

Police gun down demonstrators in East Timor

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A week of protests led by soldiers who have been sacked by the East Timorese government culminated on April 28 in a confrontation outside the prime minister's office and rioting in the streets of Dili. A brutal police and army operation to end the unrest left at least 6 people dead and more than 60 hospitalised. One police officer was killed by demonstrators and three others injured.

Last Friday's clashes are the product of months of steadily rising tensions. Close to 600 soldiers—more than a third of the army—walked out of their barracks on February 8 claiming they were poorly paid and being discriminated against by nepotistic commanders.

Most of the rebels, who call themselves the “petitioners”, are from Dili or the western districts of East Timor. The protest leaders are veterans of the guerilla war fought by the independence movement Fretilin against Indonesian rule from 1975 to 1999. They allege that the military hierarchy has favoured ex-fighters from the eastern region of East Timor for promotions at their expense. They also claim that the police force is riddled with their former enemies—officers who worked for the Indonesian security forces before independence.

The troops refused to comply with a government ultimatum to return to their duties and were dismissed en masse from the military on March 16. At the end of March, the sacked men protested and rioted in Dili before going into hiding in the shanties and villages surrounding the Timorese capital. Last week hundreds of them returned to the streets, with protests each day to demand that Timorese President Xanana Gusmao and the courts intervene to compel Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri to reverse the sackings and listen to their grievances.

April 28 was the deadline for Gusmao to act. The spokesman for the sacked soldiers, former junior officer Gastao Salsinha, demagogically told journalists that the petitioners were “ready to conduct a new guerilla war in East Timor if our formal leaders in this country have no political will to solve our problem”.

The protests were joined by thousands of Dili youth, most of whom are deeply alienated from the government due to high unemployment and the lack of services. Violence

erupted on April 26. The houses of police officers were firebombed and young people attacked market traders believed to come from the east. By April 28, hundreds of police had been brought into the capital from surrounding areas and army units loyal to the government were on alert.

Rioting broke out after police fired tear gas into a 2,000-strong crowd attempting to force its way into Alkatiri's offices. Parts of the building were set on fire, reportedly destroying documents relating to the recent agreements between Australia and East Timor dividing the oil and gas fields in the Timor Sea. As the demonstrators were dispersed, hundreds of youth rampaged through the district of Taci Tolo where many people from the eastern districts of the country live. A marketplace, dozens of vehicles and over 100 homes were set ablaze. Some 10,000 people from the area took sanctuary in seminaries and churches over the weekend out of fear of further violence.

Dozens of the rebel soldiers have now either been arrested or are among the seriously injured in hospital. Unconfirmed reports have accused police or vigilantes of gunning down a rebel and his two sons as they tried to escape into the hills, and then murdering two women who attempted to recover the bodies.

Salsinha, however, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that 100 ex-soldiers had fled with him into the countryside around Dili and were prepared to fight against the government. In an attempt to forestall further clashes, Alkatiri has announced a special commission of inquiry to investigate the accusations of regional bias in the army.

Initially, the Fretilin leadership implausibly blamed the unrest on “young opportunists linked to Osósio Leki”—the leader of a cult called Colimau 2000 that has developed a following in some poverty-stricken villages in western East Timor. Foreign Minister Ramos Horta declared on Tuesday the violence was the work of “thugs and hooligans”. The unrest within the army, however, is just one reflection of the extreme social tensions on this “independent” half-island.

Illusions that the occupation of East Timor by an Australian-led force in September 1999 would be followed by concrete steps to improve living standards have been dashed. While members of a tiny local elite connected to the

senior Fretilin leadership have gained business opportunities or positions in the state bureaucracy, the vast bulk of the population remains in desperate deprivation and backwardness. Young people, in particular, have become increasingly hostile toward the government due to the lack of jobs and infrastructure and widespread official corruption.

Indonesian rule has been replaced by what is effectively an Australian outpost, dependent on financial aid and military support from Canberra. Since the country was formally established in 2002, East Timorese have witnessed so-called fighters for independence like Gusmao, Alkatiri and Ramos Horta sign off on one-sided treaties that deliver the lion's share of benefits from the oil and gas fields in the Timor Sea to Australia.

The government is increasingly reliant on state repression to suppress social discontent. A Human Rights Watch report released on April 21 documented accusations against the Timorese police of brutality, arbitrary detentions, torture, rape and indiscriminate killings of protestors. Political opponents of Fretilin are among the victims.

The report stated: "Since independence in 2002, police abuse has become one of East Timor's most worrying human rights problems. Police officers regularly use excessive force during arrests and beat detainees once they are in custody. The police and other state institutions have often failed to respond to incidents of police abuse with appropriate disciplinary measures or criminal proceedings." Alkatiri dismissed the findings as "too negative".

This state of affairs in East Timor is an indictment of all those who politically supported the Australian-led takeover in 1999, claiming it was a humanitarian mission to bring liberation to the Timorese people. The Howard government, on behalf of Australian corporate interests, deployed troops to ensure control over the resources of the Timor Sea and assert Australian predominance in the South Pacific as a whole. The fate of the Timorese masses was never a consideration.

Coming just one week after the eruption of political unrest in the Solomon Islands—which was answered with the dispatch of Australian troops—the riots in Dili have provoked concern in the Australian establishment that its client states in the region are coming undone.

Kevin Rudd, foreign affairs spokesman for the opposition Labor Party, called on the Howard government to ask for immediate UN assistance to mediate between the Fretilin government and the rebel soldiers. He told journalists: "There is a grave risk that events in our immediate region are beginning to spiral out of control. We cannot allow this situation to deteriorate any further. East Timor is a very close and important neighbour and a huge amount of Australian foreign policy capital and financial capital has

gone into establishing an independent East Timor."

Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone warned of an "influx of people seeking to arrive in Australia unlawfully" if East Timor descended into greater turmoil or civil war.

Indicative of the neo-colonial mentality that now prevails in Canberra, the Howard government has immediately begun preparing to re-deploy Australian troops and police to shore up the Fretilin regime. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer told journalists that Australian forces would not be dispatched "unless we were invited to do so by the East Timorese". East Timorese Foreign Minister Ramos Horta obligingly announced on Tuesday that he had spoken to Downer about seeking an increase in the number of UN trainers and advisors from 90 to 200. Most of these personnel are Australian. Horta said his government could "use further assistance from Australia".

If the situation continues to deteriorate, a request by the East Timorese government for a large-scale return of Australian troops and police is possible. Unlike 1999, however, when the population generally welcomed the Australian force, they would now be viewed as the defenders of a corrupt government and enforcers of a neo-colonial operation.

The concern in Australian ruling circles was epitomised by the editorial in Monday's *Australian*, the flagship newspaper of Rupert Murdoch's News Limited. While the paper absurdly blamed "rabble-rousing local politicians who have painted Canberra as greedy in negotiations over how to carve up the revenue from the oil and gas fields", it warned, "Australia's reputation with the East Timorese has deteriorated".

More than six years since the Australian intervention, it is self evident to most East Timorese that the concern of the Howard government was not their welfare, but control of lucrative natural resources.



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