



**Speech by the Minister of the
Presidency of the Council of Ministers,
Agio Pereira**

On the occasion of the commemorative
ceremony marking the 50th anniversary
of the deaths of the Balibó Five

**Balibó Fifty Years On:
Remembering the Balibo Five and Roger East**

Balibó, 16 October 2025

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests,
dear friends from Australia and Timor-Leste:

We gather in October 2025 to mark 50 years since the tragedies at Balibo and in Díli that claimed the lives of courageous journalists — the Balibó Five and Roger East.

Fifty years ago, five young journalists in Balibó and one in Dili stood between silence and the world. They chose truth. They paid with their lives. Today, we remember them not as distant figures, but as echoes of our responsibility — to speak, to demand, to act.

On this 50th anniversary, their stories demand remembrance: not only for the sacrifice these journalists made in pursuit of truth – truth about crimes done by powerful nations to weaker ones. And also for the critical lessons their fates teach about the responsibilities of governments, the perils of secrecy, and the courage of those who report from the world's most dangerous frontiers.

Their deaths are not merely distant footnotes of history. They remain wounds in our conscience: reminders of the human cost of conflict, the fragility of truth in war, and the heavy burden of moral responsibility across borders.

In this commemoration, I wish to speak both to memory and to questions: why they were reporting in Balibó; what was the response to the deaths; and what meanings do these events have for Australians and Timorese as we reflect on this half a century's passage.



The six Australian journalists killed in East Timor in 1975: Gary Cunningham, Brian Peters, Malcolm Rennie, Greg Shackleton, Tony Stewart and Roger East.

To understand the deaths of the Balibó Five and Roger East, we must situate them in the political and military dynamics of Timor-Leste in 1975 — a moment of decolonisation, polarization, of hope and great peril.

Portuguese Timor had been a Portuguese colony for centuries. Following the 1974 Carnation Revolution in Portugal, Portugal initiated decolonisation of its overseas territories. In East Timor, that created a vacuum: local movements vied for leadership, and regional powers watched closely.

An Indonesian-supported coup attempt in August 1975, destabilized the Portuguese administration; Portuguese authority weakened amid retreat and disengagement. In that vacuum, the popular political party Fretilin stepped forward. On 28 November 1975, in an attempt to stem off an invasion by its huge neighbour, Fretilin declared independence for the Democratic Republic of East Timor (Timor-Leste).

Across the border, Indonesia was under the Suharto regime, supported by Western nations. It viewed East Timor as a geopolitical risk: a small independent state on its frontier, potentially politically unstable and susceptible to leftist influence. And it viewed its potential oil & gas resources.

Indonesia increased military attacks and incursions into East Timor after its coup attempt had failed.

Inside this volatile political and military theatre arrived the Balibó Five in October 1975, seeking to bring the unfolding drama to the world's attention.

What happened to the Balibó Five

On 16 October 1975, the five journalists from Australian TV were in Balibó to investigate reports of incursions from Indonesian forces.

The group was:

Greg Shackleton (Australian, Channel 7 reporter)

Tony Stewart (Australian, Channel 7 sound recordist)

Brian Peters (British, Channel 9 cameraman)

Malcolm Rennie (British, Channel 9 reporter)

Gary Cunningham (New Zealand, Channel 7 cameraman)

At Balibó, from the nearby old fort, they had a perfect view of the coast towards the Indonesian border. Soon after they encountered Fretilin patrols and had contact with senior Timorese leader Dr. José Ramos-Horta. They were then able to film Indonesian naval ships off shore.

The journalists stayed here, then a deserted house, which they painted with an Australian flag in the hope that their journalistic status might afford them protection. They dubbed the house “the Australian embassy” in recognition of the protection they hoped for but did not realistically receive.

In the early morning of 16 October 1975, Indonesian forces launched an attack on Balibó as part of a covert operation codenamed *Operasi Flamboyant*, to seize key border towns of Maliana, Atsabe, and Balibó, as the first stage of the full invasion.

That morning, within minutes of filming advancing special forces soldiers, the five journalists were dead. They had been murdered in cold blood by Indonesian forces intent on silencing them, to suppress evidence of Indonesian military involvement in East Timor.

For a moment the Indonesian invasion forces drew back, and hesitated, awaiting the world's official reactions to the murders. But there was none.

Weeks later, Indonesian forces launched a massive invasion that opened a brutal 24-year occupation, during which as many as 200,000 Timorese perished; through violence, famine, and forced displacement. It was nothing less than a humanitarian catastrophe.

What we have come to learn is that the truth cannot be buried

The official public Indonesian position long held and repeated by subsequent Australian governments was that the journalists died as incidental casualties of crossfire during the fighting. However, over subsequent decades, a very different account emerged, brought forward through testimonial evidence, inquiries, and, most importantly, investigative journalism.

In 2007, in New South Wales, the Deputy State Coroner Dorelle Pinch conducted an inquest into the death of Brian Peters, after pressure from the families, and in doing so implicitly extended findings to all five journalists.

Her findings were stark: The Balibo Five died at Balibó on 16 October 1975 from wounds sustained when they were shot and stabbed deliberately, and not in the heat of battle, by members of the Indonesian Special Forces. She named the soldiers who had acted on orders to prevent the journalists from revealing that Indonesian Special Forces had participated in the attack on Balibó.

The Coroner concluded that the journalists were not incidental casualties: they had been captured as non-combatants and then deliberately executed, despite protesting their status. She further found compelling circumstantial evidence that the orders originated from higher levels, possibly up to Major General Benny Murdani, head of the Indonesian special forces.

The Coroner's report recommended that prosecutions under Australia's war crimes provisions be considered; however, that never happened.

As Indonesian forces moved in towards Dili, Australian aid workers and medical staff joined with the other foreign correspondents in Timor and withdrew to Australia. Roger East chose to stay, planning to escape with Fretilin forces into the mountains and transmit reports back to Australia by radio.

His final broadcast for ABC's *Correspondents Report* on 7 December 1975, described invading Indonesian troops in the capital Dili.

The next day, East was trapped in Dili and soon captured by Indonesian soldiers. After being taken prisoner, he was executed by one shot to the head at the wharf of Dili Harbour, along with a mass execution of Timorese prisoners and civilians. He was executed as a continuation of the Indonesian campaign to silence independent news.

In sum, Australia's posture in 1975 and afterward, until the Interfet intervention of 1999, reflected an alignment of realpolitik, regional alliances, diplomatic caution, and strategic interests — one that, many argue, subordinated the protection of journalists and the people of Timor-Leste, as well as the moral imperative of justice.

In both the Balibó Five case and Roger East's death — as in the case of the Indonesian invasion of East Timor — allegations of collusion, suppression of truth, and diplomatic cover-up loom large.

In short, decades of silence, classified files, and diplomatic deference have allowed much of the truth to remain buried — in justice, if not in memory.

The moral imperative of remembrance

As we mark 50 years since those deaths, what should such remembrance offer to an Australian and Timorese audience?

For the Australians, there is:

Honouring journalistic courage: The Balibó Five and Roger East embodied the essential principle that journalists risk their lives to report truths others would suppress. Their sacrifice demands we honour press freedom and protection for truth-seeking work.

Acknowledging state complicity: Many Australians have long felt unease that their government tacitly abandoned its own citizens to silence. Recognising, confronting, and learning from that failure is vital to national integrity.

Advocacy for justice: Although legal obstacles remain (time, evidence, jurisdiction), Australians can still demand disclosure of classified materials, renewed investigations, and diplomatic pressure for accountability.

Foreign policy lessons: The Balibó and East deaths – as well of the Timorese people – provide a necessary caution against uncritical alignment with powerful nations. They show the moral cost of political compromise. They also press us to centre human rights, not only strategic interests, in regional policy.

For us, the Timorese, there is:

Respect for suffering: Timorese communities (our communities) have endured profound loss over decades. Remembering the Balibó Five and Roger East affirms that their story is part of a nation's struggle for dignity and truth.

International solidarity: The presence of Australians and others here acknowledges that Timor's cause has had many supporters beyond its borders. It strengthens years-long bonds of trust and moral partnership.

Ongoing vigilance: Even in an independent Timor-Leste, the lessons persist: that truth must be protected and that no story should be buried for the convenience of the powerful.

We remember that justice delayed is not justice denied

Fifty years is a long time. Yet remembrance matters precisely because justice is never automatic.

Commemoration is not passive. It is an active practice of memory: demanding transparency, pushing for declassification, renewing investigations, supporting journalism training, and strengthening international norms of protection for journalists.

Ceremonies are frequently held to celebrate not only the lives of Shackleton, Cunningham, Stewart, Rennie, Peters, and East, but also to recommit to the principles of free speech and international accountability.

In Australia, memorials such as the War Correspondents Memorial at Canberra, and in Timor, the Balibó House, stand as precincts of memory. And the Balibó Five Families provide ongoing support for a clinic and schools, here, in Balibó.

The journalists' union, the MEAA: Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance, and APHEDA-Union Aid Abroad, run the "Balibó Five – Roger East Fellowship" to provide support and training for Timorese journalists. **It is a living legacy of memory into action.**

But memory alone isn't enough: each generation must assert that truth matters, that the cost borne by those who spoke must not be in vain.

To the Balibó Five — Shackleton, Stewart, Cunningham, Peters, Rennie — and to Roger East: your names are not forgotten, your sacrifice still demands justice, your courage still calls us forward. May we not fail those who stood so bravely for truth.

Fifty years is a long distance. New generations in Australia and Timor-Leste may ask: why dwell so long on events in 1975? **It is because memory bridges time, and moral duty does not expire.**

The legacy of the Balibó is inseparable from the history of Timor-Leste – its struggle for independence, the regional politics that shaped its fate, and the international pursuit for truth amidst violence and denial. Their sacrifice endures in every act of remembrance, every step towards reconciliation, and every story that honours those who confront injustice.

The deaths of the Balibó Five and Roger East underscore that at moments of historical rupture, when to speak is to risk death. **They remind us how powerful regimes can control the narrative by silencing witnesses.**

They challenge governments not to trade moral clarity for diplomatic convenience. And they charge us – this generation and the next – to keep open the space for truth, justice, and remembrance.

As Australians and as Timorese – neighbours linked by geography, history and humanity – our responsibility is bound together. May this 50th anniversary not be a mere ceremony, but a renewal: of memory, of commitment, and of resolve to honour the fallen by ensuring that no voice for truth is ever again muffled.

Thank you.