



johnpilger.com

A Moral Outrage

2 November 1999

It was the public, not politicians, who forced the Australian government to end the betrayal of East Timor.

On October 11, the Guardian published a letter by the Australian high commissioner in London, Philip Flood, objecting to my column about Australia's complicity in the suffering of the East Timorese. His words shone with moral indignation. His government had been "driven by humanitarian concern for the desperate plight of the East Timorese" and had "acted forthrightly after Indonesia failed to maintain order". For suggesting otherwise, I was guilty of "denigrating" my homeland.

Could this be the same Philip Flood who was the Australian ambassador to Indonesia at the time of the massacre of hundreds of East Timorese in the Santa Cruz cemetery in 1991? This was the atrocity that was secretly videotaped by a British cameraman, Max Stahl, breaking the long, international silence over East Timor. In my 1994 film, *Death Of A Nation*, Stahl and I revealed that a second massacre of the wounded had taken place later that day in the Dili morgue and military hospital.

The most vigorous denials of these subsequent murders came from Canberra, where the government of Paul Keating was in the midst of preparing a highly secret "security pact" with Indonesia that would integrate the Australian military into General Suharto's war effort against the East Timorese. Foreign minister Gareth Evans, who had described the initial Santa Cruz massacre as an "aberration" and congratulated Suharto for setting up an "inquiry" (dismissed by Amnesty as bogus), wrote in the Melbourne Age on June 6 1994: "As to Pilger's claim in *Death Of A Nation*, that a second massacre occurred in November 1991, whether he likes it or not, the balance of available evidence is against this."

Yet 10 days earlier, Evans had been sent a top secret letter from his ambassador in Jakarta, Allan Taylor, who was Philip Flood's successor. Taylor revealed that "during a review of our files we came across a private minute prepared by Philip Flood on a conversation with [Suharto's] son-in-law on Christmas eve 1991. Philip had covered the minute with a note, stating that the conversation had taken place on the basis that its content would not be reported... I subsequently wrote to Philip to ask whether elements of his minute might now be provided to Canberra, particularly in the light of the allegations by Pilger of a further 'massacre' at the military hospital."

The man Flood had secretly met was Lieutenant-Colonel Prabowo, commander of the notorious Kopassus special forces, an equivalent of the Nazi Waffen SS, which trained and armed the militias that murdered thousands of East Timorese before and after the UN-organised vote for independence last August. Prabowo confirmed to Flood that a second massacre had taken place, and that bodies had been "burnt and some dynamited". But the ambassador ordered his report of this crucial information suppressed.

When the episode was disclosed last year in the Sydney Morning Herald, Flood claimed that the "substance of the information" had been passed to Canberra - which, if true, would have made further nonsense of his government's denials. In any event, it was withheld from the Australian parliament and public, and provides a vivid example of the cover-up that has scandalised Australia's obsequious "special relationship" with the Indonesian dictators, whose crimes, according to a CIA study, rank as "one of the worst mass murders of the 20th century."

And the cover-up goes on. Last month, the Sydney Bulletin published intelligence documents which show that prime minister John Howard and his foreign minister, Alexander Downer, were warned months ago that the murderous Kopassus was running the militias and was about to "scorch" East Timor. Yet Downer "repeatedly sought to head off peacekeepers for Timor", assuring Jakarta that Indonesia was "100 times more important than East Timor". After seeing detailed intelligence of the approaching bloodbath, he said: "There isn't any doubt that the Indonesians... are committed to the laying down of arms."

When the Australian government was finally persuaded to provide troops to a UN peacekeeping force, it was only after East Timor had been devastated and de-populated by Indonesian-run death squads and only after public opinion in Australia forced the issue. Tens of thousands demonstrated, trade unions boycotted Indonesian cargo, schools stopped. It was one of those wonderful moments when the force of popular moral and political outrage cannot be ignored or distracted; it was Australians at their best.

As for those politicians, diplomats, academics and pet journalists who, like their counterparts in this country, for years rationalised genocide in East Timor as "economic stability" and celebrated the piracy of East Timor's oil and gas reserves while children and nuns were hacked to death, they are understandably circumspect on proposals for a war crimes tribunal. They no doubt fear their Faustian mates in Jakarta will name them as accessories, spilling even more blood on their reputations. By betraying basic principles of humanity, it is they who have more than denigrated their country.

 [Print this article](#)