

Strong in Defence: Timor-Leste and Australia

Timor-Leste has faced many challenges in its endeavour to establish itself as an independent and viable nation. Over the past 66 years, Australia has conducted operations in Timor-Leste to repel invasion; reinforce an act of self-determination; rapidly quell communal violence; and develop a national defence force from a guerrilla fighting force. **Matthew Barclay explains.**

Australia's strong military links with Timor-Leste were initially forged in battle in the Second World War. An Australian commando unit known as 'Sparrow Force' fought a guerrilla campaign to resist Japanese invasion despite being outnumbered ten to one. 'Sparrow Force' was assisted by the people of Timor-Leste at considerable risk to their own safety and fought bravely to halt the Japanese advance.

It was another 56 years until the Australian military was again involved in Timor-Leste, this time under very different circumstances. In August 1999, Timor-Leste voted to end 24 years of Indonesian rule and become independent. Following the announcement of the result

(79.5 percent in favour of independence), pro-integration militia groups turned on the local population – murdering, looting and destroying a significant portion of the national infrastructure.

Australia responded to the violence by leading a coalition of 17 nations in a peacekeeping effort known as the International Force for East Timor (INTERFET). The INTERFET deployment, led by then-Major-General Peter Cosgrove, marked the largest deployment of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) since the Vietnam War, with the Australian commitment peaking at 5500 personnel. INTERFET succeeded in stabilising the situation and peacekeeping responsibilities were moved to United Nations (UN)-led forces in early 2000. Democratic elections were held and independence was declared in May 2002. The ADF peacekeeping contribution withdrew completely in 2005.

In May 2006, after a promising start to Timor-Leste's nationhood, violence descended when tensions within the nation's military led to mass desertions. The deserting soldiers clashed with police forces while marching in Dili, sparking widespread violence, which led to dozens of deaths and the displacement of thousands of citizens. After requests for assistance from the Timor-Leste Government, Australia committed 1300 troops and several warships under a deployment

known as Operation ASTUTE. Security was quickly restored and the UN deployed a significant multinational police force to maintain security. This facilitated the holding of free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections in mid-2007.

In early 2008, despite the robust security measures in place, rebel forces attacked Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao and severely wounded President Jose Ramos Horta. This prompted a rapid reinforcement of the ADF commitment to Timor-Leste to maintain the fragile peace.

As of April 2008, Defence's contribution to Timor-Leste is made up of three main components – Operation ASTUTE, Operation TOWER and the Defence Cooperation Program (DCP) – involving around 780 Defence personnel.

Operation ASTUTE continues to ensure that security and stability is maintained. At present, 750 Australian troops serve alongside 170 New Zealand Defence Force personnel as part of the International Stabilisation Force.

Operation TOWER is Australia's commitment to the UN Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT). Four ADF members support this UN mission, deployed as military liaison officers outside Dili and in the UNMIT Headquarters.

As the security situation stabilised in 2001, Defence initiated the DCP to develop the former

RIGHT Private Laurence Cillers is serving with the International Stabilisation Force in Timor-Leste.
Photo by Corporal Christopher Moore.



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guerrilla fighting force, Falintil, into a capable and professional defence force. The DCP is an ongoing Australian contribution to the development of Timor-Leste’s security and has concentrated on addressing some of the key capacity constraints within the Ministry of Defence and Timor-Leste’s Defence Force (F-FDTL). At present 18 Defence personnel, both ADF and civilian, implement the DCP.

The DCP has developed a state-of-the-art training facility for the F-FDTL at Metinaro; trained numerous F-FDTL personnel in English language and general education both in Timor-Leste and Australia; provided assistance to engineering capability development; and has facilitated the training of several F-FDTL officers at the Royal Military College, Duntroon.

Through 2008 the DCP will continue to implement major infrastructure projects such as developing a specialist training facility at the Metinaro training base and training F-FDTL members in the areas of engineering, communications and English language.

“ We must be careful not to arbitrarily impose Australian values, processes or organisational norms on Timor-Leste. No matter how incongruous their actions, this is still their country. Nothing is easy, even the simplest things take time. Capacity building takes time and patience. ”

Lieutenant Colonel John Symons, Assistant Defence Attache, Dili 2008

“ My time as a Policy Advisor to Operation ASTUTE covered the period of Timor-Leste’s second presidential and prime minister elections in the country’s emerging democracy. It was exciting to witness such a historical moment pass peacefully and without incident. A real testimony to the East Timorese thirst for democracy. ”

Valerie Thomas, Policy Advisor to the International Stabilisation Force, 2007

“ We (the Defence Cooperation Program) serve alongside our Timor-Leste Defence Force (F-FDTL) counterparts and, where appropriate, offer advice and assistance, working toward the common goal of ensuring a professional, disciplined and well trained defence force for Timor-Leste. The F-FDTL has a vision of where it wants to be well into the future. We are working together to see, as far as is possible, that this vision is realised. ”

Major Paul Bonney, Operations and Doctrine Advisor – Defence Cooperation Program, 2008