

Following student protests in Dili:

## UN and East Timor government push for tougher police measures

John Ward, Peter Symonds  
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In the wake of violent protests in the capital of Dili on December 4, the East Timorese government, backed by UN officials, has attempted to deflect attention from the country's mounting social tensions by blaming politically-motivated "provocateurs". Backed by the UN, Portugal and Australia, it has called for measures to bolster the police in preparation for further unrest.

Government ministers and officials have variously accused their political opponents and remnants of pro-Indonesian militia for the violence that resulted in two deaths. Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri immediately pointed that finger at the CDP-RDTL, a group calling for the UN to leave East Timor. UN representative Kamallesh Sharma has claimed that the riots may have been "a planned attack against selected targets".

From the available details, however, it is clear that the chief responsibility for provoking the protests rests with the East Timor police, which is trained and commanded by the UN. Moreover, as the situation rapidly escalated out of control, the Fretilin-led government relied on UN troops to suppress the demonstrators, who lashed out and attacked symbols of the privileged ruling elite.

An article in the *Australian* highlighted the role of the notorious Special Police Unit which, on December 3, went to a secondary school to arrest a 20-year-old student named Daniel, suspected of a gang-related murder. Citing Jose Agustino, deputy director of the Students Solidarity Council, it described what took place: "Officers handcuffed one of Daniel's wrists, threw the chain over a bar and hoisted him, painfully, from the ground. Students and teachers surrounded the police, demanding they stop the brutality".

Agustino told the newspaper: "The police were uncontrolled. We reject that kind of attitude." As Daniel was dragged away, the police kicked one of the teachers and struck other students. A protest march by 200 students and teachers to the parliament building was broken up by UN and East Timorese police who used tear gas and fired warning shots.

The following day, 500 people gathered outside parliament to protest against the behaviour of the police and asked to speak to a government representative. When no one appeared, some

threw stones at the building, injuring a parliamentarian. The angry crowd moved to the nearby police headquarters where they confronted police, who, in response some stone throwing, let off warning shots and then fired directly into the unarmed protestors.

Two students—14-year-old Horatio Ximenes and 18-year-old Manuel De Silva—died and 16 others were injured, two critically, as a result of the police shootings. Even though all of the media reports indicate that the police fired straight into the crowd, the East Timor ambassador to the UN Jose Luis Guterres claimed that police bullets were not responsible for the deaths. He provided no forensic evidence, and none has been subsequently released, to back his assertion.

The *Australian* cited an intelligence source in East Timor who declared: "Whatever they find about who shot who, there's no doubt that 100 percent of the shootings were by police. They behaved like wild dogs." Following the shootings, the protest erupted into a riot and was joined by unemployed youth. Alkatiri's home was attacked and burned along with a number of foreign-owned businesses, including the "Hello Mister" supermarket that supplies high-priced imported goods to UN staff and others.

The police responded brutally and indiscriminately. At least five people with gunshot wounds insist that police shot them. In each case the witnesses blamed members of the Special Police Unit. Marcel Ximenes, a stallholder at the Comoro market, told the *Age* newspaper: "They got out of the car and began shooting. I wasn't in the demonstration. My life is just working to get enough to eat."

An eyewitness told the *Australian*: "I saw two police vehicles chasing a dozen students down the street, running for their lives. Several shots were fired. I looked up and saw one guy, maybe a student, standing rigid on the balcony of the Harvey World Travel building. The police came to a screaming halt, struck him with batons even though he was motionless, pushed him to the ground and kicked and punched him, and threw him in the back of the wagon."

An hour after the clash at police headquarters, Portuguese soldiers were mobilised to defend Portuguese citizens and

property, and to join the police in suppressing rioters. Portugal's decision to actively deploy troops to deal with what was a civil disturbance in its former colony appears to have been taken unilaterally without the authorisation of the UN, which commands the international force. It was not until late morning that the Alkatiri government met with the United Nations Mission of Support in East Timor (UNMISSET), which agreed to provide UN troops to crack down on the protestors.

The activities of the Portuguese and UN troops have received scant reportage. But the police, whom they were assisting, arrested some 77 people in the course of the day. According to a report in the *Age*, those detained were kicked and punched by police and sustained a number of injuries, including split lips, bruises, black eyes and a suspected fracture.

The actions of the government and the UN on the day provide a revealing glimpse into the real state of political relations in "independent" East Timor. While the police in Dili did not receive their orders from UNMISSET, they are nevertheless under the direct control of UN Police (UNPOL). There are still more than 700 UN police in East Timor and their role in the events of December 4 is yet to be accounted for.

The UN has been responsible for recruiting and training the Timor-Leste Police Service (TLPS) and has handed over control to the government in only five of the country's 13 districts—Ermera, Aileu, Mantuto, Manufahi and Ainaro. A number of reports indicate that the police, the Special Police Unit in particular, are widely despised. The TLPS is accused of having former Indonesian police, militia members and local thugs in its ranks.

A joint UN-Timorese police inquiry is being carried out into the riots. Six police officers have been suspended pending further investigations—none of them, however, are from the Special Police Unit. But the main response of the UN has been to announce further training for the TLPS in non-lethal combat and more effective crowd control.

Far from criticising the actions of the Portuguese, the Alkatiri government has praised the former colonial power for its prompt response. The comments underscore the subservience of the administration to the UN and the major powers. Alkatiri, Foreign Minister Jose Ramos-Horta and others are part of a tiny ruling elite that has maintained close connections to Portugal ever since the Indonesian invasion of the half island in 1975. The government has been widely criticised for making Portuguese, which is spoken by only 10 percent of the population, the official language of the country.

Lisbon obviously saw the protests as an opportunity to steal a march on its rivals, particularly Australia, in consolidating its position in East Timor. Portuguese minister José Luis Arnaut boasted: "UN forces took a long time to respond—nearly three hours—while we, the Portuguese forces, began to respond in about an hour to guarantee the security of our compatriots." Ramos-Horta praised Portugal's actions and called for the slowing down of the planned withdrawal of UN troops.

In the aftermath of the riots, Portugal and Australia have been engaged in something of a competition to bolster the capacity of the police and judiciary to stamp out any further unrest. Australian Prime Minister John Howard rang Alkatiri and promised "assistance to help develop the capacity of the East Timorese police and the East Timorese judiciary". Portugal has pledged more aid for police training and a team of anti-riot instructors.

Neither the UN, Portugal, Australia nor the East Timorese government have announced any measures to deal with the underlying causes of the unrest, which lie in the vast social chasm between a tiny well-off, insulated elite and the vast majority of East Timorese. According to UN estimates, half the population lives below the official poverty line of just 50 US cents a day, and between 70 to 80 percent are unemployed.

Just a week after the protests, 250 donor countries and organisations gathered at a conference organised in Dili by the World Bank to assess six months of East Timorese independence. While UN representative Sharma described the conditions in Dili and Baucau where unemployment stands at 43 percent, no new programs were announced to attempt to alleviate the situation. The conference made only two decisions: to release \$US240,000 from the Trust Fund for East Timor to help develop the country's oil and gas fields and a paltry \$US700,000 for education. Its major preoccupation was to strengthen the police.

East Timor has no resources of its own to overcome the poverty facing the population. The government had a budget of just \$US74.2 million for the year. The UN administration in East Timor had a budget for the 2002/2003 financial year of four times that amount—\$US316 million. More than one third of UN spending—\$US134 million—has been allocated to the cost of UN military personnel.

The figures underscore the fact that economically, as well as politically and militarily, the Alkatiri government is completely dependent on the major powers, acting under the umbrella of the United Nations. Jointly they are presiding over an impoverished half island of 800,000 people, whose living standards are continuing to deteriorate following the declaration of independence. Their unified response to the outbreak of protests—tougher police measures—highlights their indifference to the plight of ordinary working people.



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