

East Timor: Plot thickens as leader of alleged “coup” attempt surrenders

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Gastao Salsinha, the alleged co-leader of what was labelled an assassination or coup attempt against President Xanana Gusmao and Prime Minister Jose Ramos-Horta on February 11, surrendered to authorities in Dili on Tuesday. Salsinha is specifically accused of attacking Gusmao's vehicle after former major Alfredo Reinado was shot dead by soldiers at Ramos-Horta's residence. The former army lieutenant denies these allegations and insists that neither he nor Reinado tried to orchestrate a coup or assassination.

Salsinha's surrender comes amid additional revelations that cast further doubt over official explanations for the murky events of February 11, and again point to the possibility that Reinado himself was set up for assassination.

Salsinha had been on the run with about a dozen of his men in Timor's western districts since the alleged attack on Gusmao. He previously led the 600 soldiers known as the “petitioners”. Their 2006 mutiny precipitated widespread violence that resulted in 150,000 Timorese fleeing their homes. The unrest was followed by an Australian military intervention and the ousting of the Fretilin government led by Mari Alkatiri.

Salsinha formally agreed to surrender last Friday and spent the next few days in negotiations with authorities in the western town of Gleno. He surrendered in Dili on Tuesday along with 12 fellow ex-soldiers, including Marcel Caetano, who is alleged to have shot Ramos-Horta. Ramos-Horta publicly met the rebel soldiers in Dili as they formally handed over their weapons and submitted to Timorese police in a ceremony held at the Government Palace. With Prime Minister Gusmao in Jakarta for talks with the Indonesian government, Deputy Prime Minister Jose Luis Guterres presided over the surrender and declared it a “historic moment” for East Timor.

Last month Salsinha gave a telephone interview to Australia's SBS television program, “Dateline”. “There are many accusations about us, about Major Alfredo's death and the president being wounded and also the attack on the prime minister,” he said. “They all say that we were planning a coup. But they are lying. Whoever says that is trying to sully our reputation.... I was there but had no intention to launch a coup or harm the prime minister. If we'd planned to harm the prime minister, he would not have made it to Dili.”

Salsinha told “Dateline” that early in the morning of February 11, Reinado, whom he claimed was drunk, ordered his men to accompany him to Dili to meet with Ramos-Horta and Gusmao. Salsinha said he waited along a road leading to Gusmao's house and awaited further instructions while Reinado went to Ramos-Horta's home.

It remains unclear what happened next. Some reports claim that Salsinha received a text message notifying him that Reinado had been shot dead, and that the petitioners' leader then unsuccessfully ambushed Gusmao's motorcade. But government MP Mario Carrascalao has questioned how no one was injured in the alleged ambush, while Mari Alkatiri insists that Fretilin has photographic evidence indicating that the entire incident was

faked.

The “Dateline” program, broadcast on April 16, included an interview with one of Reinado's men, codenamed Teboko, who was involved in the clash at Ramos-Horta's home. Teboko insists that Reinado had an appointment to see the president.

“We had an order from Alfredo not to attack the residence of the president,” he told the SBS program. “It's clear. You can imagine that if we were going to attack him we could have shot him in Maubisse or Suai when we met him [previously]. We did not think of this. It was not in our minds. We had an appointment with the president from Major Alfredo and we were going with two vehicles and we arrived without any weapon discharge. As we know on the FDTL [Timorese military] part, they shoot at us first. They killed Major Alfredo and a member Leopoldino.”

“Dateline” journalist Mark Davis explained: “According to Teboko, about 10 minutes after entering the compound with no gun fire and none threatened, Alfredo Reinado was suddenly shot dead. Meeting closed.”

A similar account was provided by Natalia Lidia Guterres, the widow of Leopoldino, Reinado's man who was also killed in Ramos-Horta's residence. She told the *Australian* that her husband had entered their home at 3 a.m. on February 11 to change his uniform. She told the newspaper that Leopoldino had said, “We are going to meet Señor President”. The article, published on April 19, continued: “Natalia said Leopoldino seemed ‘most happy’ because they were going to work things out at a meeting [Angelita] Pires had arranged.”

The *Australian* also noted that a hand-drawn map of Ramos-Horta's residence was found on Reinado's dead body. The layout details were allegedly provided by Albino Asis, one of Ramos-Horta's military guards who had also worked alongside Reinado in the military police before the 2006 crisis. Telephone records allegedly show Reinado speaking with Asis immediately prior to the alleged attack on Ramos-Horta's residence. The *Australian* suggested that Asis had betrayed Ramos-Horta and was collaborating with Reinado. But if this were the case, why did Reinado enter the president's home looking for him when he was away on his regular morning walk? Asis must have been familiar with Ramos-Horta's schedule.

Also unexplained is the role of another man who worked at Ramos-Horta's office and was seen at Reinado's camp on the night before the February 11 violence. According to “Dateline”, the unidentified individual was a member of a group called MUNJ (Movement for Unity and Justice) which acted as a go-between for Ramos-Horta and Reinado. The SBS program reported: “Since the Horta shooting MUNJ have been particularly coy about their presence in Reinado's camp the night before the attack. It's clear that they were delivering a message from Horta, but it is totally unclear what time they left.”

The official account of what transpired on February 11—that Reinado led a coup or assassination attempt—has fallen apart. It is now virtually certain that the former major went to the president's residence to speak with Ramos-Horta, and may have believed he had an appointment. Why he did

so, and how he came to be killed—up to an hour before Ramos-Horta himself was wounded—remains unclear.

The April 16 “Dateline” broadcast suggested Reinado feared that an amnesty deal, which he had arranged with Ramos-Horta in mid-January, was at risk. Under the terms of this secret agreement, Reinado and his men were to submit to the police, after which Ramos-Horta would issue them a full pardon. But on February 7, Ramos-Horta convened a meeting at his home involving Gusmao, government parliamentarians, and a large Fretilin delegation. The MPs reportedly told Ramos-Horta that he did not have the authority to issue Reinado an amnesty, and that this would have to be discussed in further meetings scheduled for February 12 and 14. “Dateline” suggested that Reinado, having learned of what had been discussed, had gone to Dili to confront Ramos-Horta, whom he thought was preparing to renege on their deal.

This is certainly a possibility. Notably, however, the SBS program failed to acknowledge that the main item on the agenda of Ramos-Horta’s February 7 meeting was not Reinado’s amnesty but rather the formation of a new government. The president had concluded that Gusmao’s government, which was increasingly unpopular and wracked by infighting, was no longer viable. He told the assembled MPs that he agreed with Fretilin’s demand for early elections to be held to resolve the political crisis. Gusmao adamantly disagreed, however, and insisted that his coalition would continue to rule alone.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has previously noted that Prime Minister Gusmao had much to gain from Reinado’s death. In accordance with the old investigative standard *cui bono* (to whose benefit?), the possibility that Gusmao, or forces aligned with Gusmao, may have had something to do with the former major’s elimination cannot be excluded. The events of February 11 certainly resulted in the immediate cancellation of Ramos-Horta’s planned February 12 and 14 meetings, which had threatened to further advance moves to dissolve Gusmao’s government. The prime minister immediately seized upon the violence to claim authoritarian powers under a declared “state of siege” (which will remain in force in Timor’s western districts until late May). Moreover, Reinado’s death came after the former major had released a widely circulated DVD in which he accused Gusmao of directly instigating the 2006 petitioner’s protests that triggered the events culminating in the ousting of Alkatiri’s administration. Reinado had threatened to provide more details of Gusmao’s alleged role in the “regime change” operation.

Reinado had long standing connections with Australia. He resided in the country as a refugee in the 1990s (his wife and children continue to live in Perth), and received military training in Canberra after he had returned to Timor and joined the country’s armed forces. In 2006, Reinado was hailed in the Australian media for his role in destabilising the Alkatiri government, which Canberra considered too closely aligned to China and Portugal. After UN police arrested him on weapons charges, Reinado and his men somehow walked out of a Dili prison being guarded by Australian and New Zealand troops. Australian soldiers, including elite SAS forces, then claimed to be unable to locate and detain the former major as he issued regular public statements and conducted media interviews from his base in Timor’s west. This was completely implausible—Canberra has an extensive network of intelligence agents operating in East Timor, as well as an entire intelligence division, the Defence Signals Directorate, dedicated to monitoring electronic communications.

In the days leading up to Reinado’s killing, the former major made and received 47 telephone calls to Australia. It remains unknown to whom he was speaking. Timorese authorities have expressed frustration over the difficulty they have experienced in getting information from Australian intelligence officials about the voice recordings and text messages they intercepted. Indonesian authorities, on the other hand, immediately provided their intelligence relating to several calls Reinado made to that country.

Timorese investigators are also waiting for information regarding a Darwin bank account, containing up to \$US1 million, that Reinado was able to access. According to East Timor prosecutor-general Longinhos Monteiro, Reinado was informed that the money had been deposited in the account in a text message sent by Angelita Pires, his lover and former go-between with the Australian military. Timorese prosecutors, President Ramos-Horta, Salsinha, and many of Reinado’s men have all accused Pires of manipulating Reinado and provoking the violence on February 11. No criminal charges have yet been laid against her.

Ramos-Horta has publicly demanded that Canberra explain why the million dollar sum went undetected, particularly in light of the automatic reporting alerts that routinely apply to large deposits under Australia’s strict banking laws. He also condemned the Australian government’s lack of action. “Two months [later] and I haven’t seen action to force the bank in Australia to release information,” he told ABC radio. “I want this resolved very, very quickly, otherwise I will take the matter to the UN security council.”

This extraordinary ultimatum was met with assurances from foreign minister Stephen Smith that the relevant information would be shared once “appropriate procedures” were followed by Timorese officials.

The Rudd Labor government’s apparent stonewalling has fuelled rumours in Dili that Australian personnel had a hand in the events of February 11. An April 22 article in the *Australian* noted: “It must disturb Australia—which heads the unloved International Stabilisation Force, which has been taken to sharpen its image by running newspaper advertisements showing a Digger shaking hands with a Timorese kid—that Timorese will interpret the [Darwin-deposited] money claims as powerful proof non-Timorese Australians were backing Reinado and Ms Pires.”

The piece continued: “Things are now skewing sideways, with many Timorese convinced that the February 11 attacks were all about Timor Gap oil and gas, with Australia not content to take the lion’s share it already has and, therefore, somehow trying to execute the Timor leadership in order to grab more money off the struggling country. Ordinary people will advise you quietly, with wide eyes, that this is really a battle between Australia and Indonesia v China.”

These rumours point to the escalating hostility towards the ongoing Australian occupation of East Timor. How credible they are is another matter. One more plausible explanation than Canberra being involved in “trying to execute the Timor leadership” is that Australian officials knew of, and perhaps participated in, a plan to eliminate Reinado. The former major had served his purpose as far as the Australian government was concerned, and was now threatening to help bring down the Canberra-aligned Gusmao government, thereby opening the door for Fretilin to return to power. Having expended significant resources ousting Alkatiri in 2006, this was the last thing Australian strategists wanted.

Salsinha’s surrender has been hailed in the international media as a major step towards peace and stability in East Timor, but the potentially explosive political crisis remains unresolved.

While still recuperating in Australia, President Ramos-Horta said he still feared for his life and was considering stepping down in order to write his memoirs in Paris. Now in Dili, however, he insists he has no intention of resigning. He has repeated his support for early elections to be held at the start of next year, and has also called on Fretilin to form a shadow cabinet, “to contribute to the country’s development”. The move has been interpreted in Dili as an expression of support for a potential Fretilin-led administration. In a speech to the Timorese parliament on April 23, Ramos-Horta said he would pardon Rogerio Lobato, a senior Fretilin MP who was convicted of arming civilians during the 2006 crisis. Lobato’s case formed an important part of bogus allegations issued by the ABC “Four Corners” program that Alkatiri had armed a “hit squad” to assassinate Fretilin’s opponents. The ABC smear job was used by Gusmao and the Australian government to pressure Alkatiri into

resigning.

Ramos-Horta's pledge to provide Lobato with an amnesty has been denounced in the Australian media. His apparent shift away from Gusmao and towards Fretilin will be similarly unwelcome. In all likelihood, Canberra's response will be to step up its back door manoeuvres and dirty tricks aimed at bedding down its significant economic and strategic interests in the tiny, impoverished country.



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