

East Timor: Hunt for “rebel” military leader called off

Patrick O'Connor
20 April 2007

East Timorese presidential candidate and current prime minister, Jose Ramos-Horta, announced on Tuesday that he was calling off the pursuit by Australian soldiers of “rebel” military leader Alfredo Reinado. The former major is wanted for attempted murder and illegal firearms possession, charges relating to his mutiny and attacks on government forces in May last year. Reinado, who has close links with the Australian military and President Xanana Gusmao, played a significant role in Canberra’s campaign last year to unseat former Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri. The decision to suspend the pursuit and negotiate terms for a voluntary surrender raises further questions about Reinado’s provocative record.

Ramos-Horta’s announcement comes amid ongoing political manoeuvring in the aftermath of the first round of the presidential election on April 9. The national electoral commission released its final tally on Thursday, with Fretilin’s Francisco “Lu-Olo” Guterres winning the highest vote of 27.9 percent. Ramos-Horta won just 21.8 percent and finished only marginally ahead of rival opposition candidate Fernando “La Sama” de Araujo, on 19.2 percent. The losing candidates have threatened to challenge the results in the courts before the run-off ballot between the two leading candidates is held next month.

There is no doubt that Ramos-Horta’s decision to suspend the search for Reinado is bound up with his desperate attempt to secure support in the second round of voting. The initial ballot revealed that despite his constant promotion in the Australian media, Ramos-Horta has no genuine social base. He won relatively few votes outside the capital, Dili. With East Timor’s eastern districts solidly pro-Fretilin, Ramos-Horta aims to increase his vote in the western districts. For this, De Araujo’s support is critical, as he received almost all of his electoral support from this area. Ramos-Horta’s announcement that the pursuit of the former major was being called off came just days after he declared his intention to meet with the losing candidates, including de Araujo.

Reinado had publicly backed de Araujo’s presidential

campaign, as had wide sections of the most right-wing layers of East Timorese society, including the Catholic Church. Father Martinho Gusmao, the Church’s representative on the national electoral commission, publicly endorsed de Araujo days before the vote. De Araujo has close connections with leading figures associated with the Indonesian military and the pro-Indonesian militias who inflicted widespread destruction in 1999 during the independence referendum. By calling off the pursuit of Reinado, Ramos-Horta was issuing an appeal to these reactionary elements to support his bid for the presidency on an anti-Fretilin platform.

The prime minister, however, could not have acted without the prior knowledge and permission of the Australian forces in East Timor. About 1,100 Australian troops, including at least 100 elite SAS forces, continue to occupy East Timor. They were initially dispatched in May last year, after the Howard government seized upon unrest in Dili, which had been partly instigated by Reinado and his men, in order to extend its control over the country and Timor Sea oil and gas. The troop deployment was portrayed as a humanitarian operation but, like the 1999 military intervention, was driven by the economic and strategic interests of the Australian ruling elite.

The Howard government’s first aim was to oust Alkatiri, who was viewed as an obstacle to these interests. The Fretilin leader had developed close ties with Portugal and China and had also forced Canberra to make some limited, though costly, concessions relating to its exploitation of the Greater Sunrise gas field. Alkatiri resigned in June after ABC television’s “Four Corners” accused the prime minister of forming a “hit squad” to assassinate his opponents. These charges have since been dropped due to lack of evidence. Reinado similarly alleged that before he mutinied, Alkatiri had ordered him to fire on anti-government demonstrators. Again, no proof was provided.

The exact nature of Reinado’s connections with Canberra remains unclear. He lived and worked in Australia in the 1990s, returning to East Timor in 1999 after the Indonesian

government agreed to hold a referendum allowing formal independence. After joining the East Timorese armed forces, Reinado received military training in Canberra. His wife and children still live in Australia.

Australian troops made no effort to detain Reinado after they landed in East Timor last May. With the encouragement of President Gusmao, Reinado and his men had withdrawn from Dili to their base in the central mountains. He remained a public figure, issuing regular denunciations of the Fretilin government, for which he was feted in the Australian press. Gusmao's staffers, media personnel and Australian soldiers were regular visitors. After Reinado was arrested on weapons charges by Portuguese police last July, it emerged that the house used to store these weapons was directly opposite an Australian military base in Dili.

In another highly dubious development, a month after his arrest, Reinado was able to literally walk out of Dili's prison. East Timor's Justice Minister Domingos Sarmiento alleged that New Zealand forces guarding the gaol had been withdrawn just days before the breakout, while Ramos-Horta reported that Australian authorities had turned down several requests for troops to be posted outside the facility. Both Canberra and Wellington denied responsibility for the incident.

In the months after his "escape," Reinado continued to issue various public statements. He accused Ramos-Horta of being weak and too dependent on Fretilin. In this way, the former major served as a useful means for Canberra to maintain the pressure on the East Timorese government and parliament.

In February, President Gusmao and Prime Minister Ramos-Horta negotiated a deal with Reinado on his surrender, but this collapsed after the parliamentary president (and now candidate for president proper), Fretilin's Francisco Guterres, rejected the agreement because it was unconstitutional. Ramos-Horta subsequently authorised an Australian military raid. The Howard government dispatched an additional 100 SAS troops for the operation, and on March 4, Australian and New Zealand forces attacked the former major's base in the central mountain town of Same. Five of his followers were shot dead, although Reinado again managed to escape.

How this happened has never been explained. Dozens of heavily armed and highly trained special forces, backed up by military helicopters and armoured personnel carriers, launched the operation in the middle of the night. Despite having monitored the area for weeks and being equipped with night vision goggles, the troops were unable to prevent Reinado and the majority of his men from disappearing.

The most plausible explanation is that the Australian operation was never aimed at capturing Reinado. It is

unlikely that Australian forces have subsequently made any genuine efforts to capture him. While military spokesmen insisted that troops, including the SAS personnel, were "on the hunt" for Reinado, the fugitive continued to issue public statements and grant interviews to the media during the presidential election campaign. An ABC "Foreign Correspondent" camera crew met him in the jungle less than a fortnight after the raid in Same. There is no doubt that Australian intelligence could have pinpointed his location had they wanted to; an entire Australian agency, the Defence Signals Directorate, is devoted to monitoring overseas electronic communications.

Ramos-Horta's announcement that the "pursuit" was now being called off was barely reported in the Australian media and has met with no official response from the Howard government or the Australian military. A spokesperson for the foreign ministry in Canberra told the *World Socialist Web Site* that they would not comment because it was an issue for the defence ministry, while the defence ministry insisted it was an issue for the East Timorese government.

No announcement has been made of any withdrawal of Australian personnel, including the 100 SAS troops the government claimed were needed for the Same raid. Such an announcement is unlikely until the elections are finalised. The real reason for the troop build up was to bolster Australia's military forces in preparation for the presidential election as well as the parliamentary vote scheduled for June 30. Having expended considerable resources on ousting Alkatiri last year, Canberra is determined to prevent Fretilin from regaining power. The Howard government hopes to ensure the defeat of Guterres in next month's run-off ballot and then engineer an anti-Fretilin government based on President Gusmao's new party, the National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT), after the parliamentary vote.

These plans rely upon election results going Canberra's way. If they do not, there is every possibility that East Timor will be plunged back into violence. The Australian military is already playing an increasingly aggressive role and there will no shortage of pretexts and provocations in the next period, particularly with Reinado now enjoying a free hand.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact