

Western calls for intervention mount after Timor killings

Mike Head
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Western governments and media columnists have stepped up calls for military intervention in East Timor after pro-Indonesian militias killed at least 20 people and abducted dozens more in two days of violence throughout the provincial capital of Dili last weekend.

Portugal, the former colonial ruler of the territory, was joined by the Foreign Minister of Ireland, another European Union member, in demanding UN action, while the United States and Australia expressed alarm about the developments and indicated support for early UN involvement.

Between 2,000 and 7,000 members of various militia groups rampaged through Dili, shooting known independence supporters, assaulting refugees from other towns and burning homes, and businesses of secessionists. According to eye-witness accounts from refugee agencies, the show of force began with a rally on Saturday in front of the governor's office. There Eurico Guterres, the commander of the Aitarak militia urged his followers to "conduct a cleansing of all those who have betrayed integration. Capture and kill them, if you need it. I, Eurico Guterres, will be responsible."

Paramilitary groups with assorted names from throughout East Timor attended the rally, coming from towns and villages such as Atabae, Maliana, Aileu, Same, Ainaro, Suali, Maubara, Viqueque, Bacau and Lospalos. Also present were the Governor, Abilio Soares, the military commander, and the police chief. Aid agencies said some Dili residents were rounded up and forced to participate.

Gangs armed with rifles, home-made guns and machetes then circled the city, shooting weapons and seizing vehicles. Among the homes targetted was that of a prominent businessman and independence supporter, Manuel Carrascalao, leader of the East Timorese People's Reconciliation and Unity Movement. Some 170 refugees from outlying areas had been sheltering in the house. Carrascalao's adopted son and others were either shot or hacked, leaving a likely death toll of 10-15. Many more are missing.

Gangs also ransacked the houses of two other leaders of the umbrella secessionist movement, the National Resistance Council of Timor (CNRT)--Leandro Isaac and David Diaz. Likewise, the home of the late Herman das Dores Soares, the victim of a military shooting last year, was raided. Militiamen burned the warehouse, kitchen and two cars owned by his family. Other homes were raided or burned down.

Four truck and van loads of militia members attacked and destroyed the offices of the local daily *Suara Timor Timur* (Voice

of East Timor). They smashed up computers, printing machines, archival cabinets, windows and doors, accusing the paper of being a voice for anti-integration forces.

A number of witnesses, including aid agencies, Western reporters and the Irish Foreign Minister David Andrews, stated that Indonesian military commanders and soldiers watched benignly or gave signs of encouragement as the attacks continued. At times, soldiers waved on the attackers and provided them with food and water.

Refugee agencies reported similar rallies and violence in other towns and villages in preceding days, including in Suai, Emera, Maubara, Viqueque and Maliana. These events followed the previous weekend's massacre of up to 52 people in a churchyard at Liquicia and reports of military shootings elsewhere.

In the leadup to last weekend's violence, the Indonesian regime currently headed by B.J. Habibie gave indications of hardening its attitude toward the prospect of East Timorese independence or autonomy. A spokeswoman for Habibie said the government took responsibility for the events, but emphatically ruled out any foreign involvement in East Timor in preparation for a UN-supervised "act of free choice" on autonomy, due to be held in July.

According to one report from New York, Jakarta is planning to demand significant changes to the autonomy package due to be finalised with Portugal at the UN this week. The changes include a continued Indonesian armed forces (ABRI) presence, supervision of an East Timor police force by the Indonesian police, Indonesian control over the territory's natural resources (notably oil and coffee) and no East Timorese flag, emblems, colours or sporting teams.

In addition, no details of the proposed voting method on the autonomy plan have been released, or indeed whether any ballot is to be permitted.

Under pressure from Portugal, the US and Australia to resolve the ongoing Timor conflict and relax the Indonesian regime's grip on the economy, President Habibie in January this year indicated that an autonomy plan would be drafted but if it were rejected, Indonesia would simply abandon the province. Its legal status would then revert to a Portuguese colony. Because of lobbying by Portugal and the European Union, the UN has never recognised the Indonesian annexation of East Timor after its 1975 invasion.

With elections due to be held across Indonesia on June 7, key political and military leaders have denounced Habibie for even

canvassing the notion of autonomy. The *Far Eastern Economic Review* last month reported that Wiranto is working with retired General Benny Murdani, an architect of the Timor occupation. Murdani told a visiting academic in January that he disapproved of Habibie's autonomy offer. In "four to five months" ABRI would be ready to crack heads once and for all in East Timor, he boasted.

Opposition politicians such as Megawati Sukarnoputri and Abdurrahman Wahid have condemned Habibie's plan. Elements within Indonesian ruling circles are determined to cling to East Timor for fear of setting off breakaway movements in other resource-rich regions such as West Papua and Aceh. Their interests coincide with local business interests in East Timor, forged on the basis of the military's domination of the coffee trade, logging and other concerns.

On Sunday Portugal accused Indonesia of being directly responsible for the latest militia violence and called for stronger international action to halt the attacks. "It was Indonesia that armed the militias," Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Guterres declared. But he said the incidents would not prompt Portugal to suspend the talks with Indonesia at the UN. Portugal hopes to use the UN negotiations to force Jakarta to accept UN monitoring of a ballot.

The Irish government, which has in recent years expressed interest in playing a larger role in East Timor, is backing Portugal. Speaking from Jakarta on Sunday, its minister David Andrews said he was "deeply shocked and horrified" by what he had seen in Dili the day before. He called for an immediate UN presence and declared his intention to brief European Union ambassadors in Jakarta before raising the subject at an EU foreign ministers meeting in Brussels next week.

A US State Department spokesman adopted a more cautious line. James Rubin said the United States was "deeply concerned" by the weekend reports and wanted ABRI to "bring the pro-integrationist militia groups under control". This was in line with the stance adopted last week by US Assistant Secretary of State for Asian and Pacific Affairs Stanley Roth, after visiting Habibie and Wiranto in Jakarta. "I emphasised in my discussions that Indonesia has responsibility to provide security," Roth said.

Roth claimed to see several "positive notes" in Jakarta, including the establishment of a human rights commission for East Timor, which would include the jailed resistance leader Xanana Gusmao. Roth, a frequent visitor to Gusmao's cell in recent years, held what he called "a very good discussion" with Gusmao on steps to "promote a peaceful outcome in East Timor".

In Australia, the Howard government has, on the one hand, pointed to the evidence of military backing for the militias but, on the other, called on the Indonesian government and ABRI to protect East Timorese people from the gangs. Meanwhile, the Liberal-National Party government is preparing troops and other personnel to participate in a UN force and is forming a new 3,000-strong Rapid Deployment Force in Darwin, just 600 kilometres from Dili.

Prime Minister John Howard and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer have come under intense fire from the Labor Party opposition and key sections of the corporate-controlled media for not demanding the immediate acceptance of a UN force, which

would include a substantial contingent of Australian troops.

Labor's foreign affairs spokesman Laurie Brereton repeated earlier calls for the Howard government to commit itself to joining a UN force in East Timor. "The horrific events in Dili confirm the absolute necessity for immediate and strong international pressure on the Indonesian government to disband and disarm the pro-integrationist militias and accept an effective United Nations peacekeeping mission," he said.

An even more strident demand came from the *Australian Financial Review*, the country's main business newspaper. Its commentator Brian Toohey declared the US-NATO bombing of Serbia to be a precedent for an Australian-led UN mobilisation against Indonesia. "No-one is suggesting that Indonesia's basic infrastructure should be collapsed by 1,000 advanced warplanes as in Serbia," he wrote last weekend. "But there may be isolated incidents in which paramilitary groups have to be confronted on the ground by an international force of about 5,000 troops, including a significant number from Australia." Toohey urged the Australian military to "start treating it [ABRI] as little different to the Serbian forces".

Plans are well underway for a large UN military operation. Australia's Northern Territory government revealed the plans in a newspaper advertisement seeking expressions of interest from local businesses in supplying the UN's "initial requirements for goods and services". It listed fixed-wing aircraft and medium-sized helicopters, military-style food rations, temporary housing, power generators, water purification equipment, a field hospital, medical evacuation facilities, freight shipping services and 70 four-wheel drive vehicles with UN insignia.

The Northern Territory government wants to make its capital, Darwin, the "staging post" for the UN operation.

As in Kosovo, the purpose of such an armed intervention will not be to protect the rights and aspirations of poor villagers, but to secure the investments and strategic interests of Western big business. Having worked hand-in-glove with the Suharto dictatorship for decades to oppress the Timorese, and the Indonesian masses as a whole, the corporate chiefs, politicians, military commanders and their media mouthpieces have not suddenly acquired pangs of conscience.

Rather, they are seeking new means of preventing the unrest unleashed by the collapse of the Indonesian economy from threatening their oil and coffee interests and other profit-making opportunities currently in the hands of the Indonesian military and its cronies.



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