

“Infuriated” Alexander Downer tried to get US officials to mask Australian inaction on East Timor

Declassified documents show the then foreign affairs minister was angered by leaks showing Australia rejected US request for peacekeepers

Helen Davidson -*The Guardian* - 30 August 2019

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/aug/30/infuriated-alexander-downer-tried-to-get-us-officials-to-back-up-response-to-east-timor-leaks>

A former Australian foreign affairs minister, Alexander Downer, in the East Timorese capital, Dili. He branded the leaks ‘completely false’ only to backtrack after the publication of highly sensitive cable. Photograph: Dean Lewins/AAP

An “infuriated” Alexander Downer tried to get US officials to back up his response to leaks revealing Australia rejected a US request to join a peacekeeping force in East Timor, documents show.

The series of media reports in early August 1999 came amid international concern over the [rampant violence and human rights atrocities being committed against the East Timorese](#) as they prepared to vote for independence from Indonesia.

The vote on 30 August 1999, in which 78.5% of East Timorese chose independence from [Indonesia](#), was the culmination of 24 years of occupation by Jakarta and, before that, hundreds of years of colonial rule by Portugal.

East Timor's 1999 independence vote

On 1 August 1999, the Sunday Age reported the Australian government had ordered senior strategists to reject a US invitation to discuss sending peacekeeping forces to the region before or after the 30 August referendum. The Australians reportedly said such a discussion would be “premature” and “damaging” to Australia’s relationship with Indonesia.

Downer, the then foreign affairs minister, denied the claims, branding them as “completely false”, only to be forced to backtrack after a highly sensitive leaked cable – which Downer claimed he had not read – revealed further discussions.

Two days later the US embassy in Canberra sent a “sensitive but unclassified” message to the secretary of state and joint military and state department staff, noting the three days of media reports.

“Dfat maritime Southeast Asia assistant secretary Neil Mules told [US embassy officer] on Aug 2 that these stories infuriated FM Downer, coming as they did at the end of what he considered to be a highly successful visit to East Timor and Jakarta,” it said.

The hundreds of documents show Stanley Roth’s repeated efforts to lobby General Wiranto, pictured, the then head of Indonesia’s armed forces, to allow a peacekeeping presence. Photograph: Oka Budhi/EPA

It noted Downer’s strong denials, and said he had “ordered Dfat to send to the Australian embassy in Washington, for transmission to the department, press points he is using to rebut the articles”.

“Mules urged that, in responding to press queries about these stories, US [government] spokesmen make similar points.”

The news reports included a description of a meeting between then head of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Dfat), Ashton Calvert, and the US assistant secretary of state for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, Stanley Roth, where the pair disagreed on when international forces should be sent.

Roth believed it should be sooner rather than later.

Roth was a key proponent of the need for an international presence in East Timor, arguing it would descend into violence without one.

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The hundreds of documents released on Friday show his repeated efforts to lobby General Wiranto, the then head of Indonesia's armed forces, to allow a presence, but without the backing of the Pentagon Roth was refused.

Clinton Fernandes, a professor of international and political studies at the University of New South Wales, said if Roth had the support of Australia he could have “gone to the Pentagon and asked for a rethink”.

“What strikes out to me is that in all the hundreds of cables [released on Friday] you don't see anything from the US government to say ‘we are getting pressure from the Australians to help the Timorese’,” he said. “That is the telling thing.

“There is no sense they're getting any pressure from Australia to help the Timorese, they're only getting pressure about pushing back against the leaks.”

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The cable released on Friday said the US embassy officer agreed with Mules the stories were “ludicrous” and that US-Australian coordination had been “good”.

Mules said Dfat believed the Roth-Calvert conversation referred to might have been one in February, “in circumstances which bear no resemblance to those which pertain today”.

He suggested the “mischievous” leaks had come from Labor and were given to journalists who favoured a peacekeeping operation.

On 10 August 1999, the then opposition spokesman for foreign affairs, Laurie Brereton, [told the ABC](#) Australia was “the reason that peacekeepers are not there now”.

Australia's [pushback on international intervention](#) at the time has been widely criticised, particularly in the years after East Timor's independence.

described one of the reporters as “a long time East Timor activist” who wanted to embarrass Australia over its “craven” handling of East Timor.

The government has been repeatedly accused of protecting its relationship with Indonesia – [and its interests in oil and gas reserves](#) – over standing up for East Timor.

Australia eventually contributed personnel to a UN mission to supervise the independence referendum, and led a UN peacekeeping force after the vote.

The post-vote force was allowed in only after US military pressure was applied to Indonesia, the tranche of declassified cables revealed on Thursday.

The documents [were released in a briefing book by the National Security Archive's researcher Brad Simpson](#) to coincide with the 20th anniversary of East Timor's independence referendum on 30 August.

They revealed the US had widespread and evidenced knowledge of the Indonesian military's support for the militias months before the vote.

Downer has been approached for comment.