

Pro-Indonesian militia murder at least 25 East Timorese

Peter Symonds
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Pro-Indonesian militia have launched a series of attacks on pro-independence supporters in the Maubara sub-district of East Timor west of the capital of Dili, as preparations continue for negotiations later in the month between Indonesia and Portugal over the fate of the former Portuguese colony.

At least 25 people were hacked to death with machetes on Tuesday while they were sheltering with hundreds of others in a Roman Catholic church and residence in the town of Liquica. According to the local priest, Rafael Dos Santos, the mobile police brigade stood behind members of the Besi Merah Putih militia during the attack and discharged their weapons into the air. When people ran for cover, teargas was fired into the buildings to drive them into the open.

Witnesses told reporters that around 500 militia members armed with homemade rifles, swords, machetes and other weapons took part in the attack on the church, which is only 100 metres from the local headquarters of the Indonesian military.

Bishop Carlos Belo told the press: "I have a paper from the military commander that there were 25 bodies inside the priest's house, but according to other witnesses outside around the church there were other bodies. I don't know exactly how many." Indonesian military spokesman Major General Syamsul Maarif claimed that only five people had been killed.

The previous day the Besi Merah Putih militia attacked people in the village of Mauboke near Liquica. According to Antonio da Cruz of the pro-independence National Resistance Council of Timor (CRNT), three people were killed and eight injured. Some had to be treated in Dili for gunshot wounds.

CRNT leader Xanana Gusmao, who is still under house arrest in Jakarta, reacted to the news of the killings by calling for "the population to undertake a

general popular insurrection" against the militia and the Indonesian army stationed on East Timor. He explained, however, that he would immediately call off the "insurrection" if the United Nations agreed to put a peacekeeping force in place.

Gusmao is the crucial linchpin in UN-brokered attempts to impose an agreement to hold a poll in July involving a choice between limited autonomy within the framework of Indonesian sovereignty, or formal independence under some form of UN supervision. Indonesia invaded East Timor in 1975, but the UN still recognises Portugal as the former colonial ruler over the island. Further talks over the exact guidelines for Indonesia's autonomy offer are due to take place at the end of this month.

Under considerable international pressure, the Indonesian regime led by President BJ Habibie stated for the first time at the beginning of the year that Indonesia would hand East Timor back to Portugal if the autonomy offer were rejected by the East Timorese. But substantial sections of the Indonesian ruling elite are opposed to any independence for East Timor, fearing that it will encourage similar separatist movements in West Papua, Aceh and other regions leading to the fracturing of the country.

The Indonesian military has assisted in the organisation and arming of militia groups, some of whose leaders have links with the armed forces going back to the 1975 invasion. The latest attacks clearly strengthen the hand of those elements in the Habibie regime and the military who want to heighten political tensions in order to influence the outcome of the July ballot or prevent it happening altogether.

Australia, the US and Portugal have responded to the attacks and Gusmao's threat of an "insurrection" with alarm. US State Department spokesman described

Gusmao's remarks as "dangerous and troubling". The Australian government urged Indonesia to disarm the militia on East Timor. Portuguese Foreign Minister Jaime Gama condemned "the pre-meditated attacks by pro-Indonesian militia organised by the Indonesian military".

An outbreak of fighting between the militia and pro-independence FALINTIL guerrillas threatens to undermine the plans of the major powers to impose their own settlement on East Timor through the auspices of the UN. Both Australia and Portugal have been jockeying to head any UN force of advisers, administrators, police and possibly troops, which would supervise East Timor in the event that Indonesia's autonomy deal is rejected. Each is looking to enhance its position to exploit the island's oil, coffee and other resources.

By threatening to unleash an "insurrection" and then call it off in favour of a UN peacekeeping force, Gusmao is seeking to demonstrate his value to the major powers in containing the pent-up anger and frustration of ordinary East Timorese while an agreement is imposed which will do nothing to meet their aspirations for basic democratic rights and a decent living standards.



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