

Official disinterest over tens of thousands still missing in East Timor

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Eight weeks have passed since the UN's Australian-led Interfet force occupied East Timor. In that time the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) has been established, and its leading personnel selected. Some of them, including UNTAET's chief, Brazilian diplomat Sergio Vieira de Mello have already arrived in Dili.

Meanwhile, a World Bank team of experts has completed an 11-day preliminary assessment of the territory's economy and is currently drawing up budget recommendations. High on the list of official priorities is determining what the territory's currency and national language will be. Intensive negotiations over the fate of the former Indonesian province's oil deposits are underway in Australia and Portugal.

But in all the activity, nothing has been done to address the foremost concern of the East Timorese people: how many were butchered by the Indonesian army-backed militias in those three fateful weeks following the August 30 referendum? Who were the victims? What became of them?

The UN's failure to investigate the killings speaks volumes about its aims in the territory. "Stabilising the security situation", Interfet's brief, turns out to have had very little to do with the humanitarian ideals invoked by the UN to justify its intervention.

No forensic scientists have been sent, there is no morgue and no capacity to properly investigate gravesites. Nevertheless, Interfet's commander, Major-General Peter Cosgrove has publicly admitted that, according to his calculations, some 80,000 people remain "unaccounted for". The United Nations World Food Program estimates the number is in the vicinity of 180,000 people.

"We're missing an awful lot of people here," said Ross Mountain, the UN coordinator for humanitarian

affairs in East Timor.

But it is generally accepted by the UN, Interfet and the media, that the fate of most of these people will remain a mystery.

The five experts appointed by UN Human Rights official, Mary Robinson some five weeks ago to investigate the alleged atrocities, have yet to be dispatched to East Timor. The UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) did not get around to discussing the issue until last Monday, when it eventually voted, with 27 for, 10 against, 11 abstentions and 6 absent, to allow an inquiry to proceed. Italy's ambassador F. Paulo Fulci, president of ECOSOC, was reported to have remarked that "not many nations" were keen to meet.

Several human rights activists have warned that by the time UN investigators arrive, the rainy season will have set in and any remaining evidence washed away.

An unofficial UN team has been interviewing eyewitnesses about the killings. On the basis of the evidence they have collected, the team members described the wave of violence carried out after the August 30 referendum as "truly catastrophic".

They called for forensic experts to be sent "urgently" to the island. "What we see is devastating," declared Asma Jahangir, a special investigator for summary executions. "Two to three dead bodies are being identified every day."

Speaking on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's radio program *PM*, British army officer, John Harvey, who investigated war crimes in Bosnia, said "There are two problems in East Timor: there's still no UN special investigators, and there's no scientific examination of the bodies [that are recovered]."

"For whatever reason... basically forensic pathology

isn't here, whereas it is in Bosnia, it was in Kosovo, it's not here.

Yvette D'Oliveira, a 24-year-old East Timorese anthropology graduate, was interviewed on the same program. Along with seven other students, she set up the East Timorese Human Rights Commission in the aftermath of the militia rampage. She remained in the hills around Dili and saw some of what took place. So far, the group has identified 200 gravesites across the region.

“I know we have the CNRT, but during [the violence] they don't do nothing. They all talk, talk and talk, and have meetings. That's all. We are young people. We realise we don't have anything—computers or paper—but we have spirit.”

The Commission's general coordinator, Ms Isabel da costa Ferreira, says they have found 364 bodies, just in Dili, Hera and Tabar.

Sydney Morning Herald journalist Paul Daley, writing from Dili, commented on November 13: “It is possible to reach only one conclusion: East Timor is the scene of a massive crime against humanity—and an even bigger attempt at cover-up—by Indonesia's security forces.

“...the militia left plenty of evidence behind. But nobody from the international community—not the least Interfet, which has no mandate to investigate war crimes—is seriously examining it.”

An American intelligence officer told Daley: “It's like you come home, the house is burnt down, grandma's been murdered and the kids have been kidnapped and you know who did it. But everyone just keeps saying ‘Oh how awful. She's dead, the house is burnt the kids are gone—they should just have more kids and build another house.”

In recent weeks scores of bodies have begun washing up onto the shores of East Timor's northern and southern coasts, confirming fears that the militia had dumped many people into the sea.

The intelligence officer said there were “more signs all the time of sea killings”.

At the same time, the situation facing the two hundred and fifty thousand East Timorese who were forcibly evacuated to Indonesian West Timor by the Indonesian army and the militia gangs is deteriorating. Only 65,000 have so far been repatriated, and the new Indonesian government is denying any access to human

rights activists, medical teams and the media.

According to a United Nations Children's Fund spokesman quoted in Portugal's *Lusa News*, at least 114 East Timorese children have died in West Timor's makeshift refugee camps because of unsafe drinking water, bad sanitary conditions and insufficient medical assistance. Diarrhea and respiratory problems are the main causes of death, and the situation is expected to worsen with the onset of the rainy season.

Indonesia's *Antara* news agency has reported the deaths of 158 East Timorese children and 136 adults, most of them in camps near the border with East Timor.



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