

Poor conditions in East Timor spark riot by sacked soldiers

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Riots occurred in East Timor's capital Dili at the end of March after mass sackings in the military. While reports are sketchy, it seems that soldiers rampaged through Dili throwing rocks and looting shops. Their actions apparently merged with those of criminal gangs, resulting in damage to at least 20 stores. Shops and public transport were forced to shut down.

The immediate spark for the unrest was the government's dismissal of 591 soldiers—a third of the East Timorese armed forces. They were members of a “petitioners” group that had been on strike throughout March. Their protests erupted initially on February 8, when some 350 officers and soldiers abandoned their posts and marched to the presidential palace, condemning their conditions and claiming discriminatory practices within the military.

President Xanana Gusmão on two occasions attempted to mediate, saying: “Return to your posts and you shall not face court martial, or face the consequences of doing otherwise.” But only 25 soldiers heeded Gusmão's warning. On March 16, the armed forces chief, Brigadier General Taur Matan Ruak responded by announcing that all the striking soldiers had been sacked.

These are not isolated events. Since East Timor was declared independent in 2002, its military, the Forças Armadas de Defesa de Timor Leste (FDTL), has been dogged by serious problems. Even before the February incident, 60 personnel, including a major, had faced charges for indiscipline, often involving clashes with members of the police force. There are now only about 840 full-time soldiers remaining in the force, along with 1,500 reservists.

Some commentators have argued that the turmoil in the military has resulted from former Falintil guerilla fighters being unable to make the transition to formal

army routine. Yet, most of the disciplinary cases involved young soldiers who had little or no participation in the pre-1999 resistance to Indonesian rule. Many of them were conscripts who entered the force in 2002.

The underlying source of the rebellion lies in the poor conditions within the army and throughout the country. A dismissed lieutenant, Gastao Salsinha, spoke of being treated “like a dog”. He said nothing was resolved and tensions would persist. “Of course it will—nobody has listened to us until now and I can't see that changing.”

The just released UN National Human Development Report 2006 admits that after four years of independence, East Timor remains one of the most deprived countries in the world. It ranks East Timor below all ASEAN countries on its human-development index. Half the population lacks safe drinking water. Life expectancy is not improving and stood at only 55.5 in 2004. Out of 1,000 infants born alive, 60 die before their first birthday. Half the adult men and two-thirds of the women are illiterate.

In fact, living standards have declined for ordinary people since independence. According to the UN report, the average per capita income is \$US370 (about \$1 a day) and falling. The tiny statelet, with a population of less than a million, is economically, militarily and politically dependent on the UN and major powers, notably neighbouring Australia.

With few sources of income, the East Timorese government has been counting on revenue from the oil and gas fields of the Timor Sea. Through bullying, stalling and bribery, however, Canberra has forced it to accept ongoing Australian domination of the resources. While oil and gas companies will extract billions of dollars worth of income, the government in Dili will receive only about \$130 million per year.

The appalling social conditions are also fuelling regionalist tendencies. Guerilla warfare against the Suharto regime occurred mostly on the eastern end the island, due to its natural landscape. Since 2002, soldiers from western areas have claimed unfavourable treatment by eastern superiors drawn from the disbanded Falintil.

Moreover, the larger and better-funded police force is largely derived from the west. It also includes ex-members of the Indonesian occupation force, which was responsible for killing tens of thousands of East Timorese. For instance, police commander Paulo Martins was a colonel in the Indonesian police. This recruitment policy has intensified resentments between the military and the police force.

In a ludicrous attempt to play down the latest crisis, Foreign Minister Ramos Horta said the riots were a media beat-up. On March 30, Horta claimed that the disturbances were not related to the military turmoil, saying the media coverage was “irresponsible, alarmist and completely false”. A police official told the Portuguese newsagency Lusa, however, that of 34 people detained since the weekend of the riots, 13 were sacked soldiers.

Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri has appealed for calm and stated that Gusmão would contact the former soldiers to “resolve” the situation. On April 13, the UN Daily Media Review reported that Alkatiri said a solution might be found at Easter time. This week, however, Horta gave an indication that the “solution” is hardly likely to be acceptable to the 591 “petitioners”. He declared that they could apply to work elsewhere, including in the police force.

Joaquin Fonseca from the East Timorese human rights group Yayasan Hak has described the social tension in the country as “quite high” and observed that “we’ve already had these problems for some time”. Even if the current conflicts over the dismissal of the soldiers are finally quelled, any lessening in the unrest can only be temporary because the problems within the military reflect broader social antagonisms.



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