

What the UN knew about militia violence in East Timor

Nick Beams
6 October 1999

Below we publish a reply by Nick Beams, a member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site, to a letter to the WSWS defending the role of the UN in East Timor. The letter was written in response to the article "Kosovo and East Timor: a reply to a WSWS reader" published on October 1. For those who wish to read the text of the letter in full, a link is provided at the conclusion of this reply.

Dear DM,

As you point out, we recently wrote in reply to a WSWS reader that "the UN proceeded with the referendum [in East Timor], in the full knowledge that the Indonesian military would unleash a wave of brutality against the East Timorese people".

Your claim that this is an "outrageous" allegation is easily settled by examining the historical record.

In January this year, before the referendum plan had been agreed upon, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer warned that a plebiscite in East Timor would "cause more bloodshed than solutions."

On March 4, Australian intelligence sources reported that Indonesian armed forces were arming and organising militias in East Timor. On July 8, an article in the *Australian Financial Review* pointed out that the Australian government had received intelligence proving that top levels of the TNI, (Indonesian armed forces) as well as a group of Indonesian cabinet members, were complicit in the terror campaign underway in East Timor.

One did not need access to intelligence reports to ascertain the involvement of the TNI. The Dili TNI commander, Colonel Tono Suratman, told the Australian television program *Sunday*: "I would like to convey the following: If the pro-independents do win [the ballot] all will be destroyed."

In its September 12 edition, the British newspaper the

Observer published a detailed account of the plans by the Indonesian military to unleash a wave of terror. According to this report: "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."

According to the article, information contained in the March 4 report by Australia's Defence Intelligence Organisation warning that the Indonesian military was preparing a "scorched earth policy" was passed on to the UN.

The *Observer* noted that: "The UN also received documents from resistance sources revealing the Indonesian plans. Even their own security briefing for the third week of August noted 'continued Indonesian army involvement' in the militias and preparations for a 'full-scale offensive after the [referendum]'."

Let me cite a letter from Charles Scheiner, the UN Representative for the International Federation for East Timor, to the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. The letter is dated May 3, just two days before the agreement between the UN, Indonesia and Portugal on the ballot. It argued that the ballot should not go ahead if Indonesian armed forces remained in control.

The letter pointed out that, in the month of April alone, more than 100 East Timorese civilians had been murdered by the paramilitary militias and that the murders were being organised by the military and police.

"The armed forces provide the paramilitaries with weapons, money and training. Senior military and police have attended rallies where speakers have incited

mobs to murder and stood by doing nothing as the killing ensued. Increasingly, there are reports of the police and army directly participating in the activities of these death squads.

“At the April 23 tripartite talks, much was made of the April 21 Peace Pact brokered by General Wiranto. But the paramilitary violence persists, and Indonesia has made no significant efforts to control it. Murders continue daily, militia leaders exhort their coerced followers to assassinate pro-independence leaders and human rights workers with impunity, and tens of thousands of internal refugees live in fear for their lives. If the United Nations were to conduct a popular consultation in this atmosphere of terror, it would be a cruel hoax on the people of East Timor and a betrayal of the principles the United Nations stands for.”

The “atmosphere of terror” referred to in the letter existed before the ballot date had even been announced. It continued thereafter, as acknowledged by the UN Secretary-General himself, in a report to the Security Council on May 25:

“Despite repeated assurances that measures would be taken by the Indonesian authorities to ensure security in East Timor and curtail the illegal activities of the armed militias, I regret to inform the Security Council that credible reports continue to be received of political violence, including intimidation and killings by armed militias against unarmed pro-independence civilians.”

In view of this record, can I suggest that your anger is misplaced and that you should, perhaps, critically examine your attitude to the United Nations?

Yours sincerely,
Nick Beams



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact