

Balibo inquest a damning indictment of `Jakarta lobby`

Wednesday 21 February 2007, by [HEARMAN Vanessa](#) (Date first published: 16 February 2007).

At a meeting in Melbourne on February 8 journalist and film-maker John Pilger hailed Shirley Shackleton as one of Australia's "heroes". He praised her tireless dedication, since 1975, in exposing the genocide in East Timor and in pursuing the truth about the death of five journalists in Balibo, East Timor. One of the journalists killed was her husband Greg Shackleton.

Shirley Shackleton has campaigned for decades for an independent judicial inquiry that would reveal the circumstances surrounding the death of Greg, Brian Peters, Malcolm Rennie, Tony Stewart and Gary Cunningham in Balibo near the shared Indonesian border, on 16 October, 1975 two months before Indonesia invaded East Timor.

An inquest into the death of Peters began on February 5 at the Glebe Coroners' Court.

Official Indonesian and Australian accounts have been that the men died in crossfire by warring Timorese factions and were not murdered in cold blood by Indonesian Kopassandha (secret warfare) troops to prevent them from reporting Indonesian military hit-and-run attacks on unarmed Timorese civilians. Timorese claimed that repeated assaults had occurred over the previous year.

It was reports like these that Greg and his four colleagues were sent to expose.

Shackleton, who is attending the first two weeks of the inquest, told Green Left Weekly that "it [the inquest] is a triumph for the Australian judiciary. Rod Lewis, a member of the Australian section of the International Commission of Jurists, discovered a loophole that allowed an inquest into Brian Peter's death, as he was a resident in New South Wales.

"Among other facts, if it can be established that Defense Signals Directorate intercepted orders from the Indonesian military to kill the five journalists, it will surely mean that Gough Whitlam and Australian government officials like Richard Woolcott [ambassador to Indonesia at the time] knew the facts.

"Woolcott arranged what I believe to have been a bogus funeral in Jakarta to which none of the relatives of the murdered men were invited."

Shackleton continued: "During the Sherman inquiry [in 1996], two former intelligence officers, who were not prepared to identify themselves publicly, came forward with the intercepts. Yet Sherman chose to 'let sleeping dogs lie'."

Shackleton wishes that the coroner had the power to subpoena Lieutenant-General Mohammad Yunus Yosfiah, a sergeant at the time of the Indonesian assault on Balibo. He has repeatedly claimed, as his defense, that, "he has never met the men". He was promoted after Balibo and boasted in the October 18, 1997 Sydney Morning Herald of being an

orang tempur (a fighting animal)". Yet Yosfiah has been named by witnesses in the inquest as being the commander of the Balibo operations.

Shackleton described his claim that he has never met the journalists as "laughable". "Does he suggest that one must be introduced to one's victims before murdering them?"

Timorese witnesses at the inquest testified that the journalists emerged from the house, where they had been sleeping, with arms raised in surrender. They were unarmed.

Shackleton condemned both Labor and Liberal governments for their moral bankruptcy on East Timor, arguing that governments were elected "to look after their people, not collude in covering up for murderers".

"This exposes the bipartisan Jakarta lobby's perception that it controls the propaganda of what happened in Balibo, and it challenges their arrogant attitude that East Timor and the Timorese were expendable."

Shackleton is sad about the Indonesian military's rampant brutalising of the people of West Papua. "In a repeat performance of the brutal Indonesian occupation in East Timor, the rapists, arsonists, kleptomaniacs and murderers are on the loose against unarmed civilians in West Papua."

At 75 years old, Shackleton is keeping an open mind about whatever the inquest reveals. "But, one thing is certain", she said. "The inquest will be another important step in recording for the history books how the successive Australian government and the Jakarta lobby got it so wrong."

P.S.

* From: Comment & Analysis, Green Left Weekly issue #699 21 February 2007.