

After vote for secession

Western powers accelerate plans for military intervention in Timor

Mike Head
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Western powers are bringing forward plans for military intervention in the Indonesian-occupied former Portuguese colony of East Timor following today's release of the results of last Monday's United Nations-supervised ballot on secession.

The votes showed 78.5 percent support for independence. According to the UN, 432,287 people, or 98.6 percent of eligible voters, took part, with 344,580 rejecting Indonesia's alternative autonomy scheme.

The US, Portugal, Australia, New Zealand and possibly other powers have contingency plans to quickly send troops to the island, with or without Indonesia's agreement. They are preparing to do so under the guise of protecting the East Timorese people from Jakarta-backed militia death squads, which are running amok.

Since Monday's vote, rampaging gangs have slain at least three local UN employees, together with secession supporters. Journalists and UN staff have been beaten and threatened at gunpoint. Militia roadblocks have cordoned off entire areas in the territory's west. Witnesses have seen members of the Indonesian military's elite Kopassus (Special Forces) collaborating with the thugs.

Sections of the Habibie regime in Indonesia, particularly the top military officers with extensive business interests in East Timor, are undoubtedly fomenting the violence. By some reports, Indonesian generals and their local supporters are intent on partitioning the territory, tying the western half to Indonesian West Timor.

Others in Indonesian ruling circles, including opposition figurehead Megawati Sukarnoputri, are known to be anxious to stop a breakaway from encouraging similar moves across the Indonesian archipelago, particularly in resource-rich provinces such as Aceh, Riau and West Irian (West Papua). One purpose of the bloodshed and mayhem since Monday seems to be to intimidate people in those provinces.

But the governments now so anxious to send troops to East Timor represent the same forces that supported and participated in the oppression of the East Timorese masses for decades—first under Portuguese rule (which extended for 400 years) and then Indonesian military occupation. As a consequence, terrible poverty afflicts the Timorese people—80 percent of the 800,000 population live at a subsistence level, per capita income is less than \$300 a year and illiteracy rates exceed 35 percent.

Governments and leading media outlets in North America, Europe, East Asia and Australasia are preparing public opinion for large-scale troop movements in the name of humanitarianism and peacekeeping. Headlines in Australian and New Zealand newspapers refer to “anarchy”, “bloodshed” and “violence”. The *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Auckland Weekend Herald* this morning advocate the dispatch of a Kosovo-style force, led by Australia and New Zealand, without waiting for a full UN operation.

Yet, as in Kosovo, the military preparations are marked by sharp

tensions over which country or countries will dominate the “peace” force and hence the economy of the proposed statelet.

Portugal is still recognised by the UN and all Western powers except Australia as the sovereign power in East Timor. This week it demanded the early dispatch of UN troops, with itself playing a leading role. When the UN Security Council met on Thursday and condemned this week's violence, Antonio Monteiro, Portugal's Ambassador to the UN, urged the Security Council to speed up plans for a major peacekeeping presence. In a radio interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation on Friday, Monteiro went further, saying the UN Security Council should act “regardless” of any objections by Indonesia.

Last week at a meeting in Lisbon, UN and Portuguese officials gave their Indonesian counterparts a draft UN plan to send as many as 15,000 troops if the poll resulted in an independence vote. Jakarta promptly accused Portugal of seeking to resume control of the territory. The head of its delegation to the tripartite talks, Nughrobo Wisnumurti, declared that Indonesia would resist the arrival of foreign soldiers. His country was “not Kosovo,” he said. Portuguese Foreign Minister Jaime Gama felt compelled to issue a formal denial of any intention to stake a new claim on East Timor.

In a move to head off external intervention, Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas on Thursday announced that Indonesian troops had been asked to help police provide security. An additional 1,400 crack troops have been mobilised today. Jakarta opposes a UN force being deployed before the scheduled November meeting of the Indonesian MPR (national assembly) to consider the referendum outcome.

At the same time, thousands of Indonesian administrators and other personnel are being evacuated from East Timor, a sign that the territory is being abandoned to the militia. On Wednesday night a large passenger ship entered the harbour at Dili, the territory's capital, loaded passengers and cargo and departed at 5.30 am Thursday, reportedly carrying 2,000 people. Hours later two Indonesian military Hercules aircraft flew in hundreds more police and then evacuated Indonesian journalists and personnel.

Leading commercial news organs such as *Time* magazine in the US and the *Australian Financial Review* have seized upon these departures, and the militia violence, to argue that the Indonesian government is effectively abandoning the territory. “After years of stubborn determination, Indonesia now wants to wash its hands of the mess it's created in East Timor,” declared *Time* on Thursday, under the headline: “East Timor: Time to Send in the United Nations?”

Interviewed on Australian television on Thursday, US Assistant Secretary of State Stanley Roth gave the Habibie regime the Clinton administration's clearest warning yet of military intervention. Calling the actions of the Indonesian police and military “unacceptable,” he said:

“They can't say they don't want the international community to come in with peacekeepers if they're not going to provide the security themselves. Either they're going to have to produce or the international community will have to consider additional steps.” Roth refused to rule out the option of armed troops being sent without Indonesian consent.

Roth's threat followed a letter last weekend from US President Bill Clinton to his Indonesian counterpart, B.J. Habibie. Clinton warned that US relations with Indonesia would be seriously damaged if mass violence erupted after the UN vote. One senior US official told the *New York Times* the letter was “very tough”. Another official said Clinton had implicitly threatened to cut off international loans and aid to Indonesia via the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, where the US has de facto veto power.

On Thursday New Zealand Foreign Affairs Minister Don McKinnon revealed something of the plans under discussion by Australia and New Zealand. He spoke of a non-UN force that could include Australia, New Zealand, Japan, the US and members of the Association of South East Asian Nations. “Like-minded countries” could decide not to wait for a UN mandate if “absolute chaos” developed in East Timor, he said. McKinnon commented that the chances of getting a UN mandate were low because “it would be seen as interference in the affairs of another country”.

The Australian government quickly distanced itself from McKinnon's statement, in line with Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer's insistence earlier in the week that Canberra had no intention of “going to war” with Indonesia. The Howard government has previously said it would only consider an unarmed UN police and military liaison force in the period between the UN ballot and the November MPR session.

However, on Thursday Downer shifted ground. He told federal parliament that Australia was prepared to take part in a military operation “at whatever level is felt appropriate,” provided it was sanctioned by the Indonesian and Portuguese governments and the UN.

On the same day, Defence Minister John Moore paid a very public visit to an air force base in the Northern Territory to inspect the readiness of combat troops, Black Hawk helicopter crews and SAS forces, who are on alert for East Timor. Both the opposition Labor Party and the Australian Democrats, who hold the balance of votes in the Australian Senate, condemned the government for not moving faster.

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Like New Zealand's McKinnon, the Canadian Foreign Minister made an unexpected announcement on Thursday. Lloyd Axworthy said his officials had contacted the US, Australia and New Zealand as a first step to organising a special meeting on East Timor at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) ministerial meeting in Auckland on September 12 and 13.

Not to be left out, Japan's foreign ministry responded to McKinnon's statement by asserting that a sudden worsening of the situation could not be ruled out. Singapore's pro-government *Straits Times* daily also stepped into the ring, urging Habibie to accept a UN force “much as Jakarta dislikes the idea”.

For three decades these governments supported the Suharto military junta in Indonesia—from its bloody coup of 1965 to its collapse last year. They all backed the invasion of East Timor in 1975 and the suppression of East Timorese resistance at the cost of an estimated 200,000 lives. But now, with Suharto gone and his handpicked successor Habibie unable to contain the country's economic and social crisis, they are moving aggressively to assert their own business and strategic interests—even if it could mean hastening the breakup of Indonesia.

Intervention by the capitalist powers will have nothing to do with protecting the rights of the East Timorese workers, poor farmers and youth, let alone uplifting their living conditions. Nor will so-called East

Timorese independence provide any genuine liberation to the people. The leaders of the proposed mini-state will be handmaidens for one or another major power and its multinationals.

At present, the leadership of the National Council for Timorese Resistance (CNRT) is doing everything it can to facilitate military intervention. CNRT leader Jose Alexandre “Xanana” Gusmao this week again called for the rapid deployment of troops. He also reiterated a pledge to contain unrest. Although still under Indonesian house arrest, he gave interviews to *Time* and *Asiaweek* to emphasise that a government headed by himself would “stabilise the situation under the auspices of the United Nations” (*Time*) and “keep political, social and economic stability, and respect all laws” (*Asiaweek*).

As a token of his commitment, Gusmao arranged for an independence supporter who had been accused of involvement in the death of a militiaman to hand himself over to the Indonesian police. He urged all youth supporting independence not to respond to militia attacks. He further called for a reconciliation conference with the pro-Indonesia thugs and business owners.

Recognising the value of Gusmao's services, the Australian government and others urged the Indonesian regime to bring forward their plans to release him on September 15. The *Australian Financial Review* editorial said it would be “useful” for Indonesia to “release Gusmao quickly so he can appeal for calm when the results [of the UN ballot] are known”.

Another CNRT leader, Manuel Carrascalao, said a free East Timor would support breakaway movements throughout Indonesia, not just in Aceh and West Papua. This vow may be designed to attract the support of governments and companies interested in encouraging breakaways in oil and mineral-rich regions.

Carrascalao's brother Mario, a former Indonesian-appointed governor of East Timor, echoed plans already outlined by Gusmao and his international spokesman Jose Ramos Horta for an economy based on the exploitation by transnationals of the territory's substantial off-shore oil and natural gas, plus coffee plantations. Mario Carrascalao spoke of earning revenues through casinos and tourism.

Such is the dead-end of “national liberation” in the final months of the 20th century. East Timor is a tiny half-island whose impoverished people will be subordinated by aspiring entrepreneurs to the plundering operations of multinationals. It will be a “model” for similar statelets in the event of the Balkanisation of Indonesia. Neither Indonesian rule nor transforming East Timor into a profit-generating enclave offer a way forward for the East Timorese masses.



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