

COMMITTEES: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee: Report

Mr HOLLIS (Throsby) (12.46 p.m.) —On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, I present the committee report on our visit to East Timor on 2 December 1999, together with the minutes of the proceedings.

Ordered that the report be printed.

Mr HOLLIS —This visit was particularly timely for the committee not only for the foreign affairs implications but because it covered areas of two other inquiries that the committee is currently involved in. The first inquiry covers the suitability of the Australian Army for peacetime, peacekeeping and war, and the second covers our relationship with the UN. Of course, it also covers the important work the committee does on human rights.

Despite the media coverage of Timor, nothing prepares you for the senseless destruction that became so much a part of the life there, not only in Dili but also in other parts that we visited such as Suai. There has been some discussion on possible changes to the Australian defence forces. I believe that our defence personnel have performed magnificently in Timor. They had no idea when they arrived of what to expect on the ground or whether they would be forced into a confrontation with the Indonesian military or the militia. Despite this, they carried out, and continue to carry out, their role. When we talk about our troops there, we should bear in mind that most of them are only young—18-, 19-, or 20-year-old men and women. They have done Australia and its defence forces proud.

There has been some debate in recent days about military training and if the correct emphasis is placed on training, whether it is for peacekeeping or for combat areas. The debate has been made more interesting by the New Zealand Prime Minister's statement last week that New Zealand troops would place a particular emphasis on a peacekeeping role. I am firmly of the view that troops trained for combat can readily adapt to the peacekeeping role. I am not so convinced that the reverse is true. While we are all justifiably proud of the role our forces played in East Timor—and they will be honoured at a luncheon in this building tomorrow—many important issues for Australia have been thrown up by the Timor situation. What would have happened if our forces had had to be replaced by the same number of troops, or what if Australia were committed to other responsibilities at troop level of the same number, or what if another conflict had emerged in this increasingly conflict ridden part of the world?

Australia certainly would not have been able to provide two forces of the same strength as were provided in Timor. I suspect that Timor will become like the Falkland Island war.

Whatever it is you may wish to prove or indeed disprove, you will be able to make reference to the events in East Timor.

Although the committee was only in Timor for a short time, our visit was well planned and coordinated. One area of concern that did emerge and has become more obvious since our visit is that there are large numbers of aid agencies there. It seems that for domestic purposes every agency wants a presence in Timor. I believe this will inevitably lead to a duplication of efforts. There must be more coordination between aid agencies, but most importantly there must be a strong local Timorese presence in the planning, coordination and work of the relief effort. No-one should dictate to the Timorese or indeed impose their cultural values on them. Geography and history dictate that we will have a close relationship with this new nation, but it will be a nation whose destiny will be decided by the Timorese. It is too easy for us to bring our own local preconceived ideas on development or what we think is needed. Aid agencies must work with the Timorese. They must let the Timorese determine the pace and direction of future developments.

I wish to thank the Minister for Foreign Affairs for making this visit possible, and the Minister for Defence for providing air transport. I also thank the committee secretariat and other members of the committee. I thank the committee secretary, Margaret Swieringa, for another outstanding report. I know that for each member the East Timor visit was profoundly moving and a rewarding experience. I hope our report will make a contribution to the ongoing debate on East Timor. In the years ahead, East Timor will figure prominently in Australia's strategic and economic thinking. We managed to ignore what happened in Timor for too long. A price has been paid for this. Hopefully Australia has learnt a lesson. I must say that the Timor people have suffered dreadfully to achieve their independence.

Mr JULL (Fadden) (12.51 p.m.) —I too would like to make some comments in relation to the tabling of this report as I served as a member of the group that went to East Timor in early December last year. I commend the member for Throsby for some of the points that he made. I know that my colleague following will also be talking about some of the human rights aspects of what went on and what will go on in the future in East Timor. I also commend to the House the publication of a book by the Hon. Tim Fischer. I read his book during the recent parliamentary break, and I think it is quite a good introduction for anyone here who is thinking of reading this particular report because it does build up the scenario in which Australia found itself when our forces first went into East Timor in September of last year. The member for Throsby is perfectly correct when he said that nobody really has any idea of the total destruction and devastation that is East Timor. I think that all members of the delegation, especially those who had been there for the vote, found this just by driving into Dili. In fact, Dili is probably not necessarily the greatest example of what went on. I think I have worked out why we get no concept of the range of the destruction: it is simply because we have seen it on television. Virtually the entire footage came from Dili itself and most of it is taken at ground level. It is not really until you take off in a helicopter and get into the countryside and see these great areas of burnt out villages, and the utter destruction and devastation that has gone on, that it really comes home to you just how thorough the destruction has been and the tremendous challenge that is before the East Timorese as they try to build their new nation.

I also commend the Australian troops. I know that accolades have been given to them all over the place but I think that at every opportunity we should praise the efforts they made. One of the highlights of this visit by members of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade was the fact that we managed to go down to Suai, which was indeed one of the hot spots near the border, to meet with our troops, who were operating in the most appalling conditions. We were there at lunchtime. The heat was 40 degrees, and I would hate to think what the relative humidity was—if it was 290 per cent I would not have been surprised. The troops were there in full battle fatigues. They were headquartered in the old courthouse, which had been burnt out and virtually destroyed. The only protection they had was galvanised iron, and all these people working their hearts out in the most appalling conditions. Yes, all of a sudden they had been granted access to some provisions that had come up in refrigerated containers, but for something like nine weeks they had endured on basic army rations. There was nothing for them to do in terms of any sort of recreational activity. There was nothing in the town to do, and they were working very long hours and very long days. But there was that sense of determination and that sense that they were achieving a great deal, and I think that we must be particularly proud of the efforts they made and, of course, particularly proud of the work of Peter Cosgrove, who has been lauded not only in this country but also around the world for his particular contribution to that effort. The challenge for East Timor in the future is enormous. One of the things that came through to the committee as we were driving around some of these areas of destruction was the tremendous warmth of the reception that we received from the locals. The V for victory sign

was there, and the graffiti on the wall praised Australia and New Zealand for their particular efforts. There is no doubt that these people are thankful. But theirs is a tremendous challenge, one for which we must be sympathetic. I agree with the member for Throsby about the coordination of the aid efforts. Something must be done so that we do not get duplication because the needs are going to be just so great. The challenge for Australia will be there for many years to come. We are already there once more with the United Nations forces, and one would hope that we will have the capacity to be able to sit back and give help where it is required and when it is asked for, and that the East Timorese themselves will have the capacity to be able to build their own nation, one which will be truly free, independent and, hopefully, democratic.

Mr NUGENT (Aston) (12.56 p.m.) —I support the comments of the previous two speakers, the gentlemen from Throsby and Fadden. The first point I would make is that I think it is important that the parliament, in addition to ministers, the executive, the bureaucrats and officials and so on, actually does go out and inspect where our troops are deployed and come back with a first-hand view of what has been going on. Therefore, we were appreciative of the opportunity for 10 members of our committee to go to East Timor last December.

As has already been said, the performance of our troops has been outstanding in very difficult and trying conditions. Whilst we say that, and I do not want to take away anything from the performance of our defence forces, I think we also need to acknowledge, however, that they were up against a situation where they had been invited into the place and, although there were difficulties with the militia and some difficulties with the TNI on the Indonesian side, our troops have been trained for war. Clearly their opponents were not particularly competent in a war situation; they were much more attuned to a civil disturbance situation. The two things are different, and therefore our troops were able to very quickly establish a military ascendancy. They did that competently and efficiently.

One of the questions that it raises, when we look at the difficulty we had in mustering the numbers and the extra defence budget we have now had to come up with, is that we do need to look at what our role is going to be in the region, if any. We therefore need to look, once we have decided that strategic view, at the tactical issues of what shape and size our defence forces ought to be. Whilst we performed outstandingly in East Timor, I think it does in fact prompt some further questions that this country needs to pay attention to.

We should also acknowledge the contribution of other countries. I think it is important that, in the euphoria about how well we did, we need to recognise that we performed as part of a United Nations force and that many other countries were there on the ground with us. There is also no question in my view, gained as I travelled around the region—and I have talked to many visitors from overseas in particular in the last couple of months—that the action we have taken there has immeasurably improved Australia's standing as a country in this region of the world.

Other speakers have mentioned the extent of the destruction in Dili and there is no question that, from a helicopter, you get a very good view of that sort of destruction. As we went into Suai, which is a town of about 10,000 or 12,000 people, we could see that every single building was absolutely burnt out—no roof, no doorways and no window frames. They were just burned out hulks. Where there had been wooden buildings there were just scorch marks on the ground. So the situation and the devastation there is absolutely complete, and we are talking now about East Timor having to rebuild its society from the ground up. The spirit of the people is good. The spirit of relationships between the Australian troops and the local people is outstandingly good. Of course, now we are seeing the country move into a new phase. The new part of the United Nations mandate has taken hold. There are still, however, some key issues. One of those I think is that we still need to address more vigorously the problem of refugees who are still in West Timor. Secondly, we need to be conscious that we

now have a lot of particularly young men back in East Timor who really have no employment and nothing very much to do. I think we will start to see some terrible social issues unless the United Nations can get the economy working fairly quickly.

In terms of the aid organisations, I echo the comments of my colleagues. I think there is also a need to look at the impact of the training of our military. It is quite clear that, whilst we are very good as a war fighting force, there is a need for some special training for this peacekeeping type of operation. Frankly, if it had not been for the special expertise shipped in from the United States, we would have found ourselves deficient in that regard, and we need to look at that. As a quick aside, let me say that one of our bodyguards in fact was a lady soldier. Whilst probably in an ideal world that should not be something remarkable to comment on, there is no question that, culturally, as a former serviceman I found it a change, but it is something to be welcomed.

We met with the United Nations human rights team, who were conducting an investigation of abuses of human rights. There is no question that there have been human rights abuses on a huge scale. We must support the United Nations in its investigations, and also Indonesia in its investigations, and pursue those who are responsible for those abuses. Apart from the troops, we should also remember the police and others who served in the East Timor area. For many months before the civilian police were in there, and we need to recognise them as well. I commend the report to the House.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER —Order! The time allotted for statements on this report has expired.

Mr HOLLIS (Throsby) (1.02 p.m.) —I move:

That the House take note of the report.

I seek leave to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER —In accordance with standing order 102B, the debate is adjourned. The resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting, and the member will have leave to continue speaking when the debate is resumed.