

# New Zealand

## and the 2006 East Timor Crisis

Zhivan Alach

In May 2006, New Zealand troops returned to East Timor, six and a half years after they had first been deployed and nearly four years since the last battalion contingent returned. Given the NZDF's extensive prior experience in operating in East Timor how did New Zealand respond this time and what further lessons were learnt?

### Background to the crisis

During the first half of 2006, East Timor was increasingly riven by civil conflict. By early May, there were indications that New Zealand would be asked to provide forces for a potential stability operation and New Zealand Minister of Foreign Affairs, Winston Peters, noted that it was likely that New Zealand would agree to such a request.

On 24 May, New Zealand placed a single infantry platoon on standby for possible deployment in a services-assisted evacuation. That night, a formal request for assistance was received from the East Timorese government, after earlier, confusing requests from various East Timorese politicians. Australia had already begun advanced preparations for interventionary assistance by deploying several ships to northern Australia waters and concentrating ground forces and air transport support at the major ADF bases in Townsville and Darwin.

Some concern was expressed at official and political levels in both Australia and New Zealand as to the size and roles of any intervention force. These issues were resolved by late afternoon on 25 May, and soon after Australian commandoes secured Dili airport as a firm base for operations. Further Australian forces began to flow over the Timor Sea. On the following day, 26 May, New Zealand sent a 42-strong infantry platoon to Townsville for onward transit to Dili. By this time the Australians already had two company groups on the ground in Dili.

### Arrival in Dili

New Zealand's infantry platoon arrived in Dili on 27 May and moved immediately to secure the New Zealand embassy. The same day, the New Zealand government announced it

would send an additional company group to the theatre. This flew out immediately to northern Australia.

On 29 May, the NZDF announced that the New Zealand embassy was secure and some of the initial reinforced platoon-strength detachment were now engaged in general patrolling tasks around Dili. Some public concern in New Zealand was expressed as to why the company dispatched on 27 May had not yet arrived in East Timor. The NZDF and New Zealand government responded with the explanation that the company group would be in-theatre for some time, so required a period of tropical acclimatisation in Northern Queensland. There were also apparently issues of movements co-ordination and operational synchronisation with the larger Australian deployment.

The 123 members of Delta Company, 2/1<sup>st</sup> RNZIR, finally arrived in Dili on 31 May, some six days after the formal request from East Timor for assistance. Soon after, the initial infantry platoon was rotated back to New Zealand, and additional armed civil police were sent.

### Evaluating the New Zealand intervention

Given the above, there are three main issues to consider when examining the effectiveness and speed of New Zealand's initial response: the time taken to place a force on standby, the time between the force being placed on standby and when it was first deployed, and the time between deployment and arrival in East Timor. The initial infantry platoon was placed on standby on 24 May, flown to Australia on 26 May, and arrived in East Timor on 27 May. The company group was placed on standby on 26 May, flown out on 27 May, and arrived in East Timor on 31 May.

In the time taken between first deployment and arrival in East Timor this took only one day for the initial rifle platoon. This was an acceptable timeframe in both operational and diplomatic terms. However, with the company group, there was a four-day delay between its arrival in Australia and its eventual arrival in East Timor. At first glance, this does not seem particularly speedy and such a period could

be disastrous in other regional evacuation and stability assistance contingencies.

There appear to be several reasons why this follow-on force took so long to deploy from Australia to East Timor. The first is that Australia was the lead nation and provided the largest contribution to the intervention force. This meant that New Zealand had to ensure its contributions synchronised with Australia's operations. By the time the company arrived in Australia on 27 May, the Australian operation was in full swing and the situation on the ground in Dili was (thankfully) largely peaceful. An additional company group was perhaps not immediately useful at that stage, and indeed may have been difficult to integrate into existing movement schedules.

A second issue related to the roles and activities to be carried out by the NZDF contingent. There was some confusion about the specifics of any NZDF role, and these required negotiations between the NZDF, the ADF and East Timorese authorities, as well as the authorising Ministers in all three countries.

The third issue was tropical acclimatisation. This appears to be a valid reason for some delay. It was initially expected that the first platoon would carry out merely a short-term services-assisted evacuation, whereas the company group would remain in East Timor for some time. Preferably this would involve some acclimatisation in a tropical climate before arriving in East Timor itself. It does, however, raise a separate question: why then did it take until 26 May for New Zealand to mobilise a company group for such a deployment? This apparent tardy decision is the crux of the matter.

## New Zealand misunderstandings

As noted earlier, there had been signs throughout April-May that East Timor was likely to descend into chaos sufficiently serious to require external intervention of some kind, even if only to evacuate foreign nationals. It was always likely that northern Australia, chiefly Darwin, would provide the base for such assistance, that the ADF would figure prominently and that, as in 1999, Australia would have to co-ordinate and lead any coalition of regional partners offering assistance.

By early May, at least, the situation in Dili had swiftly deteriorated and it became highly probable that a New Zealand contribution to assist in restoring order, and not merely evacuate New Zealand citizens, would be necessary. It might have been expected that the New Zealand government would have raised the preparedness for short-notice deployment of a sufficient force, such as a company group, much earlier than was actually done.

On 25 May, the Australian Minister of Defence, Brendan Nelson, noted that the ADF had been ready to go (in reasonable strength) and provide assistance for some two weeks at least. Considering the close links between the ADF and NZDF, and the combined contingency planning that is generally undertaken for reasons of continuing commonsense based on numerous historical examples, an NZDF company group might reasonably have been deployed to Queensland as a prudent contingency measure by mid-May at the latest.

Such a company would thus have been suitably acclimatised to tropical conditions by the time the formal request for assistance was received and approved. If mid-May was considered too early for such a contingency deployment then 25 May, the day after the request for assistance was received, was surely too late. By this time it was clearly apparent that more than a services-assisted evacuation (using the original platoon group) would be necessary.

The primary reason for this hesitation in providing a company group to East Timor seems to have been a misreading of the situation at official and/or political levels in Wellington. There are several facets to this. First, New Zealand prides itself on a multilateral, consensual attitude to multi-national security operations. It is likely that policymakers at both levels did not wish to be seen as making moves that might have been misconstrued in some quarters as overly aggressive, such as mobilising or pre-deploying a company group to northern Australia earlier. It may have been felt that even sending a company group to Townsville would have been seen as firmly indicating an intent to contribute to a regional stabilisation force – although any number of combined training pretexts could plausibly have been used to assuage or deflect such concerns. The infantry platoon, being tasked with only evacuation duties at first, was probably seen as being less provocative. But even then, there were delays in its warning notice and deployment.

There were also concerns about the factional nature of the fighting in Dili. Unlike the 1999 operation, there was



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no clear demarcation between 'good guys' and 'bad guys', at least in media coverage although it seems probable that diplomatic reporting and intelligence assessments were much better informed. The New Zealand government was apparently concerned that any NZDF contribution to a regional intervention force did not take sides in an incipient civil war. At this stage it was unclear who still constituted the legitimate government of East Timor, especially as the East Timorese President and Prime-Minister were not then in agreement over the need for external security assistance. Related to this were issues about the exact roles that would be undertaken by such an external assistance force.

However, the primary reason for the New Zealand government's delay in raising the infantry company's readiness notice seems to have been a simple misjudgement of the level of conflict on the ground. They misread the signs and assumed that the situation would probably not require a major intervention. When the situation continued to deteriorate, necessitating forceful intervention, they were surprised. This is probably why it took until after the formal request had been received for the infantry company to be mobilised. Indeed, it was over a day between the receipt of the request and the mobilisation of the company.

This seems to indicate that there were still some lingering doubts in New Zealand (but not Australia) about the necessity for additional forces and the type of assistance needed, even when East Timor had firmly asked for such assistance – and even after the New Zealand government had stated themselves that intervention was necessary. Oddly, this happened despite former Foreign Minister, Phil Goff, known as a supporter of peace support operations and the use of the NZDF as a legitimate and useful tool of foreign policy, being the Minister of Defence.

Because it took until 27 May for the infantry company group to be dispatched, a further delay was inevitable. The company group arrived in Australia when the ADF was already busy, and it had to wait in the queue before it could be further deployed across the Timor Sea.

## Other shortcomings

Apart from the issues noted above, the operation also indicated other shortcomings in New Zealand's ability to provide overseas assistance.

Raising the two small groups to a realistically useable degree of operational readiness seems to have required a Cabinet decision in each case. This seems to be a mechanism designed to create undue delays. While the actual dispatch of forces overseas should be a Cabinet decision, increases in readiness for such small forces might well be devolved to senior military commanders, or at least the Minister of Defence. The fact that an additional increase in readiness was necessary also indicates that prescribed routine levels of readiness in the NZDF are insufficient for the ready use of any force other than the smallest sub-unit strength. Given the limited size of the defence budget, it may be that the cost of maintaining realistically-sized forces at more readily useable levels of deployability for sudden (or shorter-notice) crises cannot be met within current funding levels. Future crises

might require more speedy commitments and New Zealand should not depend so much on Australia pulling kiwi irons out of the fire in this regard, particularly at such a low level of capability as rifle companies.

Some gaps in the NZDF's force structure were also highlighted. The ADF was able to deploy naval units off East Timor on the night of 24 May, which provided crucial 'show of force', command and control, and logistic support. Even allowing for the much greater distances involved, the NZDF lacked any such capability; its two frigates were elsewhere, and its other units were largely useless in such an operation. Luckily, there is hope on the horizon with the entry into service of the 9000-tonne Multi Role Vessel in 2007. Had this ship been in service, it might have been positioned off East Timor in mid to late May, carrying equipment and personnel, and able to land forces over the beach (or by helicopter) within a few hours of receiving the call. Also, the infantry on the ground would have had proper protection in armoured vehicles, rather than being forced to rely on unarmoured vehicles.

There remains, however, the question as to whether the Multi-Role Vessel, even if it were already in service, would have been authorised to deploy nearby, given the New Zealand political sensitivities discussed above. Still, it is possible that a contingency naval deployment to northern Australia waters would have been considered as much less provocative than pre-deploying ground forces to northern Australia.

Finally, the size of New Zealand's contribution was also relatively small. Less than 200 personnel were eventually



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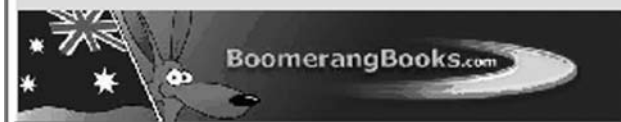
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deployed in East Timor – less than a tenth of Australia's contribution. This was in direct contrast to the situation in 1999, where New Zealand was able, with some difficulty but much improvisation, to provide a full battalion group and then rotate that force on four occasions.

## Optimum deployment

An optimum deployment to East Timor, using only the forces actually sent, might instead have taken the following form. In early May, noting the steady rise in violence, the NZDF might have deployed a company group (and associated C-130 air transport) to Australia for tropical acclimatisation, general contingency co-ordination activities and some measure of combined tactical exercises. Just as importantly, this would have allowed combined planning based on a more certain commitment of forces by both countries (and in practice a probable firm commitment). This acclimatised and prepared company might then have been on the ground in Dili on 25 May, alongside initial Australian forces. If the entire company could not have been sent at this stage, then at least one of its platoons could have been sent to secure the embassy on the first day of the regional assistance force deployment.

Whether there would have been sufficient spare airlift capacity to carry New Zealand forces to East Timor is another question. It is likely, however, that had a New Zealand company been available and ready in northern Australia by 25 May, it could have been flown to Dili by either RNZAF or RAAF C-130 aircraft. Alternatively, ADF sealift assets might have been able to ferry the force across the Timor Sea.

Operationally, additional New Zealand forces, delivered earlier, would also have increased the patrolling strength and reaction capacity of the regional intervention force. While, in the end, there were relatively few deaths in the first days of the intervention, this might not have been the case. Had the situation been bloodier, then the relative lack of numbers on the ground in the first day or so might have caused a high number of military and civilian casualties.

The second consideration in this regard is the international strategic and diplomatic dimension. For the first six days or so of the collective intervention, the vast majority of troops on the ground were Australian. Press reports of the intervention around the world emphasised the involvement of Australian forces. New Zealand, with perhaps 1/30<sup>th</sup> of the troops in Dili, was almost invisible. Had New Zealand had a company on the ground in the first day or so of the intervention, then it would have been a highly visible contributor. This would have had largely positive impact on New Zealand's image around the world, portraying it as a willing and able participant in operations to restore peace and stability.

Regional intervention forces need to be regional in both fact and perception. The limited and somewhat tardy New Zealand commitment meant there were disproportionate levels of Australian and New Zealand forces in Dili, especially in the early stages, and this was too obvious to all concerned. If two full company groups, for example, had been deployed to Australia as a contingency step, even if sent in to Dili at different times, it would have greatly strengthened the regional nature of the assistance being provided – and bolstered New Zealand's diplomatic position and international status on the ground.

## Summing up

New Zealand provided a reinforced infantry platoon and an infantry company group to the East Timor stability operation. The first was delayed a few days, the second almost a week. There was a lack of prior planning and no pre-deployment to a logical forward base. This was largely due to government misperceptions of the situation, concern about the nature of potential fighting, and hypersensitivity about New Zealand being seen as somehow too interventionist. The operation also indicated several shortcomings in the NZDF itself, particularly regarding the mechanisms by which forces are prepared and mobilised.

New Zealand's delayed and relatively limited response was in direct contrast to the Australian one. Australia had a wide variety of forces preparing for weeks beforehand and could have tackled a broad range of contingencies. In the end, New Zealand's indecision and delays did not result in serious negative effects on the ground in East Timor (this time), but this was thanks largely to Australia's large and rapid contribution. New Zealand must be better organised and prepared next time. ♦

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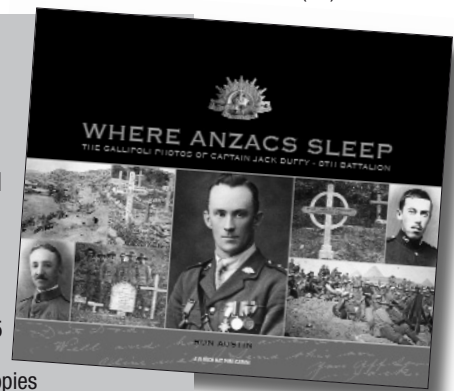
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