

Australian troops escalate repression in East Timor

Patrick O'Connor, SEP candidate for Marrickville, NSW (Australia)
13 March 2007

The Australian military shot dead five rebel soldiers in East Timor on March 4, during an operation supposedly aimed at capturing former major Alfredo Reinado. The deaths came just over a week after Australian soldiers killed two internally displaced refugees in East Timor's capital, Dili. The mounting death toll, which comes amid heightened social unrest and growing anti-Australian sentiment, testifies to Canberra's willingness to step up violence and repression in order to consolidate its neo-colonial occupation.

The Howard government secretly dispatched 100 SAS troops to East Timor on March 3. It remains unclear whether the East Timorese government authorised, or was even informed about, the troop build-up. The elite soldiers were supposedly sent to lead the Reinado operation, but Canberra has not explained why the 800 Australian and 120 New Zealand troops already stationed in the country were not sufficient to arrest the former military commander and his men. There is little doubt that Canberra has seized upon the raid on Reinado's base as a means of strengthening its grip on East Timor by ramping up troop numbers.

The exact circumstances of the March 4 operation are unclear and many questions remain unanswered. In the middle of the night, scores of heavily armed Australian troops, backed by a platoon of New Zealand soldiers as well as two Black Hawk helicopters and three armoured personnel carriers, attacked Reinado's base in the central mountain town of Same, south of Dili. Five of his supporters were killed in the ensuing battle, but Reinado and many others escaped into the jungle.

How the former major was able to escape has not been explained. The SAS troops had superior arms and equipment, including night-vision goggles. In the weeks leading up to the operation, Australian forces had extensive surveillance opportunities in Same and had blockaded Reinado's base for six days before the raid.

Those few media reports that have described the operation raise more questions than they answer. On March 5, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported: "The Australian-trained rebel [i.e. Reinado] knew they were coming and had sent at least six phone messages to journalists and diplomats. 'We are on alert to take any kind of attack,' he said shortly before the assault." On March 8, *Time* stated: "Less than 30 minutes after the gun battle began, the Australians for reasons as yet unknown stopped firing and pulled back, allowing Reinado and his surviving men to escape through the thick rainforest on the western side of the hill."

There is every possibility that the Australian forces never intended to capture Reinado. After all, the former major has played a highly valuable role for Canberra in the past. In May 2006, Reinado helped provide the necessary pretext for the deployment of Australian troops in East Timor.

The "major" is a highly dubious figure with close ties to the Australian military. He became a fugitive last May after he and his supporters deserted the army and attacked troops loyal to the government of former Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri. The Howard government used the ensuing unrest as a pretext for dispatching hundreds of Australian troops to the impoverished country and forcing Alkatiri out of office. After the ABC's "Four Corners" broadcast lurid and completely baseless allegations that Alkatiri had formed a hit squad to murder his opponents, he resigned on June 26 and was succeeded by Canberra's favoured candidate, Jose Ramos-Horta.

Alkatiri's crime, as far as the Howard government was concerned, was his attempt to counter Australia's influence by securing the patronage of China, Portugal, and other rival powers. The Fretilin prime minister had also pressured the Howard government into issuing a number of limited, though significant, concessions on the division of Timor's oil and gas revenues.

Reinado was feted at the time in the Australian press and, enjoying the patronage of President Gusmao, lived something of a charmed life in East Timor up until his arrest on weapons charges by Portuguese police on July 26. The house Reinado used to store the arms was directly opposite an Australian military base. In an episode which raised further questions regarding Canberra's collusion, Reinado was somehow able to literally walk out of prison on August 30. He then continued his anti-government campaign from the mountains, accusing Ramos-Horta of being beholden to Fretilin.

The killing of Reinado's men sparked an immediate response, under conditions where tensions were already high following the fatal shootings of the two men in Dili on February 23. Reinado's supporters in Dili fought running battles with the predominantly-Portuguese UN police, while gangs of young people armed with sticks and rocks in the capital chanted, "Down with Australia" and erected street barricades by burning car tyres.

A series of media reports has highlighted the level of anti-Australian sentiment among Dili's criminal gangs, many of which have connections with right-wing anti-government forces tied to the Catholic Church and parliamentary opposition parties. On

March 5, about 20 young people attacked the Dili Club, an Australian-owned restaurant and bar frequented by foreigners. Police also dispersed 500 protestors who attempted to demonstrate outside the fortified Australian embassy. The department of foreign affairs has since advised Australian “non-essential personnel” to evacuate the country.

The reasons are not hard to find. The Howard government’s military-led interventions into East Timor in 1999 and 2006 were never driven by “humanitarian” concerns for the country’s people. On the contrary, they were aimed at defending the economic and geo-strategic interests of the Australian ruling elite. Above all, Howard’s concern was to ensure that Australian corporations could continue their plunder of Timor’s multi-billion dollar oil and gas reserves by minimising the influence of rival powers, primarily Portugal and China.

Canberra has done nothing to improve the lives of ordinary East Timorese. Poverty and unemployment are endemic, and an estimated 100,000 people (out of a total population of one million) remain classified as “internally displaced”. Recent rice shortages have heightened fears of hunger and malnutrition. The appalling social conditions, combined with the occupying forces’ highly aggressive tactics, have stoked opposition to the Australian-led occupation, particularly among unemployed men in Dili and other urban centres.

Canberra’s response to the growing unrest has been to step up its repression. The killing of Reinado’s five men is undoubtedly meant as a warning, designed to terrorise the population into accepting the ongoing occupation of the tiny “independent” state. Australian forces now enjoy sweeping powers due to a directive issued by President Xanana Gusmao on March 6 authorising foreign police and soldiers to carry out searches and arrests without warrant and to break up any public meetings or gatherings.

Such measures will no doubt be utilised in the lead up to the presidential election scheduled for April 9 and the parliamentary elections due shortly after. Canberra has been conducting a series of behind-the-scenes manoeuvres aimed at securing a favourable outcome. Prime Minister Ramos-Horta has announced his candidacy for president, while President Gusmao intends to become prime minister. Gusmao is currently forging a new political party and hopes to oust Fretilin with the assistance of the existing right-wing opposition parties. The president has an established record of facilitating Australia’s interventions into East Timor, while Ramos-Horta has long standing ties with Canberra. Last month he secured the long-delayed parliamentary ratification of a deal allowing Australia to continue its exploitation of the “Greater Sunrise” oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea.

The presidential and parliamentary elections are being held amid intensifying great power rivalry in East Timor, with Canberra becoming increasingly concerned about the expanding economic and diplomatic influence of China.

“China has wooed East Timor’s leaders with all-expenses-paid trips to China, established tentative relations with East Timor’s army, including donating equipment such as tents and uniforms, and has paid for at least six army officers to be trained in China,” an article in the *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* newspapers reported last Saturday. The lengthy piece noted that PetroChina,

“one of China’s largest state-owned energy companies”, has financed an oil and gas seismic study in East Timor, and also warned that China could eventually control East Timor’s sea lanes, potentially allowing Beijing to “isolate Australian territorial and military assets”.

The Howard government’s response has been to utilise military force and openly flout the principle of national sovereignty in order to secure Canberra’s dominant position. The recent killings mark a watershed and indicate that the Australian government is prepared to eliminate anyone standing in the way of its neo-colonial strategy, in East Timor and throughout the South Pacific.

The entire political and media establishment in Australia is complicit in the Howard government’s crimes. Despite the current New South Wales state election campaign and a federal election due later this year, none of the parliamentary parties—including Labor, Greens, and Democrats—have raised the East Timorese killings in the media or in parliament. Their silence again demonstrates their complete support for Australia’s occupation of East Timor. The middle class protest organisation Socialist Alliance likewise opposes the demand for the withdrawal of Australian forces, thereby becoming an accomplice of the Howard government’s intervention. The organisations which now make up the Socialist Alliance played a critical political role in facilitating Canberra’s initial military intervention in 1999, when they helped organise “troops in” rallies.

The Socialist Equality Party is the only party contesting the New South Wales election that has raised as a central demand the withdrawal of all Australian forces from East Timor and the South Pacific, as part of our principled opposition to Canberra’s neo-colonial aggression. The SEP opposes the ongoing theft of East Timor’s natural resources and demands the revision of every existing oil and gas deal in accordance with East Timor’s legitimate maritime boundaries. The tiny statelet must be fully compensated for revenue already stolen by Canberra and by Australian oil and gas companies. A massive aid program must also be initiated to lift the Timorese people out of poverty and provide them with decent health, education, and other essential social services.

The SEP calls upon the Australian working class to oppose the Howard government’s crimes in the region and to take up a political struggle against Canberra’s agenda of militarism and war. The working people of Australia and the impoverished masses of the Pacific share a common interest in opposing Canberra’s predatory activities in the region, which are inevitably being accompanied by a wholesale attack on democratic rights at home. We call on all workers, youth, and students to support the Socialist Equality Party and its campaign in the New South Wales state election, and to give serious consideration to joining its ranks.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact