

Militia attacks on UN posts in East Timor

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7 July 1999

A series of attacks over the past week on United Nations posts and personnel in East Timor has further undermined the poll due to be held towards the end of August over the future of the territory.

On Monday, the head of the UN Assistance Mission in East Timor (UNAMET), Ian Martin, condemned the Indonesian police for an “inexcusable lack of action” in preventing the latest assault by pro-Indonesian militia on an aid convoy in the town of Liquica, to the west of the capital Dili. “There is certainly a pattern of incidents, of threats from militias to UN personnel, and that is a major concern to us,” he said.

The convoy was taking food and medicine last Sunday to Maubara, about 50 kilometres west of Dili, where thousands of people have taken refuge from militia attacks. The police had refused to provide security for the aid organised by the Catholic relief agency Caritas, the Yayasan Hak human rights organisation and UN High Commissioner for Refugees, saying that to do so would result in their “neutrality” being questioned.

After the vehicles including two from UNAMET pulled up in central Liquica, militia members, armed with machetes and firearms, arrived in a minibus and began to attack the convoy. One of the drivers was shot and badly injured. Five other members of non-government organisations initially were missing, but turned up in Dili on Monday.

The incident in Liquica follows two previous attacks. Last Tuesday, about 200 militia members hurled rocks at the UN regional office in the town of Maliana in western district, injuring 15 officials and forcing the evacuation of most of the remainder. The following evening 15 armed militiamen forced their way into a UN compound at Viqueque in far south east of the island, threatening election officials who were pulled out of the area.

Threats have now compelled the UN to withdraw

from three of six outposts over the week. UN officials are due to begin registering voters on July 13.

Militia chief Eurico Guterres openly defended the attack at Maliana claiming it was nothing more than a spontaneous outburst of popular protest against UN bias. For months, the armed militia have been carrying out a systematic campaign of intimidation against pro-independence supporters with the backing of security forces and the tacit approval of the Habibie regime and military chiefs in Jakarta.

Indonesian Armed Forces chief and Defence Minister General Wiranto has dismissed the latest incidents involving the UN saying that his forces could handle the situation in East Timor. “If there are one or two incidents, that is normal. Don't blow it out of proportion,” he said.

The poll, originally to be held on August 8, has already been delayed once by the UN on security grounds. East Timorese are to vote on the Indonesian government's autonomy plan for the province. If the package is rejected, President Habibie has indicated that Indonesia will relinquish control of East Timor, which will be administered by the UN pending the formal independence. The pro-Indonesian militia and their backers no doubt calculate that their continuing attacks may further delay the polling date or lead to its complete cancellation, and force concessions from East Timor's secessionist leaders.

Pro-independence spokesman Jose Ramos Horta last week offered to share power with the militia leaders in the event that voters reject the autonomy package. “The pro-integration people will be invited to join us in a provisional administration for at least three years under the United Nations,” he announced. Horta, who has been in exile since the Indonesian invasion of East Timor in 1975, was in Jakarta to meet jailed independence leader Xanana Gusmao and for a meeting with militia leaders. The Indonesian government has

banned Horta from returning to East Timor prior to the poll.

Although the talks broke up without any resolution, both Horta and Gusmao have attempted to downplay the outcome. Horta commented that the meeting had only been meant as a dialogue and suggested that the private discussions had been more fruitful than the two sides had indicated publicly. The militia leaders are little more than thugs, some of whom trace their association with the Indonesian military and its repression in East Timor back to the 1975 invasion.

The continuing militia attacks in East Timor raise the prospect of a far greater UN intervention including the dispatch of troops to the island. The former colonial power Portugal has already called for a UN peace-keeping force to be dispatched to East Timor, but to date, the Indonesian regime has insisted that its police and military will remain responsible for the security of the poll.

Last Friday, Australian Defence Minister John Moore, reviewing the country's newly created rapid reaction force based in the northern city of Darwin, said that the military now had the capacity to respond to any request by the UN for assistance in East Timor. The new military is equipped with tanks, light armoured vehicles, artillery, helicopters and armoured personnel carriers and could be transported rapidly to East Timor in a specially built fast catamaran. UN special envoy on East Timor Jamsheed Marker met with Moore and Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer in Canberra this week.

Far from resolving the social and political crisis confronting the East Timorese, the dispatch of any UN military force would only bring the island further under the domination of the major powers. Australia and Portugal in particular have been seeking to utilise the UN intervention in East Timor in order to bolster their own influence both on the resource-rich island and within the region as a whole.



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