

US threats clear way for military intervention in East Timor

Nick Beams**14 September 1999**

Threats by US President Bill Clinton that the Indonesian economy would be “crashed” were the crucial factor in securing the “invitation” by the Habibie government for the establishment of a UN “peacekeeping force” in East Timor.

Clinton's warning came after days of intense lobbying by Australian Prime Minister John Howard to win US support for the Australian-led military intervention.

In a speech last Thursday, Clinton warned that Indonesia faced “dire” economic consequences if it did not “invite the international community to assist in restoring security.” “It would be a pity if the Indonesian economy were crashed by this. But one way or another, the economic consequences to them are going to be very dire.”

The threats to withdraw international loans under the \$50 billion International Monetary Fund program were followed by intense pressure from the US military over the weekend. US officials said that military commanders, including the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Henry Shelton, had telephoned Indonesian armed forces chief General Wiranto to demand that the Indonesian general give the go ahead for the force. Earlier, the Australian Defence Minister John Moore had tried to speak to Wiranto but his calls were not returned.

Significantly the US top brass did not bother to make contact with Habibie, recognising that he functions merely as a figurehead president, with real power in the hands of the armed forces.

After representatives of the Habibie government indicated that Indonesia might object to “certain countries” taking part and that it preferred an Asian force, Clinton announced that Indonesia would have no veto on the composition of the force, which would be led by Australia.

Talks are now being held at the UN headquarters in New York to determine the rules of engagement for the UN force, with Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer insisting that they be “robust.” Australian Defence Minister John Moore has warned that casualties can be expected.

The proposed Australian military operation—the largest since the days of the Vietnam War—was the subject of a frenzied round of lobbying by Howard both before and during the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) summit meeting in Auckland.

Howard's demands for US support met with certain resistance in Washington from sections of the Pentagon and State Department who made clear that the mass murder in East Timor did not affect America's national interest and intervention could destabilise the Indonesian regime.

Faced with this resistance, the Australian government had to up the ante, warning the Clinton administration that the Australia-US alliance would be placed under strain if Washington did not swing its support behind Howard's demands. US support was vital not only in securing an “invitation” from Jakarta, but in ensuring the participation of other nations.

A total of 12 countries have so far indicated they will take part including Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore. Other countries involved are the US, New Zealand, Canada, France, Britain, Brazil and Sweden. The Australian involvement will include up to 4,500 troops out of a force of at least 7,000.

Within hours of the announcement by the Habibie government, jockeying between some of the major powers over the organisation of the force was underway. The Portuguese government stated that it was ready to take part in the intervention “from day one” with a contingent of more than 1,000 troops.

But a representative of the other former colonial power in the region, the Netherlands, immediately countered this. The Dutch European commissioner for external relations, Hans van den Broek, said that European troops should stay out. Anxious to maintain Dutch ties with the Indonesian government he said that “if you know the pride of the Indonesian people and the country's colonial past, then that is a good reason why an international force should be composed of troops from the region and not from the former colonial powers.”

The professed aim of the intervention is to end the humanitarian disaster unleashed by the Indonesian armed forces and Indonesian-backed militias since the announcement on September 4 of the 78.5 percent support for independence under the UN-organised referendum of August 30.

Reports from East Timor indicate that thousands of people may have been murdered over the past week. Hundreds of thousands have been driven from their homes and forced to

seek refuge in West Timor or in the mountains, without food or shelter. The East Timorese capital Dili, which had a population of 100,000, has been largely emptied, with buildings looted and burnt.

But the historical record belies claims by the Australian and other governments that they were shocked by the scope of the carnage. Over the past months spokesmen for the militia have continuously warned that a “sea of fire” would engulf East Timor if the Indonesian proposal for autonomy were rejected.

Last January, in a response to a question on possible “civil war” in East Timor, Dower declared: “If you thought that the solution to the East Timor issue was to hold a referendum tomorrow, all I can say is ... it would cause more bloodshed than solutions.”

In the lead up to the ballot, the Australian government continually defended the Indonesian military, claiming that it was not backing the activities of the thugs in the so-called militias.

Relying to a question on the *Sunday* television program on March 7, as to whether the Indonesian military were arming the militias, Dower said: “If it’s happening at all it certainly isn’t official Indonesian government policy. It certainly isn’t something that’s being condoned by General Wiranto.”

However, three days earlier, the Australian government’s own Defence Intelligence Organisation had circulated a briefing which stated that the Indonesian armed forces were arming and organising the militia.

Following the signing of the agreement between the UN, Portugal—the former colonial power in East Timor—and the Indonesian government for the holding of the UN referendum on May 5, the activities of the militia were stepped up.

On July 8 an article in the *Australian Financial Review* pointed to intelligence reports given to the Australian and US governments which showed that leaders of the Indonesian military, as well as members of the Indonesian cabinet, were complicit in the terror campaign being conducted in East Timor.

The Indonesian military publicly declared its aims. The commander of the TNI [Indonesian armed forces] in Dili, Colonel Tono Suratman told the *Sunday* program: “I would like to convey the following: If the pro-independents do win ... all will be destroyed. And East Timor won’t be as we see it now. It will be worse than 23 years ago.”

That threat has now been carried out.

The historical record makes clear that far from intervening to end a humanitarian disaster, the major imperialist powers, in particular Australia, have pursued policies that have created the conditions for just such a catastrophe. In other words, had they set out consciously to create the conditions to provide the “justification” for military intervention, they would not have acted any differently.

The Howard government’s campaign for military intervention has been backed by an unprecedented political coalition

involving representatives of all the major parties, the churches, and human rights organisations. Particularly prominent have been the anti-war protestors from the days of the Vietnam War, who have made clear that whereas in the past they called for “troops out”, their demand now is for “troops in”.

The fraudulent character of this campaign is exposed by asking the following question: When has the Australian government ever been concerned with the fate of the East Timorese people? It backed the invasion in 1975, turned a blind eye to the deaths of up to 200,000 people in the 1970s and early 1980s, and deepened its collaboration with the Indonesian military and the notorious Kopassus units in the 1990s.

Those who maintain that the political leopard has changed its spots because it has been moved by the latest tragedy are either deluding themselves or consciously trying to dupe others.

The change in policy by the Australian government—from support for integration of East Timor into Indonesia, to the intervention of a military force to establish a UN protectorate—is not a turn to the defence of human rights, but a continuation, by other means, of its long-standing objectives. In particular, it aims to ensure access to the lucrative oil and gas reserves in the Timor Gap. Moreover, the East Timor intervention anticipates a growth of Australian militarism throughout the region.

Barely 24 hours after the “invitation” from Indonesia had been secured, Howard warned that Australia would have to spend more on its armed forces in the years ahead. The Indonesian crisis, he declared, had pointed to the “volatility of the region in which we live.”

The establishment of a virtual UN protectorate in East Timor will not bring about independence and freedom for the East Timorese people, any more than it has for the peoples of Bosnia or Kosovo. Rather it signifies a resurgence of colonialism, with predictions already being made that troops could be maintained in the territory for as long as ten years.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact