

Defence Minister makes anniversary visit to Timor-Leste

By Sabra Lane on AM

The Defence Minister Linda Reynolds is in Timor-Leste this morning for the 20th anniversary of Australia leading an international force into the country following the terrible violence waged by pro-Indonesian militias.

While in Dili, the Defence Minister is hoping to deepen ties between the two nations.

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Transcript

SABRA LANE: The Defence Minister, Linda Reynolds, is in Timor-Leste this morning for the 20th anniversary of Australia leading an international force into the country following the terrible violence waged by pro-Indonesian militias.

And coming up on RN Breakfast after 7:30, Geraldine Doogue will interview Sir Peter Cosgrove who led that INTERFET (International Force East Timor) mission.

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Pressure is being applied, though, to the Morrison Government to drop the prosecution of two men who blew the whistle on a bugging operation on the East Timorese during negotiations on a maritime boundary.

Defence Minister Reynolds joined me earlier from East Timor.

Linda Reynolds, thanks for joining AM.

Indonesia didn't want an international force in Timor. It happened; peace was eventually restored, but not before shocking violence and death.

What are the lessons from that period?

LINDA REYNOLDS: Well, the lessons are many and it is the importance of friendship and enduring military support and cooperation which is what I've been discussing here today.

But Sabra, the most important thing for me on the 20th anniversary itself is that it's about the veterans.

We've got 150 Australian veterans marching here, side by side with their East Timorese counterparts and also veterans from many of the other 22 nations that served here in INTERFET.

Despite the difficulties and challenges, Australians today should remember what we did 20 years ago and the difference it has made to the lives of over a million Timor-Leste people today.

SABRA LANE: While you're in Dili you're aiming to deepen ties with East Timorese Government. How?

LINDA REYNOLDS: We've got a deep and enduring defence cooperation program with Timor-Leste and I've already had discussions with the President and also with the Defence Minister.

So while we talked about the past and about the 20th anniversary and marking that, we also talked about the next 20 years of defence engagements and relationship.

And we've agreed on further deepening our defence cooperation programs on everything from joint maritime patrols in our common maritime borders, but we also talked about the Pacific patrol boats capability that we are providing to Timor-Leste, which will be the gifting of two Pacific patrol boats in 2023.

So we talked about providing the training and also the port facilities here so that Timor-Leste has a truly sovereign capability.

SABRA LANE: Could improving relations involve the dropping of the spying case against Witness K and Bernard Collaery?

The former president of Timor Leste, Xanana Gusmao, says if the prosecution does go ahead, he'd be prepared to give evidence in Australia on their behalf and that could be embarrassing for Australia.

LINDA REYNOLDS: Look, Sabra, that's a matter before the courts at the moment and it would be highly inappropriate for me to comment on that.

What I'm here to do is to pay respects to our veterans...

SABRA LANE: Sorry, I'm not asking you to comment on the case itself per se, but I'm saying, wouldn't relations be improved if Australia drop the case?

LINDA REYNOLDS: Well, Sabra, all I can comment on is my experience here so far, meeting with the President and meeting with the Minister for Defence, and our relationship couldn't be any closer.

What I have witnessed here today is a deep and enduring relationship between our defence forces to the point that we have agreed on new areas of cooperation.

So not just in maritime surveillance and security, but also in engineering and peacekeeping training and many other things like English language training.

So, that is the mark of a deep and enduring relationship.

SABRA LANE: East Timor is also looking for half a billion dollars to build a gas pipeline.

Is Australia looking to help with that, and noting that the former prime minister, John Howard, says that Australia has an obligation to help East Timor with its economic future?

LINDA REYNOLDS: That is certainly the subject of discussion between Timor-Leste and Australia, but Australia would welcome investment from any partners, any global partners, as long as it's transparent, it upholds robust standards and international law and also avoids unsustainable debt.

So ultimately, this is an issue for Timor-Leste as a sovereign government.

SABRA LANE: On the region more broadly, and just touching on that issue, is defence looking at the strategic consequences of the Solomon Islands changing allegiances from Taiwan to China?

LINDA REYNOLDS: Well, Sabra, I was in the Solomon Islands a couple of weeks ago and that is clearly an issue for the Solomon Islands' Government.

It's a sovereign interest and a decision for them to make, and it's really not appropriate for an Australian minister to comment on their decision.

SABRA LANE: The United States could withdraw funds from the Solomon Islands. It's considering that.

That would be greatly destabilising to the Solomons and the Solomons' Central Bank has warned it would be catastrophic.

How prepared is Australia to respond if that happens?

LINDA REYNOLDS: Well, Sabra, as I said, I was up there a couple of weeks ago and again, that is a sovereign issue for the Solomon Islands Government, and it would be highly inappropriate for me to speculate about what they or any other country may or may not do.

SABRA LANE: Wouldn't it just open up more space for China to move in?

LINDA REYNOLDS: But again, Sabra, the key point is, that is not an issue for an Australian minister for defence to speculate on. It is an issue for the Solomon Islands Government.

SABRA LANE: The US President says he's got evidence that Iran was behind the attack on the Saudi oil facilities last weekend.

Will Australia ask to see that evidence?

LINDA REYNOLDS: Well, as you know, it's something that the Australian Government is highly concerned about, but we are still assessing information.

And you wouldn't be surprised to know that we are in close contact with our allies and also our embassies in the region.

So, we haven't yet made any public attribution and I'm certain that this will be a topic of discussion for the Prime Minister's visit to the United States.

SABRA LANE: Linda Reynolds, thanks for joining AM.

LINDA REYNOLDS: Thank you.

SABRA LANE: The Defence Minister, Linda Reynolds.