

East Timor and protest politics

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Tens of thousands of people have demonstrated in Australia's major cities over the past week to express outrage at the Indonesian military-organised carnage in East Timor. Many are deeply suspicious of the Howard government's motives in pushing for an Australian-led UN "peacekeeping" force, mindful of Australia's record of intimate collaboration with the blood-soaked Indonesian regime for the past quarter century.

But the coalition of protest organisers—the trade unions, churches, East Timorese leadership and the middle class radical group, the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP)—have lined up squarely behind the new requirements of the Australian political and military establishment, demanding "Send Australian UN troops now!", "Stop the Killings. Peacekeepers now!"

One of the organisers of the anti-Vietnam war coalition in the 1960s and 1970s, Bob Gould, told the media that the Timor tragedy had "fundamentally changed" his views.

"Usually I am calling on troops out, but this time I want troops in," he said. "I'm convinced Australia should intervene, if not in a full-scale invasion then to rescue the people and evacuate them."

While the same demands have dominated the press, and Prime Minister Howard has spent the past week prevailing upon Asian, US and European powers to acquiesce to such an Australian-led force, demonstration leaders have been at pains to paint a picture of a government "reluctant" and "hesitant" to act.

They say that if Australia does send troops, it will be the product of pressure from below, forcing an unwilling Howard to participate in a "humanitarian" solution to the Indonesian military-led carnage. "If the movement is strong enough to force an intervention, it would be a massive victory—not just for struggle for East Timorese independence, but for all solidarity movements in Australia," declares the DSP's *Green Left Weekly*.

In fact, the Australian government's motives for intervening are precisely the same as those it has pursued, by other means, in the past. Its aims are to defend Australia's substantial economic and strategic interests in the region, particularly its share of the lucrative oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea, enshrined in the Timor Gap Treaty, signed with the Indonesian junta in 1989.

The catastrophe facing the East Timorese people has simply been, for Canberra, the catalyst for effecting a tactical turn in securing these interests.

A letter to the *World Socialist Web Site*, representative of the views of the entire ex-radical milieu, roundly attacks its opposition to a military intervention into East Timor. It is worthwhile replying to it, point by point.

The author writes:

"All those intimately involved in the crisis have called for a peace keeping force as the ONLY way of saving the East Timor people. But you call it a 'pretext'. It is AGAINST the interests of business for Australia to save the East Timorese, that's why the Australian government is so reluctant to move, as is the US."

What the record actually shows is that the Australian government has been preparing an intervention force for some considerable time. In March, Defence Minister John Moore told parliament he had been

engaged in assembling the largest front-line expeditionary force since the Vietnam war: "This is the first occasion in over two decades that Australia has had the equivalent of two brigades at this level of readiness. The government's responsibility, and our intention, is to be in a position to be able to respond effectively to a considerable range of possibilities."

Since June, 7,000 troops have been placed on high alert in Darwin, in northern Australia, just 600 km from East Timor. Indeed, it was their advanced state of readiness that led the United Nations Security Council to decide on Wednesday that Australia was in a position to lead the UN "peacekeeping" force to be deployed in the territory, and that the staging post for the operation would be Darwin.

The government began the troop buildup on the basis of extensive intelligence reports it received, from its sophisticated eavesdropping equipment, about the increased activities of militia groups in East Timor, backed by the Indonesian army.

Report after report has disclosed that Australia, among other countries, knew for months what was being prepared.

Britain's *Observer*, for example, reported on September 12:

"Documentary evidence, clandestine intelligence intercepts and eyewitness accounts show that the atrocities in East Timor have been carefully conceived over nearly a year by the Indonesian army. The aim, quite simply, is to destroy a nation. Our investigation has also revealed that Western intelligence services were also aware of the army's plans and warned the UN, many months ago."

It continues: "On March 4, representatives of Australia's Defence Intelligence Organisation in Jakarta cabled their headquarters that the Indonesian military was 'clearly protecting and in some cases operating with' the militias."

"Basing their reports on intercepted satellite telephone conversations between senior officers in Dili and Jakarta, they said that the militias would implement a 'scorched earth policy' if the vote went against them.

"The Australian government passed the damning information on to the United Nations".

From March, Australia began developing a two-pronged policy. Its preferred course was to continue collaborating, just as before, with the Indonesian military, and to leave East Timor—and the East Timorese people—firmly in Indonesia's hands. The government continued to insist that Indonesian troops remain in East Timor during the referendum vote, in the full knowledge that the militia gangs were already carrying out atrocities.

Both Australia and Indonesia hoped that the army's tactics would succeed in intimidating the East Timorese people into voting against independence.

But by July it became clear that they would not.

The *Observer* notes: "A document sent from the [Indonesian] Interior Ministry to the government's Minister in charge of politics and security says: 'There is still time to confront the situation, but time is running out without any sign of hope for a victory for Option 1 (autonomy). 'West Timor must be made ready to receive huge numbers of refugees and their security forces. The evacuation routes must be planned and secured.'"

The Australian government swung into action around its own Option 2:

the deployment of its own troops to East Timor, to guarantee “stability” and the defence of its economic interests.

All that was needed was a “humanitarian tragedy” of sufficient scope to swing public opinion behind a military intervention. Once the scale of the ethnic cleansing became clear to a world audience, Howard began lobbying.

His success has been warmly applauded. Piers Ackerman, writing in Murdoch's *Daily Telegraph* gloated: “Indonesia's agreement to accept an international peacekeeping force in East Timor ... is Australia's biggest foreign policy affairs coup since ... the end of World War II... No one attending APEC is in any doubt that Australia has led world opinion on East Timor and quietly there are more than a few world leaders who are surprised at the vehemence of the Australian argument.”

Howard's “vehemence” arises out of a dawning consciousness that in the new post-Cold War era, Australia has to begin to project its own military presence within the Asia-Pacific region. No longer can it depend on its old post-war alliances with either the US or Indonesia.

Repeating the oft-quoted remark of 19th century British Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston, Howard declared on ABC television on Tuesday night: “There are no permanent alliances—only permanent interests.”

The longer the “peace-keeping” force remains in East Timor, the clearer it will become that the fate of the East Timorese people is not, and never will be, one of them.

Our critic writes: “Then, what a joke, you call for 'the unified struggle of the masses through the entire Indonesian archipelago' and absolutely nothing else! All very well in theory, and easy for you to say writing safely in Melbourne. But absolutely no help to the people of East Timor!”

“WE ARE TALKING ABOUT DEFENCELESS WOMEN AND CHILDREN, and brave journalists and UNIMET (sic) officers refusing to leave them... and all you can do is quote the shameful past and intellectual theory.”

In fact, it is precisely the theoretical orientation of the East Timorese leadership, backed to the hilt by the coalition of protest organisers, that has led to the defenceless position of the East Timorese masses.

At no stage did the National Council for Timorese Resistance (CNRT) leaders appeal to the Timorese people to fight the armed thugs let loose by the army. Nor did they extend a call to the Indonesian working class and students, who just 18 months ago rose up against the Suharto dictatorship, to join with them in struggle against both the army and the regime. Never did they attempt to explain the connection between the army's brutality towards the Timorese and its use of similar methods throughout the whole of Indonesia.

Why were no defence squads set up? Where were the guerilla fighters when the massacres were underway? Why did they not seek to mobilise and organise the vast majority of the population—who, after all, had defied death threats and voted for independence—to resist the murderous gangs?

An article in Tuesday's *Australian Financial Review* provides some answers. Written by Asia-Pacific editor, Peter Hartcher, it is entitled “As ordered, 3,000 Falantil guerillas sit on the sidelines”.

Based on information received from CNRT leader Jose Ramos Horta, Hartcher reports that the 3,000 guerillas “who have spent the past 24 years evading Indonesian troops in East Timor's jungles, are now sitting still in a contained area—a condition of the May 5 United Nations agreement governing the independence ballot.”

Two thousand of them have remained “in cantonment in the Waimori Camp, four hours from Dili, and about another 1,000 in other parts of the territory.”

“It's incredible, an incredible sense of discipline,” Horta remarked, adding that the guerillas were “under the orders of Xanana Gusmao”.

Hartcher comments: “While it may seem quixotically principled to keep an agreement which Indonesia has blatantly disregarded, it is actually very

shrewd politics.

“The international community has mobilised against the Indonesian army's brutal attacks on the East Timorese because it is an unambiguous case of the strong and well armed oppressing the weak and defenceless. As a morality play, it is a stark case of evil preying on innocence.

“But if the guerillas had responded to the TNI outrages by leaving the cantonment areas and resuming hostilities, the turmoil would have been cast instantly as a civil war.”

In other words, had the Falantil, the military arm of Fretilin, resisted the armed militia and defended their own people, then East Timor would have been abandoned by the Western powers.

And appealing to those same powers, not mobilising the masses, has been the cornerstone of the CNRT's “struggle for self-determination”. In reality, it means securing Western support for a mini-statelet that will be totally dependent for its existence on financial investment and political recognition from the various imperialist powers.

Like the Tamils, the Palestinians and the Kurds, the East Timorese masses have been used as nothing but pawns, while their leaders jockey and manoeuvre on the international diplomatic stage.

The political line of the demonstrations is creating the conditions where the top echelons of the military can begin to implement a long-held agenda.

For decades, they have been hamstrung by the “Vietnam Syndrome”—mass popular opposition to the deployment of Australian troops outside the country.

As Wednesday's *Australian Financial Review* editorialised:

“...as a result of Vietnam it became politically impossible for governments to propose military action abroad... and Australia's diplomatic engagement with the region reinforced the domestic taboo on discussion of military intervention in the region.”

Now the “taboo” has been lifted, thanks to the chanters of “troops in!” Moreover, military spending will be increased—paid for, according to Treasurer Peter Costello, out of cuts to government spending on education, health and welfare.

The *AFR* editorial continued: “The calls for action in Timor are ironic because many of those who fostered the political climate in which the army was run down were the loudest in demanding Australia intervene there. This call to arms has, for the first time in decades, given broad legitimacy to the proposition that Australia should be able to intervene militarily outside its territory. This raises the possibility of building a domestic consensus, not just in favour of increased defence spending, but of changing the structure of the defence force.”

In other words, the Australian political and military elite owe a major debt of gratitude to the protest leaders. For the first time in more than a generation, they can dust off their uniforms, flex their military muscles throughout the region, and prepare to place the full financial burden on the backs of the working class.



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