

A conspiracy against the East Timorese

UN intervention into East Timor being prepared

Peter Symonds
5 March 1999

The pace of diplomatic manoeuvres over the future of East Timor is accelerating. Over the last week, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer has engaged in a frantic round of talks with his Indonesian counterpart Ali Alatas, as well as President Habibie; East Timorese leader Xanana Gusmao, who is under house arrest in Jakarta; and Portuguese Foreign Minister Jaime Gama, whom he met just outside Lisbon. At the same time, senior Australian Foreign Affairs officials were sent to the US for talks with the UN Secretary General and the Clinton administration.

Early next week UN-sponsored negotiations are due to recommence between Indonesia and Portugal, the former colonial power, over proposals for autonomy for East Timor. In an effort to set the framework for the talks, Habibie announced last month that Indonesia would pull out of East Timor completely by the beginning of next year if his proposals for autonomy within the framework of Indonesian sovereignty were rejected by the East Timorese.

In the event that Indonesia withdraws, both Australia and Portugal have indicated that their governments will foot costs amounting to \$50 million a year for government services on the island. Downer has also sounded out other countries to provide money and personnel. The US, Canada, Britain, New Zealand and the Philippines have agreed to participate.

Preparations are being made for direct UN intervention. In a speech to the Australia-Asia Institute on Monday, Downer spoke of the need for "international confidence building and an administrative presence in East Timor from an early stage" in order to "manage the security environment". The *Australian* newspaper revealed the next day that

detailed discussions were taking place in official circles about setting up a UN peace-keeping force of up to 2,000 personnel, including Australian troops, police and administrative officials, who would institute and run everything from the central bank to customs and the education system.

There is a concerted high-level push for Australia to play the central role in any UN intervention. An editorial yesterday in the *Australian* stated: "Regardless of the scale and composition of Australia's involvement, extensive assistance will be necessary. It is also likely that an Australian commitment will last many years. It is a necessary risk to ensure the stability and security of our closest neighbour..."

In all the discussions about "independence" and "self-determination," what is completely left out is the right of the island's people to have any genuine say over their fate. The frenzied activity of diplomats, ministers and government officials in Canberra, Jakarta, Lisbon, Washington and other capitals over the issue is increasingly taking on the character of a conspiracy directed against the East Timorese themselves.

Habibie is yet to indicate exactly how the East Timorese are to "choose" between his autonomy plan and independence. He has ruled out holding any referendum on the island--a decision which Gusmao, along with Australia and Portugal, have accepted. Downer and Gusmao have floated the idea of a consultative assembly to make the choice. Whatever is finally decided, the mechanism will be little more than a democratic facade for decisions made behind the scenes by the major powers.

Moreover any so-called "consultative process" in East Timor will take place under conditions in which the

Indonesian regime has been actively encouraging pro-Indonesian militia. Militia leaders such as Cancio Lopes de Carvalho and Joao Tavarres, who claim to have as many as 17,000 recruits, will be used to intimidate and terrorise pro-independence groups. Last week two people were killed and at least five injured when militia groups opened fire on pro-independence supporters just outside the capital of Dili.

The Habibie regime has close ties with the militia. Tavarres, a local landowner, fought alongside Indonesian troops during the invasion of East Timor in 1975. Lopes de Carvalho was one of a delegation of 40 pro-Indonesian leaders who met with Habibie in Jakarta last week to discuss the future of the area.

If the proposals for autonomy are rejected then Habibie's administration insists that East Timor will be handed back to Portugal, which is expected to put the island under UN control. East Timor is, according to Downer, likely to remain under UN supervision for years. Furthermore, Downer hinted that many of the UN personnel could be Indonesian troops and civilians fitted out in blue berets and paid by the UN.

Whatever the exact twists and turns of the process, East Timor would be a tiny, impoverished statelet dependent on aid and loans from Australia, Portugal and other powers who are presently engaged in a contest for control over the island and its resources--principally oil and high-grade coffee. The large Australian corporation BHP has substantial interests in the Timor Gap offshore oil fields, which, according to some estimates, may be worth \$US11 billion. Gusmao has already reassured Australia that an East Timor government would uphold the Timor Gap Treaty signed between Australia and Indonesia.

There is considerable pressure to finalise arrangements before the Indonesian elections in June, in part, to present the new parliament and next president, due to be selected in November, with a fait accompli. One of the leading opposition contenders, Megawati Sukarnoputri, has opposed any change to the status of East Timor, claiming that the invasion in 1975 was completely legitimate. She represents sections of the Indonesian ruling class who are concerned that a breakaway by East Timor may lead to a disintegration of Indonesia as West Papua, Aceh and other regions demand separation as well.

Gusmao has emerged as the lynchpin in the

manoeuvres. He is being visited by a steady and growing stream of foreign dignitaries, officials and diplomats, including US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who is scheduled to meet him as part of her current Asian tour. Gusmao and the National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT) that he heads, are being relied upon to quell the resistance of workers, students, intellectuals and others to a deal which will do nothing to end their exploitation and conditions of poverty.

Downer praised Gusmao for his support for "reconciliation" and "forgiveness," and compared him to the South African President Nelson Mandela. The major powers are clearly looking to Gusmao to preserve their economic interests in East Timor and to maintain capitalist rule during a transitional period of great political and social instability. It is worth recalling the remark made by South African president F.W. de Klerk shortly after he released his long-time political enemy Mandela from prison in 1990: "Everything we do, we do to avoid revolution."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact