

# Women in East Timor

As in wars around the world, it is the women who have borne much of the suffering under Indonesia's illegal occupation of their country and genocidal actions. But East Timorese women continue to resist the occupation, both actively and behind the scenes.

Untold tens of thousands of women have been murdered, raped, sexually assaulted, tortured, kidnapped and forcibly sterilized since the Indonesian invasion of East Timor in 1975. While it is impossible to speak of all the horrors that the women of East Timor have experienced, the following is a brief overview of some of the crimes experienced specifically by women.

## Rape and Sexual Assault

There are many documented cases of women who have been forced to become local "wives" for the Indonesian military posted in East Timor. This has led to children being conceived through these imposed husbands.

Other women have been raped by Indonesian soldiers in front of their families.

*"Friends of mine living in Manatutu, the husband went to Dili for business. There were a lot of Javanese soldiers there. They knew the husband was away — in a small place everyone knows things — and they went to the house and raped the wife. There were three little kids in the house, very frightened. Nobody could help, this is the army, they shoot you. They take turns to rape the wife while others steal things from the house. When the husband returned he complained to their commander, but none were punished. His wife survived but she was always very sad."* (Testimony of Xavier)

For Timorese people, worse than physical suffering was the moral suffering of these things, the humiliation, taking away the dignity of people. As one Timorese said to Indonesian officers, "Don't you have mothers, sisters, do you know what it means to be human?" Monsignor Martinho da Costa Lopes, a former Bishop of Dili, recounts,

"People came knocking at my door in the day and the night, for years, whispering of terrible things. From 1975 the Bishop's residence was full of girls seeking refuge. In the Comarca prison were women who had all been raped and abused. They told me when I spoke with them. We heard constantly of young girls being abused by soldiers. The Indonesians often use Timorese not as people but as toys, young girls especially. They see a beautiful girl they want, then after they have used her they ignore what happens to her, like a child with a toy."

Many East Timorese women were raped and sexually assaulted while in custody, whether it was in the custody of the police or while being held in jail. Often such rapes result in pregnancy.

## Forced Sterilization, Birth Control and Depo Provera

In 1985, a family planning center funded by the World Bank was built in Dili. Already by that time, 183 of 442 villages in East Timor had family planning centers, and the program most vigorously pursued in East Timor was the family planning program of the Indonesian government.

Contraceptive methods promoted in East Timor and elsewhere include condoms, the Pill, injection of hormones,



IUD and implants, but in East Timor the use of injections (Depo Provera) is proportionately greater than Indonesia. See the below chart for the year 1987 (the latest available figures) produced by the Indonesian Central Information Board.

1987, percentages

|            | The Pill | IUD  | Depo Provera | Condom |
|------------|----------|------|--------------|--------|
| Indonesia  | 48.5     | 24.1 | 19.0         | 4.4    |
| East Timor | 23.0     | 12.6 | 59.7         | 1.4    |

It is not difficult to understand the relationship between population control as a target-based programme and the type of contraceptive promoted. Condoms and the Pill are falling out of favour with the family planning agency (BKKBN) because the effect depends on the decision of the individual, whereas IUDs and implants which can only be inserted and removed by trained medical staff are considered effective. "Effective" is synonymous with "low user control". The long-acting hormonal contraceptive implant Norplant, lasting five years, is termed an "MKE" (metode Kontrasepsi efektif) along with IUDs and sterilization.

The "informed consent", which is essential in any birth control program if it is not to be regarded as a human rights

violation, is often not present, according to East Timorese nurses who have observed East Timorese women being injected (and since emigrated to Portugal). These nurses say that in many cases the women are never even told that the injection they are being given a contraceptive. In one specific case, high school girls were injected with Depo Provera without their knowledge.

It is very difficult to refuse to take part in these programme because village leaders are urged to cooperate, and in some cases it is imposed as the norm where local clinics for birth control are under the supervision of military post. It is nearly impossible for the women of East Timor to protest against the forced birth control. The villages of East Timor are under the de facto control of the Indonesian military, and to protest against forced injections, etc., is to lay oneself open to execution or disappearance.

The World Bank official who was responsible for the birth control program in East Timor stated that "Although at the beginning of the program there may have been excesses or cases of force, now the Indonesian health officials are carrying out proper guidance." The non-governmental Indonesian Family Planning Association has said that they do not have a project in East Timor because "the conditions are not present for carrying out family planning in East Timor."

Given that over 200,000 East Timorese have been killed under Indonesian occupation, it is ludicrous for the Indonesian government to suggest there is an over-population problem in East Timor. In fact, the genocidal policies of Indonesia have been so effective that in 1989 the United Nations awarded the UN Population Award to President Suharto.

Another effective method for keeping the birth rate in East Timor to a minimum results when hospital staff kill

East Timor, people say "We go to the hospital to die". They cannot trust and depend on a hospital.

*"Tragic incidents have been going on every day in the territory. Screams of the innocent echo over the island day and night. To whom should we turn for a little help?"* (Timorese women appeal for international support in 1993)

The forced sterilizations continue even as you read this fact sheet. On October 18, 1994, the Catholic Bishop of East Timor said that Indonesia is carrying out a "systematic sterilization program" of indigenous East Timorese women. In a telephone interview, Bishop Ximenes Belo said that Jakarta's policy is to cut the birth rate and replace the local population with immigrant supporters of its annexation of the territory it disputes with Portugal. "They are forcing people to follow their orders by telling them that if it is the state that feeds the population, it should obey the state and not the church," said Bishop Belo. He claimed that the policy of limiting the birth rate among the Timorese "made no sense" since the Indonesians were "using their migration plan to fill the territory with people from Java and Bali" and did not respect the beliefs of the local population.

## East Timorese Women Indirectly Affected by Indonesia's Occupation

The second category identified relates to women who have been indirectly affected by Indonesia's illegal occupation. These include women whose husbands, children, parents, friends, other relatives who have been killed, tortured or have disappeared. This was reiterated in a recent letter written to Hilary Clinton from a group of mothers in East Timor. One example of these indirect abuses relates to the Indonesian military, which kidnaps male East Timorese children and takes them back to Indonesia to act as servants.

What is happening to the women of East Timor is in direct contravention of many international conventions. These include the Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (which Indonesia has ratified); the UN Charter; the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the International Conventions on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; and directly contravenes the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples.

*"Although we Timorese women have cried out or screamed to the world for help, it seems that we have not screamed hard enough to move the hearts of the leaders of the world and those who are concerned about human rights violations to extend their help to us."* (Timorese women appeal for international support in 1993)



Women's march against poverty, Vancouver, May 1996. East Timorese refugee Bella Galhos at centre, with flag.

new born babies because the child's parents are suspected of belonging to the resistance.

As a result of these and other abuses by hospital staff, many East Timorese — male and female alike — prefer the clinics run by the Sisters over the horrors of the hospital. In

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