

Was the ADF a responsible global citizen in its role as INTERFET?

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) operates in a variety of situations throughout the world; its mission includes defending local borders and people, supporting our allies and exerting a global humanitarian influence. Additionally, since 1947, the ADF has been actively involved with peace keeping operations in more than fifty countries.

When Australia is required to assist in overseas operations, this represents a shift from active and responsible citizenship within our immediate and local community to active and responsible citizenship of a more international nature. Different skills, strategic concerns and rules might well apply in the two different settings. Similarly, determining the success of such operations could well be judged according to different criteria than those that might be employed within Australia. I believe that a study of the work of the ADF in East Timor since the late 1990s allows us to reflect upon the value of our contribution, and our profile, as a responsible global citizen. It is my view that the ADF performed admirably in East Timor, adding to the reputation of the ADF.

The qualities that I think are necessary for responsible citizenship, irrespective of the context, are: sensitivity, dedication and long term commitment, courage and compassion. These are listed in no particular order as I believe that different circumstances demand different priorities. I will attempt to measure the performance of the ADF in East Timor against these attributes. My interest in East Timor stems from the involvement of two of my own cousins in the work that Australian agencies have conducted there in the past decade. It is a country that seems to have more than its share of troubles and it also features in our news quite frequently. Even today there was a report on the radio encouraging Australians to visit East Timor as a tourist destination that, being so close to us physically, should not be overlooked.[1]

Timor is the biggest of the Lesser Sunda Islands about 800 km North West of Darwin, between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. The countryside is very mountainous and the highest proportion of the population is Roman Catholic. The staple crop, and the main dietary item, is rice. Deforestation and erosion are huge problems. The country's history has been marked by foreign invasion and often brutal occupation. It is as if there has never been a time when the Timorese have been left alone to get on with their own business without vandalism and interference from elsewhere.

The Democratic Republic of East Timor was declared an independent nation in 1975, but it was not until 1999, after a referendum was held in which the East Timorese voted for independence from Indonesia, that this was supported by the United Nations. The Indonesians were still in occupation; in their anger, they set about destroying everything they could before they would be forced to leave. Around 70% of the country's infrastructure was ransacked and as estimated 75% of the population was displaced. The United Nations Security Council passed resolution 1264 for the creation of an International Force in East Timor (INTERFET), which was to be led by Australia.

The man appointed to lead this critical mission was Peter Cosgrove, who had a wealth of experience. He was very well regarded and was seen as being committed, trustworthy, selfless, passionate and honest.[2]

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Many of the ADF were frustrated because they had been given so little time to prepare for their deployment. When they first arrived in Timor, Peter Cosgrove delivered an uplifting speech to the men and women which made them feel as though they had a real purpose on the mission. Before this they had not been given a clear idea from the ADF of what they would be doing, but he gave them a real idea of why they were there and the potential for them to make a huge difference in East Timor. [3]

INTERFET'S aim was to restore peace in the area and to provide humanitarian assistance. Without such a multinational effort, it was recognised that the viability of East Timor was highly unlikely.

I think that great courage, one of the characteristics of a responsible citizen when confronted by danger and injustice, was displayed by the INTERFET troops in this situation. Approximately two thousand ADF personnel left for East Timor on September 19, 1999. Ironically, although this was to be the biggest deployment since Vietnam, when the ADF first arrived, there were about three times as many Indonesian troops as there were INTERFET. This meant that the strategy was to try and disguise this imbalance until a further six thousand INTERFET arrived from Australia and elsewhere. As the Chief of the Defence Force, Admiral Chris Barrie stated in Darwin on the eve of the first deployment, "Let us be under no misunderstanding-this will be a difficult and demanding task." [4] Potential dangers existed everywhere, with the Indonesian forces willing and able to attack at any time, with or without obvious reason or provocation. Whereas Vietnam had involved "...high intensity, all-encompassing modern warfare...East Timor loomed as a jigsaw of multinational cooperation in border and personnel protection, peacekeeping, diplomacy, humanitarian aid and nation building." [5] There was no proven recipe to follow.

I believe that the ADF demonstrated tremendous sensitivity in their approach in East Timor, another attribute of a responsible citizen. Rather than just grab the centre stage and dictate all the terms, talks were conducted with all the INTERFET partners. "The success of this mission will rely very much on the cooperation of all members of the multinational force." [6] The sense of responsibility exercised by INTERFET was very potent. In an interview on September 18, 1999, General John Sanderson (United Nations Force Commander in Cambodia, 1991-1993) emphasised that, in relation to Peter Cosgrove, "He knows that the underlying principle of these operations is the principle of minimum necessary force. In other words, use whatever force is necessary, but....minimise it. The objective is to establish the rule of law..." [7] It was also crucial to work with the legitimate institutions on the ground in East Timor.

Similarly, the ADF was very sensitive to the local needs and tensions at play. Not only was the restoration of peace in East Timor a significant priority, but Peter Cosgrove wanted to maintain the safety of his own troops whilst fostering a good relationship with Indonesia. There was simply too much at stake for everyone if any of the players involved were upset; sensitivity to the needs and values of the local people is always crucial to the success of any mission "... (we need to make) sure we can.... quickly establish a stable situation with our coalition partners." [8]

The INTERFET force went to East Timor "to establish a process by which first of all humanitarian relief can be given to the East Timorese, but in a way which salvages the process of reconciliation both within Timor and Indonesia, and between Australia and Indonesia." [9]

Visiting troops made an effort to learn something of the local language of Tetum, which was both useful and respectful as it showed an attempt to really communicate with the local people. Little gestures that showed the INTERFET forces were on the side of the locals really helped to restore a sense of trust, as if the East Timorese were being really supported by friends and not just foreigners. [10]

I consider that it is also essential that a responsible citizen displays compassion. I think the ADF did this in its work in East Timor at this time. Even prior to INTERFET's arrival, the ADF airlifted a total of 2538 people from the capital city of Dili as well as airdropping essential supplies. Given the total disarray of the country's buildings and services such as water, electricity and telecommunications, the chaos was extensive and depressing. The abuse of human rights had been widespread and distrust had poisoned morale. The lack of development had hindered growth, as had years of foreign exploitation, and the health system was weak, literacy rates were low and mortality rates were high. The ADF behaved with compassion, warmth and generosity, as a responsible citizen should; in the words of Admiral Barrie, "Australia has a very strong character of fairness. This has driven our national approach to East Timor." [11]

Finally, I believe that a long term commitment should characterise the actions of a responsible citizen; racing in to a crisis, lending a hand but then retreating just as quickly, is irresponsible. I believe that the ADF has always behaved with dedication in their role in East Timor. One example of how the ADF considered their operation in East Timor to be a long term commitment to the country was when a branch of INTERFET dedicated their spare time to construct a water tower that would supply the people with their first taste of fresh, clean water. The idea of the tower was to leave behind a lasting legacy of the work of the ADF which would not only serve as a reminder of their dedication as well as further aiding the community, even after the ADF's departure. [12]

From the outset, it was understood that INTERFET would stay in place until the UNAMET Phase III took over. This has been very costly, but this commitment has been motivated by the belief that we have a humanitarian commitment to see East Timor flourish. My cousin in NSW has, for the past two years, organised her local church community to contribute financially to the work of the Mary McKillop Sisters who have set up, funded and staffed local schools in East Timor. Through donations made by Australians, a Tetum-English dictionary has been published and distributed. Plans are underway for the creation next year of special curriculum materials that will support the schooling programme.[13] This is an example of the long term dedication and humanitarian efforts of Australia.

In addition, it is certainly in Australia's strategic interest as well to support the East Timorese because long term stability in the region is vital. Since the independence referendum, almost a decade has passed. "In that time, Australia has been intimately involved, and for most of that time we have had a military presence in East Timor. We have spent four billion dollars in aid and military deployment...But if we are the new metropolitan power in the Melanesian world, guaranteeing security, dispensing vital and ongoing aid, keeping the international order benign, monitoring the spread of infectious disease and everything else, then we need to make a long-term investment in national skills in this area...."East Timor will cost us blood and treasure for many, many years to come. Building that assumption into our institutions, their training and outlook, is the first step to keeping the costs bearable." [14]

Indeed, most observers, be they local or international, viewed the INTERFET operation as hugely successful. At a farewell ceremony in Dili, when General Peter Cosgrove relinquished command of INTERFET after five months, Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao proclaimed, "the East Timorese people honour you.... We thank you personally and we thank all INTERFET from our hearts." [15] In return, Peter Cosgrove observed that "We're absolutely delighted with the signs of affection and regard that have been given to us by the East Timorese leadership and the people." Later he added: "It was an emotional moment for me and probably quite a few of my military colleagues to see that a military force can come into a country for five months and walk away with the people cheering it." [16]

In conclusion, the ADF was in a unique position to help, both because of its status having been entrusted by the United Nations with this role, and because of its well trained personnel and strong existing links with the area. I think the work conducted in East Timor by INTERFET provides a wonderful example of the way in which the ADF has behaved in a very creditable manner as a responsible citizen, reflecting admirably on the qualities of compassion, courage, sensitivity and dedication that as a nation we both want and value in our defence personnel.

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- [1] www.abc.net.au/radionews/01/11/2008
- [2] The Spirit of the Digger, Patrick Lindsay, Macmillan, 2003, Australia, page 41
- [3] Interview with Karen Taylor, Hobart, 01/11/2008
- [4] <http://minister.defence.gov.au/media>
- [5] The Spirit of the Digger, Patrick Lindsay, Macmillan, 2003, Australia, page 36
- [6] IBID
- [7] www.abc.net.au/news/18/09/1999
- [8] <http://minister.defence.gov.au/media>
- [9] www.abc.net.au/news/18/09/1999
- [10] Interview with Karen Taylor, Hobart, 01/11/2008
- [11] <http://minister.defence.gov.au/media>
- [12] Interview with Karen Taylor, Hobart, 01/11/2008
- [13] Interview with Margaret Macdonald, Bega, 23/10/2008
- [14] www.the <<http://www.the/>> australian.news.com.au/14/02/2008
- [15] The Spirit of the Digger, Patrick Lindsay, Macmillan, 2003, Australia, page 40
- [16] IBID, pages 40-41