

Eroding the propriety of the Timor deal

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Whatever merit the Australian government might discern in spying on the ministers of East Timor in 2004, it is beggarly that its operatives apparently went about their work in Dili using the cover of aid workers. It is certainly not the first time aid workers have been accused of spying, but deceit of this kind brings suspicion on all non-government aid workers, irrespective of who they are and what they do. It runs the risk of endangering all legitimate aid workers who seek to help the disadvantaged.

East Timor says it has identified four Australians who visited the newly independent nation in 2004, when the two countries were in the early stages of negotiating a treaty on dividing the substantial revenue that is expected to be derived from gasfields operations in the Timor Sea. East Timor's government says bugging devices were installed in its prime ministerial office and cabinet rooms by the Australians, who it says posed as workers on an aid project renovating the building.

Aid agencies operate in extreme and difficult conditions, often on the front line of danger and often in countries where they are constantly at risk from brutal regimes. They dare to help when no one else will. To deploy intelligence agents under the cover of aid workers is to exploit the fragile trust that aid agencies must forge with their host country. It weakens their security because it discredits their altruism.

The allegations have emerged as Australia and East Timor enter the first stages of arbitration to resolve a dispute over the gasfields treaty, and they come less than a week after the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation raided the Canberra home and offices of an Australian lawyer working for East Timor. ASIO also raided the home of a former Australian Secret Intelligence Service officer who is said to be prepared to blow the whistle on the 2004 operation.

East Timor believes it was short-changed in the treaty because, in its view, Australia acted in bad faith by spying on its negotiators. As *The Age* has said, it is morally repugnant for a wealthy nation such as Australia to take advantage of a deeply impoverished one by spying on it for commercial advantage. To excuse such actions as being in the national interest is breathtakingly cynical.