

# US knew Indonesia intended to stop East Timorese independence 'through terror and violence'

*Documents reveal 'muted' attempts to convince Indonesian officials to allow free vote to proceed*  
Helen Davidson – *The Guardian* 29 August 2019

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The US government knew for months that Indonesia's military was supporting and arming militias in East Timor in the lead-up to the 1999 independence referendum but continued to push for stronger military ties, declassified documents have revealed.

The hundreds of documents provide a window into US policy on the months of terror inflicted on the Timorese and the "muted" attempts by the US to convince Indonesian officials to allow a peaceful and free vote to proceed.

The formerly classified documents are released in a [briefing book by the National Security Archive's researcher Brad Simpson](#) on Friday to coincide with the 20th anniversary of East Timor's independence referendum on 30 August 1999.

They reveal extensive and early awareness within the US government of the Indonesian military (formerly ABRI, now TNI) and its "determination to thwart an independence vote in East Timor through terror and violence".

## State department v Pentagon

It was widely believed TNI supported the militia, and Cohen was also concerned of indications militias were considering targeting Interfet.

Clinton Fernandes, a professor of international and political studies at the University of New South Wales, said the documents illustrated a split between the US state department concerned with the TNI-backed militia violence and the Pentagon striving to preserve a military relationship in the face of widespread opposition.

Fernandes said one key document – describing a meeting between US secretary of defence William Cohen and the Indonesian commander of the armed forces, General Wiranto, less than two weeks after International Force for East Timor (Interfet) forces landed in East Timor – starkly demonstrated that it was the military which mattered to [Indonesia](#).

"As long as there was the dual policy – state department v Pentagon – there were no practical consequences from the state department so Indonesia believed they could get away with it," he said. "It's when the defence department – Cohen – steps in that it changes things."

Cohen flew to Indonesia and met with Wiranto on 30 September, a month after East Timorese voted overwhelmingly for independence despite months of violence and intimidation only to be met with more from Indonesian military and local pro-integration militias. Thousands had died.

According to a state department cable, Wiranto claimed the situation in East Timor had been "greatly exaggerated by the media" and that now the Australian-led peacekeeping force, Interfet, had been deployed the situation was under control. He continued to deny the TNI had backed militias.

Cohen responded he would “have to be quite direct and said while TNI had done “some positive things” it had all been overshadowed by events in East Timor.

“General Wiranto had indicated that some people might have been dissatisfied by the results of the polls, but that could never justify the rampage which had followed,” the cable described Cohen’s words.

It was widely believed TNI supported the militia, and Cohen was also concerned of indications militias were considering targeting Interfet.

“Such actions would be tragic if they were allowed.”

He concluded by saying it was in both nations’ interests to have a positive bilateral relationship but that would not be possible unless Indonesia made progress.

A declassified cable describes United States Secretary of Defense William Cohen meeting with Indonesian commander of the Armed Forces, General Wiranto, in September 1999.

Cohen’s “reading of the riot act”, as Fernandes described it, intended to drive home an announcement three weeks earlier by US president Bill Clinton that they would now cut all military ties with Indonesia.

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The decisive action by Clinton and Cohen came, nevertheless, after more than a year of the US working to maintain military ties despite growing evidence of human rights abuses, especially in East Timor.

As violence escalated, state department officials, including the US assistant secretary of state for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, Stanley Roth, lobbied Indonesia to rein in the militias.

“But US military officials resisted efforts to pressure the Indonesian armed forces and opposed efforts to reduce military aid, convinced that the Indonesian military remained a crucial force for political and military stability in the archipelago during a fragile democratic transition,” Simpson said.

## **Indonesia armed militias before vote**

In January 1999, the new Indonesian president, BJ Habibie, announced that East Timor could have wide-ranging autonomy or quick separation from Indonesia. However, his government was unwilling to let a UN-led international force in before it was decided.

“General Wiranto has stated ... publicly ... that the military will dutifully support the government’s decision, but many suspect the military’s support is lukewarm at best,” an embassy briefing said.

The assessment was right, and hundreds of documents spanning months, reveal US officials had gathered evidence and formed the view the Indonesian military was arming militias.

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In February 1999, a state department intelligence report quoted Jakarta embassy officials saying the Indonesian military was “arming small, roving bands of East Timorese paramilitary groups” and that plainclothes military personnel were participating directly in those groups.

In March, military intelligence noted “close ties” between the military and local militias, “many created by Indonesian Special Forces and Intelligence officers”. It specifically mentioned “Wiranto’s decision

in early 1999 to provide hundreds of weapons to militia groups". It said local district headquarters had supplied ammunition, logistics, and advice.

By April, the situation in East Timor had drastically deteriorated.

Violence worsened and diplomatic cables showed warnings from Portuguese sources that attacks were expected on the weekend of 16 April.

In the days after the 6 April massacre in Liquica, Roth wrote to independence leader Xanana Gusmão and said he had repeatedly "urged the Indonesian government to disarm the civilian militia" and would do again. He also warned Gusmao of his own rhetoric perhaps fanning tension.

Violence worsened and diplomatic cables showed warnings from Portuguese sources that attacks were expected on the weekend of 16 April – when pro-integration militias took control of Dili with the support of Indonesian security forces, including sharing transport, and committed the Carrascalao massacre.

The military and police took "no steps to stop the violence" with a military commander reportedly declaring the military "neutral", an embassy briefing said.

A morning rally heard calls for a cleansing of the civil service and declared war on "any international presence in East Timor, especially journalists".

Roth immediately contacted Indonesia's foreign minister, Ali Alatas, and noted "a lot of weapons found there way from the military to paramilitary groups".

While he was not saying Wiranto or Habibie were directly involved "there were just too many reports of the [military] cooperating with the militias", and there had to be a disarming of both sides.

"ABRI continues to take little or no action to suppress violence in areas of unrest," read a military intelligence summary about the estimated killing of more than 50 people in three days.

By late April, the EU was joining calls for Indonesia to allow the UN in.

In early May, the CIA added its assessment that Habibie's plans for East Timor had little support among senior military, including Wiranto.

"Wiranto ... has taken no action against the pro-integration civilian militias or discipline against local military units that, if not abetting, have at the least tolerated these groups," it said.

"Wiranto has repeatedly promised that the military is a neutral force, but local commanders would have required at least tacit approval from headquarters in Jakarta to allow the militias the blatant free hand they have enjoyed."

## **Diplomacy fails to quell violence**

American officials were clearly aware TNI was supporting the militias, but diplomatic urgings were having no effect.

The following month, as the UN mission in East Timor (Unamet) prepared to deploy to oversee the referendum, UN spokesmen were publicly critical of Indonesia's handling of East Timor.

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Embassy officials were told “credible” reports that Kopassus – TNI special forces – had directed militia agents to kidnap or harm a Unamet member, and that it was standard operating procedure for the military to “outsource its dirty work to the militias”.

A Unamet political officer told embassy staff they realised critical statements would produce a sharp reaction but “it had become clear that remonstrations with the military behind closed doors yielded nothing”, and that the unacceptable situation in East Timor was worsening.

On 21 May, embassy officers were told it was a common belief that “militias planned to ‘welcome’ the first contingent of Unamet police advisors with their guns.

Embassy staff visited Liquica in June and reported “it is clear that the Indonesian military and pro-integration militias, working together closely, are carrying out a scorched earth policy”.

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In July, Unamet officers told Roth and the US ambassador militias were “merely symptoms of the larger problem of the TNI’s overall strategy”.

It was “beyond dispute” that TNI was orchestrating militia activity, a redacted Unamet official said, adding that their assessments were based on firsthand observations and a large volume of evidence from the field.

US Jakarta embassy briefing: Unamet officers detail violence in East Timor.

On 30 August, the Timorese voted overwhelmingly in favour of independence. Days later an INR report described continuing military violence.

It was “unclear whether Jakarta is now committed to restraining the militias it created”, it said.

The then US president, Bill Clinton, suspended US military relations and assistance with Indonesia. Photograph: Tim Sloan/AFP/Getty Images

“Also unclear is whether the current rampages are part of a campaign to derail the process or reflect a last gasp by gangs who fear the military will abandon them.”

Numerous documents reported on the military-backed militias and their “scorched earth” attacks on East Timor, including leaving Dili “looted, gutted, and gone”.

The US was pushed into more decisive action and on 9 September Bill Clinton suspended US military relations and assistance with Indonesia.

Behind closed doors Admiral Dennis Blair met with Wiranto, describing the US as a “friend” to Indonesia, urging him to accept a multinational force, noting Indonesia would still control the territory until they arrived.

Members of Interfet began arriving in late September, and killings continued despite Interfet’s presence, as TNI soldiers burned and murdered on their way out.

Just 10 days after Interfet arrived, Cohen sat down with Wiranto.

“Having let Interfet in, the TNI after 24 years in Timor was not going to immediately internalise the new reality,” Fernandes said. “Hence Cohen’s warning that Indonesia must not interfere with Interfet’s work. Institutions especially authoritarian ones like the TNI don’t turn around monolithically.”

TNI backed off and Interfet was able to hand over to the UN transitional administration the next month.