

Pro-Indonesian militia step up violence on East Timor

Peter Symonds
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The death toll on East Timor is rising rapidly as pro-Indonesian militia continue a campaign of rallies and attacks on pro-independence supporters. A climate of fear and intimidation is being established as Indonesian and Portuguese officials prepare for UN-sponsored talks next week over the future status of the island.

At least 25 people were killed last week when the Besi Merah Putih militia attacked hundreds of people sheltering in a Roman Catholic church and residence in the town of Liquica, west of the capital of Dili. Up to 500 armed militia members, with the mobile police brigade in the background, surrounded the area, drove the victims into the open and hacked them to death with machetes and other weapons.

The Indonesian military claimed that only five people were killed but witnesses indicate that the death toll may be even higher. The Habibie regime called on the International Committee of the Red Cross to investigate the Liquica murders but, according to an ICRC spokeswoman, militia had threatened its officials during four attempted visits to the area.

A convoy carrying Bishop Carlos Belo back to Dili from a mass in Liquica last Sunday was attacked by pro-Indonesian militia armed with rocks and iron bars. Foreigners including journalists were among the chief targets. Belo has cancelled plans for further so-called reconciliation talks brokered by the church between the political factions on East Timor.

On Saturday, thousands of pro-Indonesia militia armed with spears, machetes and home-made guns gathered in Viqueque, about 90 kilometres east of Dili. One of the leaders, Eurico Guterres, warned that the militia were ready for further clashes with pro-independence supporters and groups.

On Monday, 400 members of the Aitarak militia held another rally outside the provincial governor's office in

the centre of Dili. Again, Guterres made menacing warnings towards pro-independence supporters, saying: "If you want war, we are ready for war. If you have guns we too have guns. If you want to shoot, we can shoot."

Clashes involving the Indonesian Armed Forces (ABRI) have also been reported. According to the official *Antara* news agency, security forces killed pro-independence activist Antoni Liman at Ermera, 25 kilometres southwest of Dili. ABRI has not confirmed the report nor commented on allegations made by National Resistance Council of Timor (CRNT) spokesman Manuel Carrascalao that Indonesian soldiers from battalions 141, 142 and 143 had killed 13 people during an attack on a mini-bus filled with pro-independence supporters in the same area over the weekend.

UN mediator Jamsheed Marker warned that the upsurge of violence threatened plans to hold a poll in July to decide on an Indonesian plan for limited autonomy for East Timor. The details of the Indonesian proposal are due to be discussed in the UN talks next week. If the autonomy plan is rejected at the July ballot the Habibie regime has indicated that it will hand the island back to its former colonial ruler, Portugal, which is still recognised by the UN.

Support for the plan, proposed under considerable international pressure, is by no means unanimous within Indonesian ruling circles. Earlier this year, opposition leader Megawati Sukarnoputri condemned the plan, insisting that Indonesian military invasion in 1975 was legitimate. She reflects the concerns of significant sections of the ruling elite that "independence" for East Timor could lead to the fracturing of Indonesia as other areas also seek to break away.

On East Timor itself, sections of local business and the military have benefitted from Indonesian rule. Up until 1995, East Timor's lucrative coffee industry was under the tight control of Denok, a company controlled by the Indonesian military and closely linked to former ABRI chief Benny Murdani. The company was formed through the seizure of a number of East Timor's largest plantations following the 1975 invasion. While Denok's monopoly has formally been ended, the military hierarchy undoubtedly continues to have interests in coffee and other businesses.

The current campaign by pro-Indonesian militia is not simply the work of so-called "rogue" elements of the military on East Timor. The ability of the armed militia to openly hold rallies, block roads and conduct attacks on opponents, all with apparent impunity, indicates the support of powerful elements within the Habibie regime itself and top military circles who are opposed to any UN-negotiated deal.

The UN talks have been the vehicle through which the major powers--Portugal, the US and Australia in particular--have been seeking to intervene directly into East Timor. In the event that Indonesia's autonomy proposals are rejected, plans have been drawn up for a lengthy supervision of the island by the UN involving a substantial contingent of advisors, administrators, police and possibly troops.

The militia campaign has prompted calls by Portugal and CRNT leader Xanana Gusmao for the direct intervention of a UN military force on East Timor. Portugal's special envoy to Jakarta Ana Gomes blamed the Indonesian military for the recent attacks on East Timor, and chastised the Australian government. She agreed with comments by Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer that there was no peace on East Timor for peacekeepers to keep, but added: "Probably, we should think of peace enforcement then."

Australia's Labor opposition openly advocates military intervention in East Timor. Moreover the Australian government has announced plans for a new rapid deployment military force in Darwin, around 600 kilometres from East Timor. Australian big business has substantial investments in Indonesia, including in the oil reserves in the Timor Sea.

A comment entitled "Why not bomb Indonesia too?" in the *Australian Financial Review* yesterday indicates that pressure for direct military intervention is also

growing in Australian ruling circles. Comparing East Timor to Kosovo, commentator Brian Toohy writes:

"The message for Indonesia: because the UN does not recognise the Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor, it doesn't even have the excuse that the behaviour on the island is an internal affair. While no-one is suggesting that Jakarta should be bombed, Indonesia's political and military leaders must expect to come under growing international pressure to stop arming paramilitary groups engaged in a campaign of terror in East Timor... [T]he logic of the war against Serbia suggests that the Australian military should serve in an international peacekeeping force in East Timor while some Indonesian generals are put on trial as war criminals."

Just as in the Balkans, any military intervention in East Timor would be to further the economic and strategic interests of the major powers not only on the island but throughout Southeast Asia. And its consequences are likely to be just as dangerous and unpredictable in a region that is highly politically volatile as a result of the economic collapse over the last 18 months.



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