

Under conditions of social breakdown

UN talks propose autonomy ballot for East Timor

Peter Symonds
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UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan announced last Thursday that Portuguese and Indonesian representatives had agreed to a "direct" ballot for the people of East Timor to decide on an autonomy plan being drawn up by the Indonesian regime. If the autonomy proposals are rejected, Indonesian President Habibie has stated that Indonesia will withdraw from the former Portuguese colony, which it invaded in 1975 and annexed in 1976.

Indonesian officials have repeatedly ruled out any referendum to decide the future of East Timor. Details of the "direct" vote are still to be decided at a further meeting at the UN in April. Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas has suggested a "rolling ballot" conducted by UN teams travelling from village to village, but both Annan and Portuguese officials have opposed a drawn-out balloting process.

Annan commented: "We will be vigilant to ensure that there is no hanky-panky and that the kind of security that we are looking for is assured by the authorities. They have given us indications that they will work very closely with us on that."

However, Annan said the UN was not planning to ask Indonesia to withdraw its troops from East Timor. It was not realistic, he said, to expect that the Indonesian army, or any militia groups, could be disarmed before the vote. A poll conducted under such conditions would leave voters vulnerable to systematic intimidation and political pressure from armed pro-Indonesian militia and Indonesian troops.

Xanana Gusmao, head of the National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT), held talks last week with pro-Indonesia militia leader Joao Tavares over a ceasefire agreement. But another militia leader Basilio Araujo opposed the ballot and warned of continuing conflict, saying: "This will not solve the problem. It will create

winners and losers, and when we have winners and losers the fight will go on."

Annan stated that there would be a UN "presence" in East Timor by the end of April, which would build up closer to the poll, but refused to indicate its exact nature. Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer has already indicated a willingness for Australia to play a major role in any UN force, by sending "administrative assistance, observers, some technical assistance, perhaps some people to assist with policing functions".

Downer has ruled out the immediate dispatch of Australian troops, but the Howard government has announced the establishment of a new Ready Deployment Force of 3,000 combat troops to be stationed in the northern city of Darwin, just 600 kilometres from Timor. The unit, complete with tanks, armoured vehicles, helicopters and artillery, is to be operational by the end of June.

The exact composition of any UN presence, military or otherwise, will be determined by Portugal, Australia and other powers with vested interests in East Timor. Each is jockeying for the dominant position in determining the future of the island and its resources of oil, gas and coffee. Should the autonomy package be rejected, Indonesia is expected to hand East Timor back to Portugal, the former colonial power, which will turn the island over to the UN. Far from achieving any form of independence, East Timor will become a UN-protectorate for a number of years.

Conditions on East Timor are becoming increasingly chaotic as a result of the continuing economic crisis throughout Indonesia, the growing exodus of Indonesian businessmen and civil servants, and continuing fighting between groups for and against integration with Indonesia.

According to some estimates, at least 7,000 people have

left East Timor in recent weeks. Non-Timorese, who number an estimated 200,000, control most of East Timor's trade and hold many of the key government posts. Food stocks have been dwindling as businesses have run down supplies and the price of basic commodities such as rice has doubled in some areas.

Australian Council for Overseas Aid policy director Jim Redden cited reports that shops were closing down, and technicians, airline staff, doctors and teachers were leaving. "There is a serious breakdown of civil society. Planes and ships are fully booked; furniture trucks are coming across the border to take people back," he said. Thousands of people were crowding into Dili and other centres seeking food and medical aid.

Last week thousands of teachers from the East Timor Teachers Forum demanded talks with Indra Jati Sidi, a visiting Education Department official, urging the government to transfer them to other provinces. Some of the teachers complained that they had been physically abused, harassed and threatened by pro-independence students and residents.

East Timor's public health system is in a state of collapse, according to US-born Dr Dan Murphy who spoke to the *Sydney Morning Herald* last week. He said that 50 to 100 people were dying every day of curable diseases such as diarrhoea, malnutrition and tuberculosis, or during childbirth. Murphy, who works in a Catholic-run clinic and treats between 100 and 200 people a day, claimed that medical supplies from outside Indonesia were being prevented from reaching East Timor.

Another report indicated that 15 doctors had already left the Dili General Hospital, which is now short of staff and drug supplies. Only five general practitioners and 10 specialists remain. There is no surgeon and patients requiring surgery are being sent to the nearby Wirahusada Military Hospital. Nurses say there are shortages of antibiotics, syringes and intravenous equipment.



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