

# ‘Really disgraceful’: Australian aid program allegedly used as cover for Timor-Leste spying

by Ashlee Betteridge  
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Australia is embroiled in its second spying scandal in recent weeks following [allegations](#) that Timor-Leste’s cabinet room was bugged during maritime boundary negotiations in 2004.

Worryingly, Timor-Leste alleges that the Australian Secret Intelligence Service used the cover of Australia’s aid program to carry out the espionage.

Timor-Leste is launching a case at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague to void the \$40 million oil and gas treaty at the centre of the spying allegations. Earlier this week, ASIO officers raided the homes of Timor-Leste’s lawyer in the case, Bernard Collaery, and that of a retired Australian spy expected to give evidence.

Collaery [told ABC Radio](#) that a team of ASIS technicians were instructed to travel to Timor-Leste “in an elaborate plan, using Australian aid programs relating to the renovation and construction of the cabinet offices in Dili, East Timor, to insert listening devices into the wall”.

In an [interview](#) with ABC’s PM, former army intelligence officer Dr Clinton Fernandes, now on the faculty of UNSW-Canberra, spoke out against the use of aid workers as cover for espionage, saying that such action “puts in doubt the neutrality of every Australian who goes overseas”, including volunteers.

“I think that certain categories of occupations should never be used for espionage. For example, members of the International Committee of the Red Cross should never be impersonated. Similarly, medical personnel, religious personnel should never be impersonated in a foreign intelligence operation and I think the misuse or the alleged misuse of the Australian aid program is really disgraceful,” Fernandes said.

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Ashlee Betteridge was the Manager of the Development Policy Centre until April 2021. She was previously a Research Officer at the centre from 2013-2017. A former journalist, she holds a Master of Public Policy (Development Policy) from ANU and has development experience in Indonesia and Timor-Leste. She now has her own consultancy, Better Things Consulting, and works across several large projects with managing contractors.

Link:

<https://devpolicy.org/really-disgraceful-australian-aid-program-allegedly-used-as-cover-for-timor-spying20131206-2/>