

Timor agreement leaves military in charge of "consultation"

Mike Head
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A group of 200 pro-independence students in the East Timor capital of Dili reportedly danced, cheered and waved two large independence flags on Thursday after hearing news that Indonesia and Portugal had signed an agreement in New York for the conduct of a UN-sponsored "consultation" on autonomy for the province. Speaking from Jakarta, where he is still under house arrest, Xanana Gusmao, the leader of the Timorese National Resistance Council (CNRT), claimed it was an "historic document".

The formal agreement, however, clarifies only one thing about the ballot scheduled for August 8--that the Indonesian military will remain in control of the former Portuguese colony, and supervise the voting. To be precise, the agreement states that: "Responsibility to secure such a [secure] environment as well as for the general maintenance of law and order rests with the appropriate Indonesian security authorities". Civilian police officers from countries will "act as advisers to the Indonesian police in the discharge of their duties and, at the time of the consultation, supervise the escort of ballot papers and boxes to and from the polling sites".

The Australian government says it expects a 1,000-strong UN presence for the poll, with a small advance team to assemble in Dili within 10 days. Australia will provide probably the largest contingent, including between 50 and 60 of the expected 200 to 300 lightly-armed police advisers. Others invited include the United States, Japan, Britain, Germany, the Philippines and New Zealand.

Reports and film footage filtering out of East Timor indicate continuing widespread intimidation by military-backed anti-independence militias. One film reportedly shows soldiers and police, as well as militiamen, patrolling up to 10,000 villagers in a refugee camp on the outskirts of Liquica, 40 km west of Dili. Families, living in squalid conditions, are required to swear their

allegiance to Indonesia each day. Most of the people are believed to have been taken to the camp in military trucks since early April when militias attacked a church in Liquica, killing up to 60 people who had sought refuge from earlier militia violence.

In another instance, militiamen went to the Dili offices of the Catholic relief agency Caritas and threatened to attack staff unless they stopped supplying food to about 11,000 refugees in the city. Officials from international aid agencies have been warned not to visit refugee camps, and they say the terror is intended to force people to vote for the official autonomy plan, under which East Timor will remain part of Indonesia. Militia roadblocks have prevented journalists from entering many areas, sometimes at gunpoint, and journalists' interpreters have been assaulted.

In an interview published in Portugal, Daniel Murphy, an American volunteer doctor at a Catholic clinic in Dili, said people are dying from starvation and face an epidemic of tuberculosis. "The people who are being intimidated in Liquica have no food to eat," he stated. "They will all be dead when the time comes to vote."

Indonesian Defence Minister and Armed Forces chief General Wiranto this week signalled his approval for such intimidation. He welcomed the fact that the separatist CNRT "has lost its roots in 10 of the province's 13 regencies". Wiranto, who commands both the military (ABRI) and the police force, is reported to be planning to re-badge some of the thousands of troops in East Timor as police officers so that they can participate directly in running the August 8 consultation.

Now that the formal Indonesia-Portugal agreement has officially confirmed the continuing dominance of the Indonesian security forces, a militia leader has withdrawn previous threats to not allow the voting to proceed. Basilio Dias Araujo said his group, the Forum for Unity, Democracy and Justice--an umbrella organisation for the

militias--would accept the outcome. Nevertheless, he said the ballot "might not go smoothly". The militias would not disarm until the Falintil pro-independence guerillas also turned in their weapons.

Details of the voting process itself are still unclear following the New York signing. Voters will be asked to choose between two propositions--one supporting the official autonomy plan and the other supporting separation. It seems that people over 17 years of age that are classified as East Timorese will be eligible to vote. They must have been born in the territory, or have at least one parent born there, or be married to someone born in East Timor or with a parent born there. This will allow exiles abroad to vote, but also Indonesian officials, military personnel and trans-migrants that have settled or married in the province since the military invasion of 1975. Indonesian officials will register eligible voters between June 13 and July 17 at 200 centres in East Timor and elsewhere, with the same centres used for the actual polling.

Indonesian President Habibie has said that if the autonomy package is rejected, he will recommend acceptance of separation to the incoming Indonesian national assembly, due to be elected on June 7. Yet Habibie has little political authority. Major parties contesting the Indonesian elections, including Megawati Sukarnoputri's PDI Struggle, have vowed to reject secession.

Some international aid agencies, and CNRT leaders such as Jose Ramos Horta, have urged the UN to take control of the voting process out of the hands of the Indonesian authorities or apply economic pressure to Jakarta to disarm the militias. The response of the major powers, notably the United States, has been ambivalent. A US State Department official this week noted that Defense Secretary William Cohen, Secretary of State Madeline Albright and President Bill Clinton had all expressed concern over the escalating violence in East Timor. He said the United States had urged the Indonesian military to disarm the militias. Officially, the US has welcomed the UN pact, as have the European powers, as well as Australia.

Nervous about the instability in its nearest neighbour, the Howard government in Canberra has preferred to work with the Habibie regime and maintain close ties and cooperation with ABRI, while seeking a central role in the UN operation. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer this week reiterated the government's position of preferring that East Timor remain part of Indonesia.

Horta, the vice president of the CRNT, has invoked the precedent of the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia to call for UN intervention. Without greater international pressure, asking the Indonesian military to oversee the ballot "would be like asking Milosevic to provide security for elections in Kosovo," he told an American newspaper on Thursday.

Any such intervention would be no more motivated by concern for the East Timorese people than the NATO blitz has sought to protect the people of Kosovar. It would be driven solely by the business and strategic interests of the major powers, which all, directly or indirectly, backed the Suharto dictatorship's occupation of East Timor for two decades. The CNRT leaders have assured international investors that an East Timorese government would enhance their operations.

But, at this stage, the ruling circles in Washington and Canberra seem to share the Indonesian military and political establishment's fear that East Timorese secession could encourage similar breakaways in other resource-rich regions such as Aceh, Riau and Irian Jaya (West Papua). These calculations could change if the Habibie regime cannot stabilise the highly volatile political and economic situation throughout the Indonesian archipelago after the June 7 national elections.

Likewise, a so-called victory against Yugoslavia could spur an intervention in East Timor. One American newspaper, the *Christian Science Monitor*, last Thursday promoted that prospect, quoting Don Emmerson, an Indonesia specialist at the University of Wisconsin, as follows: "If Kosovo is a success, there will be momentum to back another small group that's been exploited and repressed."



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