with the current crisis

while avoiding repeating their mistakes of the past. On Friday 18th August 2006 it was rapidly given another week's extension of life as agreement could not be reached on how to deploy its successor. The fact that the Security Council is so pre-occupied with Lebanon has also not helped.

Debate has been going on at two levels, one is the Security Council members themselves, the other the so-called 'Core Group' of countries with a direct interest in the outcome. The core group includes the four current troop providing countries: Australia, Malaysia, Portugal and New Zealand as well as Brazil, the UK, the USA and Japan. These countries have tried to find a consensus and failed. The Permanent Five are divided along the usual lines.

While there is consensus on the Secretary General's recommendation of 1,608 police personnel backed up by 350 troops, there is disagreement about the nature of the command. The majority of Security Council members, including permanent members China, France and Russia, plus ASEAN, the Europeans and Portuguese-speaking countries are in favour of a UN "blue helmeted" operation under UN command and control. Australia, on the other hand, has something else in mind, more like the RAMSI operation in the Solomon Islands, over which they are the clear leaders, even though other regional countries take part to spread the burden and give it some cultural legitimacy.

In some ways the present argument is a continuation and a rerun of a debate that has been going on in the Security Council ever since Timor's independence when the United Nations Mission of Support in East Timor (UNMISSET) was set up which included a military and security capability. As long ago as April 2002, Kofi Annan was warning the Security Council against a hasty phasing-out of the UN's military and security forces in East Timor.

But it also represents a change of position for the Australian government from its view during UNTAET. After February 2000, all remaining InterFET troops, including many from Australia, were put under UN command and Peter Cosgrove returned triumphant to Australia. Why won't they do it again? At an open Security Council meeting at the end of February 2005 José Ramos-Horta challenged the US and Australia "I am ... sure that you do not want to be remembered by the East Timorese as having turned down a last request, a very modest one, but a critical one," he said.

In May 2005, Kofi Annan again warned the Security Council that a hasty withdrawal could jeopardise the investment made by the international community to help the East Timorese rebuild their country. The US and Australia urged the ending of the peacekeeping component and, despite Annan's warning, and one from Portugal, in May 2005 the Security Council voted to end the peacekeeping operation.

One year later, confronted with a serious disruption of order and security involving local police and military, the Security Council has had to face reality and admit they really should go back and complete the process. All Security Council members are prepared to support UNMIT and believe that the UN is the organisation best able to help Timor complete its tasks of nation building, in particular preparation for the next election, rebuilding the judicial system, the police and restructuring the defence force. Australia is somewhat isolated then, particularly in its region, with Malaysia and New Zealand favouring UN Command over a national or 'green-helmeted' command. While most of the neighbouring countries have been too polite to attribute ulterior motives to Australia, Brazil used the word 'neo-trusteeship', a polite word for 'neo-colonialism'. Portugal also supports blue-hatting, including for its own personnel in Timor Leste.

When it comes to justifying the decision for domestic consumption Alexander Downer has tried to sound pretty casual, as if he couldn't really care one way or the other, but it's just easier to do it the Australian way. He told Fran Kelly on Radio National's breakfast program on 17th August 2006 - 'we think that it would be just easier to do and simpler to administer if it was a green helmeted

operation, just as it is at the moment. I mean, the way it's worked under Brigadier Slater has been exceptional - they have just done a great job.... And, it's an easier way to administer the military component without operating through New York all the time and getting into debates about rules of engagement with the UN and so on.' He mentioned the possible cost to taxpayers if it's a green-helmeted operation almost as an afterthought.

Why is such an important policy with regional ramifications not being debated thoroughly in Parliament and in the media? Should Australia be successful in getting its 'green-helmeted' operation, the attitude of the ASEAN countries might turn to one of hostility. They will ask why is Australia beginning to behave like the US which never allows its soldiers to serve under the command of another national, in a region where they don't really belong. Its one thing to have command over a body like RAMSI, in a region of micro-states, but to do the same thing in Southeast Asia is quite different. Developments in Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan will obviously influence their thinking. And arguing on grounds that the operation has been so far a success might also lead to danger. Already many Timorese are expressing dissatisfaction with Australian troops, particularly over the weekend of 19th -20th August 2006 where violence seems to have escalated and there is great confusion over the role being played by Australians in the mind of the public.

Under the Secretary General's proposal, the mission would be led by a Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG), playing a similar role to that of the late Sergio Vieira de Mello of Brazil, an outstanding communicator who helped the UN to overcome many of the problems associated with getting such a diverse group of people to work together. The deputy to the SRSG would be a military person and lead the security component. It is hard to envisage how this would work if Australia got its way and headed the military component outside of the umbrella of the UN and yet with a UN mandate! Why does the Australian government want to take such a strong stand on this and risk alienating most of its neighbouring countries, particularly ASEAN members? Then there is discussion at the UN that pressure has been put on the Timorese to modify their position of full support for Kofi Annan's proposal and give the green light to the Australian/US one. This will be extremely difficult for Jose Ramos Horta who knows there is a certain body of people in Timor who hold the Australians responsible for overthrowing their elected Prime Minister and it could impinge upon his credibility.

## **Information about the author**

Helen Hill is Senior Lecturer in Sociology of the Global South at Victoria University, Australia, and has been actively involved in research on East Timor since 1975. She is the author of *Stirrings of Nationalism in East Timor: Fretilin 1974-1978*, (Oxford Press, 2002).

E-mail: [helen.hill@vu.edu.au](mailto:helen.hill@vu.edu.au)

## **End notes**

[1] United Nations, Security Council, [Report of the Secretary-General on Timor-Leste pursuant to Security Council resolution 1690 \(2006\)](#), S/2006/628, 8 August 2006.

<http://www.reliefweb.int/library/documents/2006/unsc-tls-08aug.pdf>

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Nautilus Institute

608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

[nautilus@nautilus.org](mailto:nautilus@nautilus.org)