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COMMENT: ALEXANDER DOWNER'S REWRITE OF HISTORY

February 2014

**ANDY ALCOCK**

**Alexander Downer's recent article in *The Melbourne Review* is a very telling example of what we have seen in the past and what we will see more frequently in the future.**

It was inevitable that when the Timor-Leste (TL) Government decided to appeal the unfair 2006 Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea (CMATS) deal in the International Court of Justice in The Hague in late 2013 that those who had played very dubious roles throughout the Timorese struggle for independence would indulge in a flurry of the re-writing of this history.

This article by Alexander Downer in the January 2014 edition of *The Melbourne Review* (<http://www.melbournereview.com.au/commentary/article/alexander-downer-letter-from-timor-leste>) is a very telling example of what we have seen in the past and what we will see more frequently in the future.

Already other key conservative figures who played dubious roles in the Timor saga, e.g. Howard, Evans, Woolcott and Keating, when they mention Timor-Leste (TL) publicly now, they refer to the country in very general terms while carefully avoiding any mention of the dastardly roles they played in the whole affair. They also omit to mention their vilification of those who supported independence for TL even before the Indonesian illegal invasion of 1975.

In this particular article, Alexander Downer speaks as though Australia was very generous to TL in the CMATS negotiations. However, he conveniently omits to mention that before the 2006 negotiations, the Howard Government withdrew its

support for the UN Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). If Australia was being fair to TL, it would have abided by this Convention because it allowed for a much fairer distribution of the resources in the Timor Sea. Under UNCLOS, all deposits north of the median line belong to TL and all those south of the line belong to Australia.

In his statement, Mr Downer would have us believe that CMATS was very generous because Australia ceded resources to TL in the Greater Sunrise region of the Timor Sea. What he omitted to say was that the area of the Greater Sunrise region is entirely in the TL half of the Timor Sea and because the Howard Government had withdrawn from UNCLOS, the CMATS deal would mean that TL was losing several billions of badly needed finances to Australia. This is not so generous after all considering what the people of TL have suffered over the past 500 years continuing until the end of the Timor occupation.

TL is one of the poorest countries in the world and many of its people still go hungry. The situation is so concerning that the UN launched its *Zero Hunger Challenge* in Timor-Leste on 10 January this year. How can people like Mr Downer try to have us believe that it is morally acceptable for Australia, the wealthiest country in our region, to be taking resources from the poorest in the region? This is especially so as its people have suffered much during a period of history during which Australian leaders not only went along with the occupation, but armed and trained the army of the aggressor nation? It did this, despite the fact that the East Timorese suffered immensely at the hands of the Imperial Japanese Army because of the great support to Australian soldiers during WW2.

The discontent with CMATS is not just something that a "virulent minority" has pushed for as he claims. This appeal is happening because the current TL Government was unhappy with the unfair agreement. It signed it in 2006 to get urgently needed funds to support its suffering people and did not see that it had any other choice. But it is not only the Timorese who feel that this was an unfair deal that they had been pushed into it. There are many Australians and others internationally who agree with the Timorese.

It is worth reading the book *Shake Down* by Australian journalist Paul Cleary, who was involved in these negotiations working for the TL Government. He describes just how hard Australia played during the negotiations. This included part of the Australian team barging into a meeting of the TL Government Cabinet to tell them that they would not get what they wanted.

Alexander Downer in his article also claims that the Timorese were fighting an insurgency against the Indonesians. What the Timorese were actually doing was defending their nation against an illegal invasion by the Indonesian military. The Timorese did not fight back to inconvenience the international policies of Australia; they did it because they wanted their freedom, which is considered under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to be a basic human right.

If Australian governments of that time, conservative Liberal or conservative ALP, had abided by international law, they would have advised Suharto not to invade East Timor, but they acquiesced to a great historical wrong because they lacked the moral fortitude to say no to Suharto and to the US. It must be remembered that the CIA helped to undemocratically and brutally install Suharto as the Indonesian dictator in 1965 and it was Henry Kissinger and Gerald Ford who sanctioned the occupation of Timor the night before the full scale invasion occurred.

Mr Downer in the article tells us that "there were a torrent of allegations of human rights abuses against the Indonesians." This is true. What he does not say is that it is beyond all reasonable doubt that most of them were true. The history of the occupation leaves no doubt about this. A third of the population was wiped out due to the policies and brutal actions of the TNI. Rape, torture, mass murder were used as strategies against the Timorese and there is overwhelming evidence of them in the international media and the reports of UN agencies, the Red Cross

and human rights organisations.

Yes, John Howard approached President Habibie to have a referendum, but he did not really want Timor to become independent. The UN organised the independence referendum and the only security put in place for this to occur was to allow unarmed UN police personnel into the country while the mass-murdering TNI was still there. This was mostly thanks to the Howard Government. Not only was the TNI still there, it was organising and arming huge numbers of militias who were harassing and murdering people suspected of wanting independence. Most observers could see there would be huge problems, but members of the Howard Government claimed that there would not be a problem. They claimed that there might be a few rotten apples in the TNI, but the leadership would not allow anything to happen.

However, the Australian Government knew about the arming of militias because it had received reports from its own intelligence and staff. According to Lansell Taudevin, an AusAid worker in both Indonesia and East Timor, he reported on seeing TNI trucks bringing in loads of arms to East Timor from West Timor to be distributed to militias. His warnings were ignored by senior AusAid personnel, so he published a book exposing what was happening, *East Timor – Too Little Too Late* (DS 1999). He was sacked.

There should have been a UN peacekeeping force in place before the holding of the referendum to ensure that there was adequate security for it to happen safely. As it turned out, after the referendum, the TNI with the support of its militias conducted a further reign of terror, which resulted in the death of up to 2000 Timorese civilians and the destruction of 80 percent of the nation's infrastructure. It was also extremely dangerous for the UN personnel and foreign correspondents working there.

It also has to be said that John Howard and Alexander Downer, who now claim they supported East Timor's independence, actually advised the Timorese to vote to stay with Indonesia.

Because the Australian Government believed its own propaganda, the Australian Defence Force was not fully prepared for being part of the UN peacekeeping force, the UN Mission in East Timor (UNAMET). The one positive thing out of this very tragic history was that, even though Australian politicians became reluctant saviours, Australian soldiers played a very significant and positive role in peace-keeping operation that finally saw the retreat of the TNI and its militias.

Mr Downer might feel sad about what is happening over the CMATS deal now, but it has to be said that the Timorese would have not suffered so greatly and would not be in the sad situation they find themselves in today had Australian, US and other western leaders said no to Suharto's plans to invade their country in the first place. Mr Downer cannot blame the ABC for that. It is a tragic fact of history and no amount of re-writing will alter that.

He should be aware that there are many Australians who are sad as well. They are sad that their leaders have treated TL so shabbily over so many years, supporting the aggressor nation that invaded them, spying on their newly independent government with a view to taking the profits from their oil and gas and now, trying to pervert the course of justice by confiscating key documents and the passport of a key witness.

Australians generally pride themselves on being fair-minded and supporting the "under dog". In the case of TL, our leaders have let us down.

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