



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

EAST TIMOR

SPEECH

Wednesday, 22 September 1999

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Questioner		Responder	
Speaker	Cox, David, MP	Question No.	

Mr COX (Kingston) (11.28 am)—Australia's forces go to Timor with the full support of all members of this parliament and the overwhelming support of the Australian community because it is a moral cause: to stop murder, terror and destruction. It is an Australian responsibility to help our nearest neighbour, and it is in our national interest—to restore peace on our doorstep.

We recognise that Australia's participation in this force may well be at a significant cost. There may be casualties. Putting young Australians in harm's way should never be done lightly. If the military involvement is protracted, as it may well be, it will have a high budgetary cost. When the situation is stabilised, Australia, amongst others, will have to make a significant contribution of foreign aid to help rebuild East Timor. We will also have to make a substantial contribution to assisting refugees.

Australia's intervention has meant a serious deterioration in our relationship with Indonesia. While we have contributed to a number of peacekeeping operations and the Gulf War, we have not faced issues of this magnitude so close to home for decades.

The position of Bishop Belo and those associated with Falintil was that there should be a lengthy period of transition, to facilitate reconciliation, followed by a ballot on independence. It is a tragedy that the views of those in a position to understand the forces at work in East Timor were not given more weight, not only by the Indonesian government but also by the Australian government and the rest of the international community.

Whatever our views about whether the circumstances now faced in Timor were either avoidable or capable of substantial mitigation, events unfortunately reached the situation where Australia and the international community had no other option but to act. When Timor became a holocaust, some Australians felt we should act unilaterally. Action of that kind would inevitably have made the situation worse. Whatever miscalculations had been made which precipitated the crisis—miscalculations by Indonesia and the rest of the international community—they had been made months before, not in the days leading up to or following the ballot.

Unilateral action by Australia may have been interpreted as a hostile act. The worst scenarios flowing from that could quite possibly have been beyond the capabilities of the force Australia had prepared, and therefore the lives of a great many Australian soldiers would have been put in jeopardy. Whatever our views about a situation which did not directly threaten our territorial integrity or the lives and safety of Australians, it would have been a dangerous precedent to act alone when it was not only possible but appropriate to seek collective international intervention through the United Nations. The appropriate response was a multilateral one in cooperation within Indonesia.

Because of the situation into which Timor has descended, there is a risk that our involvement will be for a very considerable period. However long it takes, we have an obligation to ensure that we remain steadfast in our support for the military personnel we have committed to this task. That unwavering support must be maintained until the task is complete. And when the task is complete, if there are veterans who still bear a burden from their service on Timor when they have returned home, then that support must be continued.

Fortunately, the members of the Security Council who drafted resolution 1264 have learnt the bitter lessons of some recent United Nations peacekeeping operations. A United Nations presence can be inadequate to keep the peace if it is not given authority to 'take all necessary measures' to fulfil that mandate. Massacres and acts of terror have actually occurred in the presence of United Nations forces because the perpetrators were aware that those forces did not have the necessary authority. Resolution 1264 gives that authority and, like any effective deterrent, in so doing greatly improves the chance that lethal force will not have to be used.

The difficulty of maintaining a peacekeeping operation in a potentially hostile environment cannot be overstated. It is important to recognise that the objectives of the multilateral force are entirely for the benefit of

the East Timorese people. Resolution 1264 clearly defines them as: to restore peace and security in East Timor; to protect and support the United Nations mission in East Timor in carrying out its tasks; and, within force capabilities, to facilitate humanitarian operations.

The deployment of Australian military forces to lead International Force East Timor fulfils our moral obligation to our nearest neighbour. Australia had to act to stop the slaughter of innocent Timorese people. Ensuring peace in our region stands second only to the defence of Australia as a justification in the national interest for the use of force. It is a matter of deep regret that a peacekeeping force was not put into East Timor before the vote on independence. That could have both avoided the violence and greatly lessened the danger to peacekeeping forces. The Australian government needs to review in a rigorous way what additional actions it should have taken on the diplomatic front to influence these events.

What other lessons must we learn from this experience? While Australia is contributing 2,000 highly skilled military personnel to INTERFET, the operation has also been a demonstration of some of the limitations of our military capability. There is already some consensus that this is something that needs to be addressed and that there will be a need to increase defence spending. That will have two components. The first is the actual cost of the deployment. If it is protracted, it will become very significant with the need to rotate military personnel committed to the force. Secondly, there is the general question of how we should enhance our military capability. That does not necessarily mean that the lesson we have learnt is the need to have a long-term increase in the number of regular forces. Nor is it a reason to restructure our forces specifically to meet larger peacekeeping requirements. What has been demonstrated by this experience is that, as a country with a relatively small population, there are obviously limitations to the size of any force we can raise.

If we have found some of the limits of our capabilities in preparing for the East Timor operation, then we need to think carefully about how we should structure our forces to meet a worse contingency. Nothing that has happened in the last few days should move Australia from the fundamental principle that we should structure our military forces for the defence of Australia. If we do that and, unfortunately, it is a principle which the Howard government has drifted away from with notions of forward defence, then we will be in a much better position to deal with contingencies like East Timor.

There are two main components of that. The first is focusing on our capacity for expansion, which includes an appropriate and capable reserve element, such as the ready reserves which were established by the Hawke government, but sadly abolished by the Howard government. The second, given this demonstration of the inherent limitations of the size of force elements which we can mobilise, is that we need to focus on developing those capabilities which are necessary to meet higher level direct threats against Australia, principally our strike capabilities.