Resentment mounts against UN administration in East Timor

Linda Tenenbaum
21 January 2000

Four months after the Australian-led military occupation of East Timor, the United Nations is establishing a colonial-style administration in the former Indonesian territory. Already, its callous indifference to the plight of the local population is fuelling growing resentment. While hundreds of millions of dollars have been pledged in aid by the major countries, ordinary East Timorese face an ongoing social disaster.

Unemployment stands at 80 percent, and people in many towns and villages are living on the edge of starvation. “We don't know whether it's a lack of transport or a matter of the distribution system. What's certain is that there's not enough food,” said Bishop Basilio de Nascimento, one of the territory's Catholic bishops.

Houses, shops, markets and other necessary facilities remain blackened, roofless shells, with no building materials due to arrive for at least several more weeks.

Many of the estimated 165,000 “displaced persons” living in the squalid, disease infested camps in Indonesian-controlled West Timor after fleeing for their lives last August, have calculated that they are better off where they are. This is despite the fact that some 500 people, mostly children, have died from malaria, respiratory and gastrointestinal illnesses and other contagious diseases in the refugee camps. According to UNICEF, about one-third of refugee children are malnourished.

Nevertheless, the people “believe East Timor is too destroyed, they cannot live there,” said a UN refugee co-ordinator, Frederique Adlung, last week.

Meanwhile the thousands of personnel—UN, aid, media, diplomatic—who have been flown in to “save” the East Timorese and participate in the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) are enjoying the best the UN can offer. “At one of Dili's two new floating hotels last week, it was standing room only at the upper deck bar,” reported *Washington Post* journalist Keith Richburg earlier this month.

“Relief workers, UN officials, foreign peacekeeping troops and journalists stood shoulder-to-shoulder, swapping stories and exchanging mobile phone numbers as cold beer flowed, music blared and the cook behind the counter had trouble keeping up with the cheeseburger orders.

“Outside, the capital's main waterfront road was jammed with new vehicles—Landcruisers, Jeeps, minivans, rental cars—most of them with license plates from Darwin, in Australia's Northern Territory. They plied past block after block of burned-out shells of buildings, although the street is dotted with colorful new restaurants, hotels and bars.”

One of these is the “Dili Lodge Hotel” set up in a former Indonesian Army barracks as a joint venture between Darwin-based businessmen and “pro-independence leader” Manual Carrascalao. In December the owners were threatened with eviction by UNTAET because of alleged links to organised prostitution. But the business, which includes car hire and a shop, is still there and, like others servicing the growing UN and aid community, doing a brisk trade.

In a stark demonstration of the social relations that prevail, hundreds of families survive by foraging every day through Dili's rubbish tip for the UN's discarded food and clothing.

Various commentators and aid agencies are beginning to express growing concerns about UNTAET and its unabashed lack of interest in the urgent needs of the East Timorese.

Sandra Vieira, the head of Portugal's non-governmental aid organisations, complained in December that the Australian-led INTERFET peacekeeping force was giving precedence to transporting mail and music for Australian troops over medicines and other humanitarian materials.

“It's incomprehensible,” Vieira told Portugal's *Lusa News*. “INTERFET appears to have forgotten that the territory continues to live in an emergency situation.”

In his *Washington Post* article Richburg quotes Rogerio dos Santos, deputy director of the Roman Catholic Charity Caritas, who says he still has no telephone or fax to organise rice shipments. “Something is wrong,” he surmises. “There are many dark businesses now in East Timor.... It is not a priority for me—hotels, big cars. The priority for me is that people need food and reconstruction for their houses.”

Veteran relief workers, comments Richburg, think the “Cambodia problem” is already occurring—namely the multibillion-dollar aid effort in that impoverished South-East Asian country which, eight years on, has seen no improvement whatsoever in the living standards of average Cambodians.

Lusa News last week reported the observations of another Portuguese official, Mario Almeida, who participated in a four-day “fact-finding mission” in East Timor. Almeida said he was

© World Socialist Web Site

“shocked” by the lack of support that UNTAET was providing to local institutions, and “appalled” by the fact that UN bodies had taken over all the public and private buildings still standing.

Last Tuesday the *Irish Times* pointed out that “twelve weeks after the UN Security Council established UNTAET, the only significant reconstruction has been to official buildings.”

The article quotes an unnamed INTERFET officer saying: “The UN is looking like it cannot get off its backside.” Referring to the 9,500-strong UNTAET force that will replace INTERFET at the end of February he remarked: “they're coming ... to fight a war that's finished. What we need are roads for heavy machinery, but where are the bridging materials?”

Two Australian doctors, working at the border crossing between West and East Timor, have accused the UN of treating returning refugees “like cattle”. Mark Forman told *Australian* journalist Paul Toohey that the 150 to 750 refugees crossing the border each day are “quickly processed by six or seven staff working out of five air-conditioned UN Land-Rovers.

“They are put in a bare, rutted paddock with a few crude structures covered by tarpaulins. There is little in the way of a welcome for people who are obviously traumatised and extremely unwell, ” he said. “There's money in Dili, so I expected at the border there would be some proper form of shelter and at least a cold drink.” Forman and his wife added that it had been left to aid agencies to provide doctors, because the UN provided none.

Continuing deprivation, combined with the obvious chasm between the lifestyle of UN personnel and that of the rest of the population, are fuelling growing social tensions.

“People are everywhere,” writes Toohey, “milling, talking and, most of all, doing absolutely nothing at all. The sheer numbers may intimidate foreigners as they find themselves driving timidly among hundreds of idle people, who no longer smile indebtedly or wave at every Westerner's car.”

“At night, large gangs of young men wander Dili's streets, not necessarily looking for trouble but, by appearances not afraid of finding it either. ‘You can see it in their eyes,' said one Darwin worker. ‘They smile to your face and wave but if you turn and look around after you've driven past, then you see what they really think of you.'”

Two months ago, the first open conflict erupted when 70 locals in the eastern town of Lospalos, employed by a Portuguese aid agency to work in its hospital, demanded wages instead of food-for-work. INTERFET soldiers were brought in to disperse the angry workers after they began threatening their employers.

Last Saturday a violent confrontation broke out when several thousand unemployed workers and youth were forced to wait for hours at a Dili gymnasium behind barbed-wire barricades to submit job applications. The UN had distributed 9,000 application forms during the week for just 1,900 jobs. People began queuing in the early hours of the morning for what the UN described as “not the real interview.” By early afternoon a near riot had broken out, with the crowd jeering and throwing rocks at the INTERFET soldiers called in to push the East Timorese outside the gates.

Lining up openly with INTERFET, the vice-president of the National Resistance Council of East Timor (CNRT), Jose Ramos Horta, turned up to quell the anger. Speaking later to the media, he attacked the unemployed workers, saying he was “ashamed” by what had occurred.

Even the lucky few who do eventually get jobs will only be paid a fraction of what UNTAET's “expatriate” personnel earn.

The deputy head of the UN's civilian administration in Kosovo, Tom Koenigs, recently cautioned UNTAET officials against “overpaying” local staff.

At a briefing in New York he warned UNTAET that it should learn the lessons of Kosovo. “If they hire drivers and interpreters at three times the sustainable level, they will never come down to a normal level,” he told a news conference following the briefing. He said that the 50,000 NATO-led troops, 2,000 UN staff and 3,000 international agency workers in Kosovo earned “good pay and are able to spend quite a lot of money” on rent or restaurants, and that was fine. “But we can create certain fences,” he said, calculating that a “sustainable” wage for a local would be around 10 times less.

The UN has already confirmed that it will provide even fewer jobs in East Timor than existed under the former Indonesian regime. This follows a recommendation from the World Bank that UNTAET implement a number of belt-tightening measures, including a cut in the number of civil servants from 28,000 to just 12,000.

UNTAET's role over the past two months is simply a continuation of the UN's ongoing policy in East Timor, from the referendum in August—held with full knowledge that the Indonesian-backed militia would run amok—to its military intervention in September and the creation of UNTAET in December. Far from being motivated by humanitarian concerns, the UN has functioned as the clearing house for Portugal, Australia and other imperialist nations keen to establish a firm military and financial foothold in this strategically significant oil- and gas-rich territory.

See Also:
East Timor
[*WSWS* Full Coverage]

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site