

East Timor and Kosovo: Indonesian atrocities expose US hypocrisy on “human rights”

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Only a few months ago the US government and the American media were engaged in a massive propaganda campaign to portray the war against Serbia as a crusade for human rights. The American and international public were bombarded with daily reports of mass murder, rape and forced expulsions of Albanian Kosovars by Serbian forces, and Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic was routinely compared to Hitler.

It has since become clear that figures given out of Kosovar civilian deaths were grossly exaggerated, and that the systematic drive by Serb forces to expel ethnic Albanians—including indiscriminate attacks on civilians—only began after the US and NATO launched their bombing assault on March 24.

The event that was seized on as a *casus belli* by President Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to justify the Rambouillet ultimatum and ensuing air war was the alleged massacre of 45 Kosovar civilians at Racak on January 15, 1999. Whether those killed were civilians or guerrillas of the separatist Kosovo Liberation Army remains in dispute.

But one thing is certain, Racak and the preceding months of warfare between Serb forces and the KLA pale in comparison to the murder and pillage carried out over the past ten days by the Indonesian military and its militia gunmen in East Timor. If the term “ethnic cleansing” has any meaning, it applies to the Indonesian response to East Timor’s overwhelming vote for independence (over 78 percent) in last month’s UN-sponsored referendum.

Virtually all reports agree that out of a population of 800,000, some 200,000 East Timor citizens have been forced to flee their homes and seek refuge in the hills, and another 100,000 have either fled or been deported to West Timor, where they are being held in concentration camps guarded by the army-backed militias. No Western officials or reporters are being allowed access to these camps, and there are reports of inmates being shot by their captors. Other reports say thousands of East Timorese have been deported to remote islands in Indonesia.

The East Timorese capital of Dili has been reduced to a smoking ruin. Estimates of killed civilians range from 600 to 7,000. Priests, nuns and United Nations personnel have been murdered by militiamen and troops, and UN compounds have been attacked.

Even as Clinton and other Western leaders, assembled at the weekend for the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in New Zealand, were negotiating with Indonesian government and military officials, the massacres were continuing. The latest occurred Sunday in Dare, a Catholic seminary town six miles from Dili where tens of thousands of refugees had sought shelter.

The reaction of the US government to this bloodbath has provided a

palpable refutation of the edifice of lies constructed to justify the bombing of Serbia, and, more generally, the claim that American foreign policy is motivated by humanitarian considerations. It should serve as an object lesson for all those who were taken in by the US-NATO propaganda campaign and lent their support to the Balkan War.

It is not here a matter of supporting demands for Western military intervention in East Timor. The unfolding disaster in both Serbia and Kosovo should serve as an antidote to the notion that the people in any part of the world can entrust their fate to the representatives of world imperialism. On the contrary, the present crisis in East Timor underscores the cynical pursuit of Great Power interests that underlies all interventions—unfailingly carried out in the name of peace and democracy—undertaken by the US and its allies.

On September 8, four days into the Indonesian rampage, Clinton’s national security adviser, Samuel Berger, said the US had no plans for reprisals against the Indonesian government if the violence continued. “Because we bombed in Kosovo doesn’t mean we should bomb Dili,” he quipped. Saying “It’s not a question of making threats,” Berger insisted the US would support an Australian-led UN “peacekeeping” force only if it were invited into East Timor by Indonesian President B. J. Habibie.

Berger went on to contrast the “humanitarian problem” of East Timor with the “strong security and strategic consequences” at stake in Kosovo. He made no attempt to reconcile this explanation with the diametrically opposed line given out for public consumption in the Balkan War—that the bombing was conducted for moral, rather than geo-political reasons. Evidently unable to contain his cynicism, he added, “You know, my daughter has a very messy apartment up in college. Maybe I shouldn’t intervene to have that cleaned up.”

He and other US officials said they were convinced that the head of the Indonesian military, General Wiranto, was not directing the violence.

US press reports on the atrocities in East Timor were subdued and cautious. There was none of the war-mongering and demonizing of the offending government that characterized the coverage of events in Kosovo. As the *New York Times* pointed out sympathetically on September 9, Washington was reluctant to threaten a cutoff of aid to Indonesia because, among other things, “It could also harm American corporations that have large investments in Indonesia.”

Only after public denunciations of the US silence by political leaders in Australia and other countries, and growing protests at home (Democratic Congressman Barney Frank said US policy was “almost inviting the Indonesians to go kill people”) did Clinton make a statement condemning the massacres and calling on Jakarta to put a

halt to the bloodbath.

Last Thursday and Friday he joined with other heads of state and UN officials to demand that Habibie and Wiranto agree to the deployment of a United Nations military force in East Timor, and announced a cutoff of US arms sales to Indonesia.

In contrast to Kosovo, however, no deadlines were set for Indonesian compliance and no ultimatums—“Accept foreign troops, or we bomb!”—were issued. And while in Kosovo every act of terror committed by Serb forces was laid directly at the feet of Milosevic, the US government and the American media went out of their way to suggest that neither Habibie nor Wiranto were in control of events in East Timor. Instead the atrocities were attributed to “rogue” elements within the Indonesian military.

To grasp the dimensions of the hypocrisy of US policy makers, it is useful to recall the charges that formed the pretext for the US-led war against Serbia. The war crimes indictment of Milosevic handed down last May by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia stated that by mid-October 1998 “over 298,000 persons, roughly fifteen percent of the population, had been internally displaced within Kosovo or had fled the province.” This was attributed entirely to a deliberate Serb campaign of “ethnic cleansing,” while the role of KLA attacks and provocations, and the inevitable dislocation of civilians resulting from a civil war, were ignored.

But even if one were to grant the Tribunal's estimate of displaced Kosovars and its attribution of blame exclusively on the Serbs, the level of “ethnic cleansing” in Kosovo prior to the US-NATO war was considerably less severe than what is presently unfolding in East Timor. There some 300,000 out of a population of 800,000—or nearly 38 percent—have been displaced.

As for the killing of civilians, as noted above, the only massacre alleged by the Tribunal prior to the onset of US-NATO bombing was Racak, and the total number of Kosovar civilians deaths alleged by the Tribunal was 346. That figure was published at the end of May, after two months of intense NATO bombing of Kosovo and Serbia proper, i.e., two months of civil war exacerbated by foreign attack.

It is certain that a far greater number of East Timorese have been killed by the Indonesian military and its militia thugs in the past nine days. These killings, moreover, were preceded by months of militia attacks which killed and displaced thousands, as part of a campaign directed by the Indonesian military to terrorize the East Timorese and prevent a vote for secession.

There are, moreover, profound historical differences between the situation in Kosovo and that in East Timor, differences which underscore the criminality of the Indonesian regime and its accomplices in Washington.

To begin with, Kosovo has been associated with Serbia for centuries, and Serbian sovereignty over the province has been recognized internationally for eighty years.

Milosevic rose to power by pursuing the politics of Serb nationalism, just as his counterparts in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia have based themselves on ethnic chauvinism. He employed brutal tactics against the Albanian majority in Kosovo, but the Serb offensive in 1998 was directed primarily against strongholds of the KLA, a separatist terrorist movement that had the covert support of the US and other Western powers. The entire policy of the US, culminating in the air war last spring, was an attack on Serb sovereignty.

Indonesia has no such historic or legal claims on East Timor, for centuries a Portuguese colony, whose inhabitants speak a distinct

language, are mainly Catholic (as opposed to Moslem Indonesia) and are of a different ethnic origin than the dominant nationalities of Indonesia. The military regime in Jakarta invaded East Timor in 1975 following Portugal's withdrawal, occupied and then annexed the province, killing an estimated 100,000 Timorese in just the first year of its rule. It is generally agreed that since 1975 the Indonesian military has killed at least 200,000 inhabitants of East Timor.

The only country to recognize Indonesia's claim to East Timor is Australia. But the US unofficially supported the invasion and suppression of the province. Then President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger were in Jakarta for a summit meeting with Indonesian dictator Suharto on the eve of the invasion, which was launched one day after their departure.

This was entirely consistent with US policy toward Indonesia. The US State Department and CIA played a critical role in the 1965 coup that resulted in the murder of at least 500,000 Indonesians, including hundreds of thousands of Communist Party members, trade unionists, peasants and left-leaning intellectuals. Since then Washington has remained the staunchest supporter of the Indonesian military.

Even if the US participates in an eventual “peace-keeping” operation in East Timor, its orientation will remain one of support for the Indonesian military, suitably adorned, perhaps, with the trappings of democracy.

A column in the September 12 *New York Times* by Ronald Steel bluntly and unabashedly expressed the cynicism of US foreign policy. Steel wrote:

“If the United States intervened for humanitarian reasons to support the Kosovars, even to the point of bombing Serbia, why shouldn't it do the same against Indonesia?”

“One reason is that—all the rhetoric aside—we did not intervene in Kosovo primarily for humanitarian purposes. The plight of the Kosovar refugees is what tugged at the public's heart strings...”

“[Indonesia] is the world's fourth most populous region, rich in natural resources and a prime trading partner for American corporations. It is a logical counter to any potential Chinese expansion. Furthermore, unlike puny Serbia, it is a serious military power...”

“Intervention will occur where it can be done relatively cheaply, against a weak nation, in an area both accessible and strategic, where the public's emotions are aroused, and where it does not get in the way of other political, economic or military needs.”

In other words, US foreign policy is driven by the ruthless pursuit of Great Power, imperialist interests. Washington pursues a policy of provocation and war against Serbia because it considers Serbia to be an obstacle to its strategic interests in Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia. It supports the Timorese hangmen in Jakarta because it considers Indonesia to be a crucial asset in its quest for global domination.



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