

Two East Timorese protestors killed by Australian troops

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2 March 2007

The killing of two East Timorese men by the Australian military on February 23 at a refugee camp near the Dili airport points to the real motivation behind the Howard government's East Timor intervention.

Australian troops shot and killed Jacinto Soares, 32, on the spot. Atoy Dasy, 36, died in hospital the next day. A third man, 40-year-old Geraldo Martins, remains in a critical condition in hospital. The director of Dili Guido Valadares hospital, Antonio Caleres, told the news agency Adnchronos International (AKI) that Jacinto was shot in the head and Atoy in the chest. Shots to the head and chest are intended to kill.

The three men were among a crowd of protestors throwing rocks and other objects at Australian troops and UN police outside the Internally Displaced People (IDP) camp adjacent to the airport. The East Timorese government and international security forces have been trying to evict the 8,000 terrified and defiant residents, who have nowhere else to live.

Jeff Kingston, a visiting academic, described the tense situation prior to the clash to the *Japan Times*: "Despair peered at me through the chain-link fence separating the airport from a refugee camp of nearly 8,000 internally displaced people (IDP). And from behind this forlorn façade of despair, angrier IDPs threw rocks at security personnel and their vehicles guarding the air terminal."

The very fact that tens of thousands of refugees in Dili are still living in these squalid conditions makes a mockery of the Howard government's claim that it sent troops to East Timor to help the people. The real purpose of last year's military intervention was to secure the interests of Australian imperialism for resources and regional influence, against its rivals, especially Portugal and China, and to suppress all local opposition to its agenda. The killings underscore the increasingly brutal character of this operation.

A refugee spokesman told Reuters that clashes broke

out when Australian soldiers tried to arrest some of the residents protecting the camp: "They resisted by throwing rocks at the Australian soldiers, who responded with shots and came inside the camp using an armoured vehicle. They dragged out those who were wounded and dead."

On Monday, an angry funeral procession for the two dead men walked and drove through the streets of Dili. Fifty heavily armed UN police prevented the mourners from walking with the men's bodies to the Australian embassy building. According to media reports, anywhere from 500 to 3,000 people participated, including the men's families. Reflecting the hostility and bitterness toward the Australian forces, trucks accompanying the funeral procession bore slogans such as "Australian army get out of East Timor". A letter protesting the killings was later delivered to the embassy.

East Timorese authorities have rushed to assure local residents that the deaths will be properly probed, while the United Nations Integrated Mission in East Timor (UNMIT) has said that UN Police (UNPOL) are already investigating. No confidence can be placed in such inquiries, however, which will almost certainly exonerate the Australian troops.

Brigadier Mal Rerden, the Australian Commander of the International Security Forces (ISG) in East Timor, has already publicly cleared the soldiers involved and announced that they have returned to duty. Even before any official investigation, Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer claimed that the soldier who killed Soares acted in "self-defence" after steel arrows were fired at him.

An opposition member of the Timorese parliament, Antonio Ximenes, who is the brother-in-law of Atoy Dasy, has told the media that people at the camp disputed the Australian claims. "The people say soldiers fired tear gas at them and then fired shots," he said. Ximenes, the leader of the Christian Democratic Party, has called for an

inquiry into “a crime against the rights of the East Timorese people”.

In the wake of the shootings, Downer callously declared that the incident “doesn’t come as a great surprise” given the instability in Dili in the past week. His remark simply highlights the extent to which the 930 ISG troops—800 Australian and 130 New Zealand—and the 1,000 UN police, mostly Portuguese, are there to suppress mounting social discontent and prop up the government.

In the two days before the shooting, Australian and other international security forces in Dili arrested 117 people in clashes with camp residents who resisted eviction and hungry people attempting to take rice from government warehouses. Several UN police have been injured and some 50 UN vehicles damaged by rocks thrown at them. In one incident, 700 bags of rice were taken from a Dili warehouse.

On February 22, the day before the fatal clash, a crowd of people burnt cars and attacked buildings belonging to the government and the UN. A UN police commander in Dili, Leitao da Silva, said 17 government cars and three UN vehicles were torched, “as well as about 20 houses”. UNPOL forces were deployed to guard two main rice warehouses, where people had stoned police while trying to break in.

Australian troops were dispatched to East Timor last May, not to ease the plight of ordinary working people, but to oust Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri, whom Canberra viewed as an obstacle to its economic and strategic interests. The Alkatiri government only reluctantly agreed, after years of bullying, to allow Australia to retain control over the lion’s share of the oil and gas reserves beneath the Timor Sea. Moreover, Alkatiri was looking to other quarters, notably Portugal, the former colonial power, and China to participate in drilling and refining East Timor’s undersea fields.

The full story of the Australian government’s role in provoking the political turmoil that became the pretext for its military intervention has not yet been fully told. When Alkatiri refused to resign, charges were fabricated by his opponents and aired by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that he had recruited a “death squad” to assassinate his political rivals. Alkatiri was pressured to step aside and was replaced by Jose Ramos-Horta, who immediately expressed his loyalty to Canberra.

Nine months on, the fabricated charges against Alkatiri have been quietly dropped. At the same time, 100,000 of the 150,000 people displaced during last year’s political crisis are living in appalling conditions in flood-prone

IDP camps. Most cannot leave because their homes have been destroyed or occupied and their extended families are too poor to provide for them. Drought has caused food shortages and high levels of malnutrition across the half-island of about a million people. An estimated 40 percent of the population was already living below the official poverty line of 55 US cents a day.

Yet, the UN and Horta’s government, with Canberra’s backing, are trying to close the refugee camps and threatening to end official food relief, in order to save money and force the displaced people to fend for themselves. According to a report in the *Japan Times* on February 22, the authorities are “worried that having settled in, the IDPs were becoming far too comfortable with running water and regular meals”.

The entire political and media establishment is complicit in the Howard government’s neo-colonial operation in East Timor, and the latest killings have, predictably, produced not a word of protest. While posturing as opponents of Australia’s participation in the occupation of Iraq, the Labor Party and the Greens back every military intervention in the Pacific to the hilt—from East Timor in 1999, to the Solomons in 2003 and 2006, and the Timor operation last year.

The Australian working class has a responsibility to oppose the Howard government’s neo-colonial agenda and the daily injustices it is carrying out against the peoples of the Pacific. We urge all working people and youth to support the Socialist Equality Party’s campaign for the New South Wales state elections, and our demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Australian troops and officials from East Timor and the South Pacific as a whole.



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