

THE HOWARD LIBRARY

CASE STUDY: PEACEKEEPING IN TIMOR-LESTE

In 1999, Australia led a multinational mission to restore peace in Timor-Leste. The mission is a significant example of Australia acting on its responsibilities at a global level, including peacekeeping and participation in the United Nations.

WHAT IS PEACEKEEPING?



An Australian Army Officer on a peacekeeping mission in Lebanon, 2020.

UN peacekeeping personnel are identified by their pale blue berets. Source: Defence Images

Peacekeeping occurs when international forces are deployed to an area of conflict to help restore the peace. Although peacekeepers are armed personnel, their aim is to lead the parties involved out of conflict – not to take sides or contribute to it.

Over the past 70 years, the United Nations (UN) has played a central role in international peacekeeping. **UN peacekeeping operations** are initiated and overseen by the [Security Council](#) and financed by the [General Assembly](#). The United Nations will only send peacekeepers to intervene in a conflict if the parties involved give their consent.

The UN Security Council deploys each peacekeeping operation with a mandate – a set of instructions – that varies depending on the nature of the conflict. A mandate may include instructions to:

- Prevent the outbreak of violent conflict;
- Help parties reach a lasting peace agreement;
- Promote social and economic recovery;
- Help restore and extend state authority.

Member states of the United Nations provide the military and police personnel required for each peacekeeping operation. Since 1947, at least 30,000 Australian peacekeepers have been involved in over 50 UN peacekeeping operations.

VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT IN TIMOR-LESTE



A map of Timor-Leste and surrounding nations. Timor-Leste is marked as East Timor. Leste, a Portuguese word, means East in English. Source: UNSW East Timor Companion

The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste is a small nation in South-East Asia. To its west, Timor-Leste shares a land border with Indonesia. Located approximately 700 km north of Darwin, it is one of Australia's nearest neighbours.

Timor-Leste formally achieved independence on 20 May 2002, following peacekeeping operations led by the United Nations and Australia. Prior to independence, the people of Timor-Leste experienced a long history of violence and oppression.

1. HISTORY OF COLONISATION

Timor-Leste was colonised by Portugal in the 1600s. They referred to it as Portuguese Timor and used it as a place to send criminals and political prisoners. For 400 years they neglected the colony, failing to invest in healthcare, education or infrastructure.

On 28 November 1975, Timor-Leste declared its independence from Portugal. Nine days later, neighbouring Indonesia launched a massive land and sea invasion. On 17 July 1976, Indonesia annexed—formally took over—Timor-Leste, describing it as its 27th province.

The Indonesian occupation of Timor-Leste lasted from 1975 to 1999: a period defined by violent conflict, forced migration, human rights abuses and famine. Throughout this period, the people of Timor-Leste refused to surrender. Some used guerrilla warfare to resist the occupation, while others risked persecution to campaign peacefully for independence.

2. THE SANTA CRUZ MASSACRE

The Santa Cruz Massacre was an important turning point in Timor-Leste's struggle for independence. On 12 November 1991, Indonesian forces opened fire on protestors who had gathered in Santa Cruz cemetery to lay flowers at the grave of a recently murdered independence campaigner. As many as 250 Timorese people were killed in the massacre.

The Santa Cruz massacre was captured on film by an English journalist, who smuggled the footage out of Timor and into Australia. When the footage was broadcast around the world it created strong international awareness of the human rights abuses occurring in Timor-Leste.

INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTION IN TIMOR-LESTE

1. THE HOWARD LETTER

In late 1998, Australian Prime Minister John Howard wrote a letter to the new Indonesian President, B.J. Habibie. Unlike his predecessors, Habibie had made statements that suggested a willingness to loosen Indonesia's hold of Timor-Leste in order to end the ongoing conflict.

In the letter, Howard suggested that Indonesia offer the Timorese people 'special autonomy' – the chance to govern themselves while remaining a province of Indonesia. He argued that if special autonomy were granted, the conflict would calm down and a final decision regarding Timor's independence could be put off for many years.

Habibie did not take this advice. In early 1999, he surprised the international community by declaring that a referendum – a vote of the people – would be held that year in Timor-Leste. The referendum would allow the people of Timor-Leste to choose between special autonomy and full independence.

2. UN ADVANCE MISSION IN EAST TIMOR (UNAMET)



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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An East Timorese man placing his vote in the ballot box at a polling place run by UNAMET. Photo by Rob Mills. Source: Australian War Memorial.

In June 1999, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution to send personnel into Timor-Leste as part of a mission known as UNAMET. The aim of the mission was to help supervise the referendum to ensure a free and fair voting process. Over 250 Australian police officers were sent to Timor-Leste to contribute to UNAMET.

On 30 August 1999, 78 percent of the population of Timor-Leste voted in favour of becoming an independent nation. However, a campaign of violence led by Indonesian-backed militia erupted immediately after UNAMET announced the result. 70 percent of Timor-Leste's infrastructure was burned down and approximately 250 000 people were forced to migrate.

The UNAMET mission was temporarily abandoned because of the uncontrolled violence. The Australian Government organised for the personnel it contributed to be immediately evacuated from Timor-Leste.

3. INTERNATIONAL FORCE FOR EAST TIMOR (INTERFET)



An Australian troop with local children in Timor-Leste, deployed as part of the INTERFET mission.

Source: Defence Images

On the 15th September 1999, after strong pressure from the UN, the Indonesian government declared that it would consent to the deployment of a peacekeeping force to Timor-Leste.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan agreed that Australia should lead the multinational peacekeeping force. Unlike UNAMET – which was coordinated by the United Nations – Australia would take control of this mission. It became known as INTERFET and was composed of Australian troops and military personnel from 22 other countries, including New Zealand, Canada, Thailand, South Korea and the Philippines.

The UN Security Council issued a mandate to INTERFET that gave the force authority to:

- 1) restore peace to the province;
- 2) protect UNAMET personnel;
- 3) facilitate necessary humanitarian assistance.

INTERFET was authorised by the Security Council to take 'all necessary measures' to fulfil its mandate: this included the right to use lethal weapons to defend civilians under immediate threat of violence. Fortunately, under the leadership of Australian Major General (now Sir) Peter Cosgrove, INTERFET troops were able to swiftly and successfully fulfil their mandate without any significant loss of life.

By February 2000, peace in Timor-Leste had been restored and INTERFET handed over command of military operations to the United Nations Transitional Administration in Timor-Leste. (UNTAET)

4. UNITED NATIONS TRANSITIONAL ADMINISTRATION IN TIMOR-LESTE (UNTAET)

UNTAET was a UN peacekeeping force that had overall responsibility for the administration of Timor-Leste for a temporary period of time, including the power to make laws, govern, and administer justice. The purpose of UNTAET was to establish the conditions and institutions needed for Timor-Leste to transition towards governing itself as an independent and democratic nation.

On 20 May 2002, full independence was achieved. The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste became the first new nation state of the 21st Century.

TIMOR-LESTE AND AUSTRALIA TODAY



The Hon Sir Peter Cosgrove and Kay Rala Xanana Gusmao, Timor-Leste's former president, after playing a friendly soccer match in Dili to celebrate 20 years since the INTERFET mission. Source: Defence Images

Today Timor-Leste is a peaceful, democratic nation. However, the country continues to face many social and economic challenges as it emerges from its violent history. Since 2002, Australia has been Timor-Leste's largest development partner. [Australia's aid program to Timor-Leste](#) provides money and assistance to grow the economy, improve health and education outcomes, and strengthen government and institutions.

On the 30th of August 2019, the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste celebrated 20 years of independence. This was also a significant day for many Australians, including those who migrated from Timor-Leste to escape the conflict, and those who contributed to the UNAMET, INTERFET, and UNTAET missions. Many Australians, including Prime Minister Scott Morrison, flew to Dili to celebrate this important milestone with the people of Timor-Leste.