

Australian led "peace-keepers" strike temporary deal with Falintil in East Timor

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The Australian-led "peacekeeping" force in East Timor, has struck a deal with Falintil commanders allowing pro-independence guerillas to keep their weapons—but only temporarily, and in specially-designated areas.

Colonel Kelly, spokesman for the International Force for East Timor (Interfet) announced yesterday that Interfet had "accepted that they can retain their weapons in their cantonments at present." He went on to stress that "ongoing discussions ... will look towards eventual disarming."

While maintaining close and cordial relations with the Indonesian army (TNI), Interfet commander Major-General Peter Cosgrove publicly insisted on Monday that the guerillas hand over their arms. "The policy is that we disarm any East Timorese who are not in TNI," he said. "For this province to be at peace, we must take arms out of the hands of those who are untrained and unsanctioned as a military force."

Cosgrove's demand came after a confrontation on Sunday between UN troops and Falintil guerillas in the village of Cairu, about 80 kilometres south-east of East Timor's capital, Dili.

A platoon commander of British Gurkha soldiers ordered the guerillas, who had been protecting local villagers from pro-Indonesian militia gangs, to surrender their weapons. When they refused, a "standoff" ensued. "It became very tense indeed," said Cosgrove. Eventually the British commander backed down, allowing the guerillas to hold on to their arms.

"A young man made a difficult call and I had to back him up because there could have been bloodshed right at that time," Cosgrove explained.

He went on to announce that Interfet would press "in the strongest possible terms" for the pro-independence guerillas to disarm.

Under the UN mandate, all East Timorese civilians are obliged to remain defenceless. In the past month, hundreds of thousands have been forcibly driven from their homes and scores of villages razed to the ground. Estimates range from scores to thousands of people having been butchered.

Indonesian troops, who armed, trained and organised the marauding militia gangs, retain Interfet's "sanction".

Commenting on the UN's policy, Falintil's ground commander, Taur Matan Ruak, remarked: "Interfet did not come because Falintil had committed crimes. They have to tackle the issue that these crimes [by the Indonesian-backed militia] have been committed."

The few militia thugs apprehended by Interfet have been handed over to Indonesian troops, only to be quickly released. Matan Ruak condemned what he called the "cowboy" arrangement: "We should find some mechanism to hold them a bit longer and extract information out of them," he said.

Having campaigned heavily for the UN to send a "peacekeeping" force to East Timor, Falintil's leaders, Xanana Gusmao and Jose Ramos Horta issued statements distancing themselves from Interfet's directive.

Speaking from Dublin and with an obvious eye to his East Timorese audience, Horta declared: "We would consider it to be an affront if they [Interfet] attempt to disarm its [Falintil's] members."

Gusmao, after emerging from a meeting with Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern, told reporters that it was "too soon", and that Falintil would remain armed "as long as the security conditions on the ground are what we know right now". The guerillas, he insisted, had earned the right to be treated as "an army of liberation and not as a band of bandits."

Horta, however, went on to reveal that “all Falintil elements remain confined to their cantonments”, on the explicit orders of Gusmao and Matan Ruak, just as they did throughout the carnage of the past months. Thus the leaders' protests over the disarming of their “fighters” had very little to do with defending the East Timorese people.

What concerns them most is sorting out a place for themselves in the administration that will be set up once the United Nations force has established full military control, with the assistance of the Indonesian army, over the territory.

Gusmao was adamant that, as commander-in-chief of Falintil, all negotiations take place with him. He proposed to meet with Interfet, aboard a Portuguese frigate, the Vasco da Gama, to discuss the guerillas' future role.

Once the UN transitional administration was up and running, “Falintil forces would be in a condition not just to disarm, but also to be... integrated into the future security forces of East Timor, to be trained and prepared by the United Nations,” said Gusmao's interpreter.

Bending over backwards to accommodate himself to the UN's agenda, Gusmao has already offered a “reconciliation” with both the Indonesian regime and the militia leaders. After meeting with Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas in New York last week, he announced: “We have a lot of common ground ... We can hold hands with the Indonesian government and help them regain a different image with the international community”.

In the past four days, Gusmao has been feted, in both Portugal and Ireland as East Timor's future president. In Lisbon, he was accorded honours due to a head of state. In Dublin, Prime Minister Ahern repeatedly referred to him as “president”. But the message from the United Nations, during talks in Washington last week, was somewhat different. UN officials pointed out that the Kosovo-like protectorate they intend to establish would not include the CNRT, the East Timorese umbrella organisation, of which Gusmao is “supreme leader”.

“The assumption has always been,” remarked Ian Martin, the head of the UN Mission in East Timor, “that we want close consultation with the East Timorese but not one where there is a direct sharing of authority.”



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