

# Australian government ignores growing social disaster in East Timor

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10 August 2006

The events of the last month have confirmed that the Australian military intervention in East Timor was never motivated by the slightest concern for the East Timorese people. Having put troops on the ground, ousted Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri and installed Jose Ramos-Horta in his place, the Howard government has achieved its immediate objectives and moved on to next business.

However, the social crisis confronting the population of the tiny impoverished state remains. According to UN Humanitarian Coordinator Finn Reske-Nielsen, an estimated 150,000 people are still displaced after fleeing violence stirred up since April by opponents of Alkatiri's Fretilin government. Some 72,000 people are still receiving food aid in Dili and another 80,000 people are displaced outside the capital.

Most refugees are living in squalid conditions in makeshift camps, too scared to return home. Reske-Nielsen told AFP that many feel the fundamental issues are unresolved, saying: "The political issues are still there, there are still a number of weapons out in the population, the people who committed crimes during the crisis have not been prosecuted—those are some of the factors, but on top of that the situation is still somewhat volatile."

Some 17,000 refugees are crammed into a convent in Balide on the outskirts of Dili, with 2,000 living under nothing more than tarpaulins. The remainder shelter in aid agency tents or inside the convent buildings. According to the camp director, four children and one adult have died of preventable diseases since May. "I and my family still want to stay here because there is no security guarantee for us," Paolo Soares, whose youngest daughter died of diarrhoea, told AFP.

Ramos-Horta has declared that his top priority to get people to return to their homes but with gangs still roaming the streets they have refused to do so. Last weekend between 300 to 400 youth armed with crude weapons, including slingshots and rocks, were involved in a series of violent incidents. Australian-led troops and police arrested around 40 over three days. In one instance, young gang members forced their way into a church and screamed "kill all easterners". In another case, 19 men were arrested as they allegedly planned to attack one of Dili's refugee camps.

In May, such incidents were splashed over the front pages of

every Australian newspaper as Canberra sought to establish a pretext and the political climate at home for its military intervention in East Timor. Having achieved its political ends, the Howard government is now silent on the continuing social catastrophe in East Timor and the media barely reported last weekend's violence. The Australian military has begun withdrawing some of its troops, making clear that the clashes in Dili were never the real reason for their presence.

In fact, Canberra's barely disguised aims of ousting Alkatiri only encouraged Fretilin's political opponents to deliberately stir up so-called ethnic tensions between "westerners" and "easterners". The violent attacks on "easterners" were above all against Fretilin and its supporters, which, during its long struggle against Indonesian repression, were based in the mountainous east. A WSWs correspondent from East Timor noted recently: "If you were a resident in Dili you would have noticed that the houses that were burned down were predominantly the homes of Fretilin supporters and militants."

Behind many of the youth gangs in Dili are anti-Fretilin figures—politicians, businessmen and military "rebels". Following an attack on a UNICEF aid worker in a refugee camp, the UN body issued a statement condemning the "manipulation of children to commit these violent acts". It expressed "great concern" over "the abuse of children in political protests, in destruction of properties and in wielding weapons to inflict harm on others."

An article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* indicated that supporters of rebel officer Alfredo Reinado were involved in last weekend's violence. Prior to Alkatiri's resignation on June 26, Reinado featured prominently in the Australian media as a spokesman for rebel soldiers and police and was treated with kid gloves by the Australian military. He openly supported the Australian intervention and clashes between his soldiers and those loyal to the Fretilin government provided the immediate excuse for Canberra to dispatch troops in late May.

Reinado was arrested on July 27 after the discovery of an arms cache following the expiry of an amnesty to turn in illegal weapons. Portuguese police found the firearms in houses being illegally occupied by Reinado's men across the street from Australian military headquarters in Dili. He has since been charged with a number of offences, including attempted

murder, embezzlement and theft. His arrest sparked protests by gangs of youth, 12 of whom were arrested for stoning a refugee camp in Dili.

The Australian press has all but ignored Reinado's arrest, no doubt preferring to forget its promotion of him as a legitimate opponent of the Alkatiri government. The fact that Reinado was ensconced in houses near Australian military headquarters only raises more questions about his relations with Australian authorities prior to, during and immediately after the intervention. Reinado spent part of his exile in Australia before returning to East Timor after the independence referendum in 1999 and last year trained at the Australian defence academy in Canberra.

The chief priorities of the Howard government remain what they have been all along: to establish a strong military and political presence in Dili and to ensure that Australia retains the lion's share of the benefits from oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea. Nothing is being done to alleviate the appalling poverty afflicting the majority of East Timorese, now exacerbated by the displacement of almost a fifth of the country's population.

Reflecting his allegiance to Canberra, Ramos-Horta declared, before assuming office on July 10, that Australia should lead any new UN mission to East Timor. Immediately after his installation, he announced that one of his top priorities would be to ensure that the East Timorese parliament ratified an agreement signed in January between the two countries over the division of Greater Sunrise, by far the largest of the Timor Sea oil and gas fields. It was Alkatiri's refusal to buckle to Canberra's bullying in negotiations, as well as his turn to other countries—including China and Australia's rival for influence, Portugal—that prompted the Howard government to move against him.

A month later, Ramos-Horta has still not presented the agreement to the parliament, reflecting continued opposition, not only among MPs but the broader population, to the Australian government's seizure of resources that, under international law, should belong to East Timor. In Kuala Lumpur late last month for a meeting of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), he renewed his pledge to submit the treaty quickly and assured Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer that he was confident it would pass. To date, he has not done so.

Ramos-Horta's cabinet is anxious to attract foreign investors. An article last month in the *Australian Financial Review* entitled "Timor back in business" reported that a team of executives from the Australian resources giant Santos met with the prime minister just days after he was sworn in. The company has signed a major deal with Dili to explore the Jahal Kuda Tasi oilfield in the Timor Sea. Timorese authorities are expected to shortly announce the winners of new offshore oil and gas exploration rights.

Natural Resources Minister Jose Teixeira told the *Australian*

*Financial Review*: "Our message to foreign investors is, check with those doing business in Timor. The troubles were localised to Dili. It's well known that not one foreign business was touched." These comments from Teixeira, known as a supporter of Alkatiri, are designed to assure investors that Fretilin, which retains a parliamentary majority and a strong cabinet presence, will not obstruct the exploitation of East Timor's resources.

The Howard government is determined to maintain a government in Dili that is sympathetic to Australian economic and strategic interests. Canberra is pushing for a prominent role in a new UN mission in East Timor, due to be announced later this month. Under the current Australian-led occupation, efforts are continuing to prosecute Alkatiri and former interior minister Rogerio Lobato on trumped-up charges of arming hit squads to intimidate and murder political opponents.

Alkatiri appeared for questioning at the prosecutor-general's office last month but is yet to be charged. According to an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on July 26, Lobato has retracted admissions that he provided arms to Vincente "Railos" da Conceicao, alleging that Australian soldiers coerced him into making false declarations in court. The hit squad claims, which were the subject of a lurid expose by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Four Corners" program, are based on the dubious statements of Railos and his supporters, who are openly hostile to Alkatiri and Lobato.

The political situation in Dili remains highly volatile. While Ramos-Horta has been installed, his cabinet is yet to implement any major policy, including the government budget and the oil and gas treaty with Australia. President Xanana Gusmao, who, along with Ramos-Horta, led the campaign to oust Alkatiri, retains significant powers under a state of emergency that has been extended to the end of August by the unelected Council of State. In these conditions, the Howard government is intent on maintaining a military and police force in East Timor to guarantee the interests of Australian imperialism.



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