

East Timor: History, Testimonies and Perspectives

Max Stahl



I WILL try to convey to the people here, if I may, in this brief talk a little bit about the experiences of somebody who first came to East Timor only three years ago and who, since then, has become involved in the terrible task, the struggle that faces them. It's not an easy task because frankly I could be here for several hours without even covering the basics, but I will try.

As a film-maker and as a journalist, you have to understand a certain number of extremely strange things that condition and define the news in the world. For nearly fifteen or sixteen years East Timor was a non-story. Nobody was interested, if as a film-maker or a journalist you said: 'I want to do something on East Timor', nobody was interested. The reaction was a yawn, or worse, to quote an editor that I spoke to only very recently at the New York Times magazine, 'it was laughter'. They thought the story was funny because East Timor is small and the people of East Timor are not rich. And whatever people might imagine about the news, I think perhaps there are plenty of people here who understand, that the real masters that dictate what is shown and what is not shown in the news are the people with money.

So in 1991 when the United States and other major powers got together to expel Iraq after it invaded Kuwait in the name of the new world order where 'small nations should be free and secure against the ambitions of their big neighbours', in the words of President Bush, I and others began to all had suffered an invasion by a large neighbour and repression far worse than the Kuwaiti themselves suffered at the hands of Iraq, but, in that case instead of being assisted by the actions of the great powers, the great powers assisted instead the invaders. They ensure that the United Nations that their own words condemning the Indonesian invasion were; to quote Senator Patrick Moynihan: 'made ineffectual'. In other words, they were lying. They ensured that the Indonesian army had the best access to the most modern weaponry, whilst the Timorese who had, in the UN's own words, 'the right', had absolutely no way of defending themselves.

When I went to East Timor in 1991, the big story was the visit of the Portuguese delegation. The Portuguese delegation were coming back to East Timor after sixteen years, when, as the legitimate rulers in exile, that is to say outside Portugal, had done almost nothing to actually help the Timorese. By that time in the late 1980's most people thought that they were coming there to sign away East Timor's future to Indonesia.

There were of course some very brave and determined people in Portugal, including some who are here present, who were determined to ensure that these parliamentarians would do such thing. And some of those parliamentarians too were trying to listen at least with an open mind. However, their courage failed them.

And as I was there filming with the Timorese people, with the resistance, specifically the clandestine civilian resistance made up of young people, children some of them, young people, students others and some of the older generations as well, hiding in houses and dodging policemen and the innumerable informers, we got the news that the Portuguese delegation had decided not to come. At this point the East Timorese resistance had exposed itself completely. They were in hiding in different houses and different towns. They had made flags out of bits of cloth and stencilled painted flags, I'd seen them and

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filmed them burying them in their gardens, stuffing them up their shirts and down their trousers, and they were waiting to welcome the Portuguese. Xanana Gusmao himself was in Dili. He had Timorese people mainly unarmed, organized to protect him. Amazing as it might sound, Xanana Gusmao was going to meet the Portuguese delegation in the capital city where the headquarters of the occupation army was located. When this delegation decided that it was not appropriate, too dangerous or not correct to come, the students, the young people and the others had to do something. And they chose to commemorate the death of a young student, a guy whom I knew slightly called Sebastiao, who had been taking refuge from the Indonesian police, who were chasing people all over Timor, threatening them with death, torture, beating them, trying to intimidate them into not talking to the invited delegates. This man had been taking refuge in the church. The church was attacked at night and stoned and he was shot. Two weeks later, in the traditional Timorese way, was the day when they were to commemorate him, and it so happened that particular day the UN special rapporteur on torture, the man who is now Dutch foreign minister, Mr. Kloimans, was visiting Dili. And this was the day chosen to demonstrate. I won't easily forget that morning when I filmed the young people putting these flags, the entire Indonesian occupation force had been trying to find for two years, up their shirts and down their trousers, before going to church that morning to hear mass.

There was a perfect silence and respect. It was a very dramatic mass because only I and others and of course those themselves who were going to participate knew that following this mass the impossible was going to take place. These people were going to walk out into the main street of Dili and take out these flags demanding dialogue asking why the Indonesian army was shooting at the Timorese church, supporting their leader Xanana Gusmao who was hiding underneath a toilet I was told at that time not very far away, and walk down the main street right past the headquarters of the Indonesian army.

No demonstration that I know of had ever been held in East Timor that had not been attacked brutally. So they knew when they did this what the likely outcome might be. They walked down the street, there were thousands of them, I don't know how many, two, three thousand at least, and they got more as they went down.

And the Indonesian reaction, I remember filming it, was one of sheer shock. They couldn't believe it, they looked aghast and they ran into their military bases. At that point of course I didn't know why. And as the demonstration continued, the younger people, some of them as young as six or ten years old, became more and more excited, people jumped up and down, they started shouting. And the leaders of the demonstration had no need whatsoever to shout slogans in the way that we're familiar with in the west. They simply asked for discipline and calm. Repeatedly, they told people not to run. Even when a small group of Indonesian soldiers attacked some demonstrators that was reaction from one of them after told them not to react. In fact there was a very slight altercation that was reaction from one of them after a girl carrying the Timorese national flag was knocked to the ground by one of these Indonesian soldiers, and one Indonesian officer was stabbed along with several demonstrators.

This was the excuse that was given by the Indonesians later for murdering hundreds of people. Because when the demonstrators got to the cemetery, and began to pray for their dead colleague, Sebastiao, and I was at that point inside the cemetery filming the beginning of the prayers and the

procession to his grave, the Indonesian soldiers arrived.

There was none of them there before, there was no confrontation, there was nobody to confront. There wasn't even a demonstration at that time. The people were praying. And they lined them up along the top of the road like an execution squad, and without a single shot or a single shout they opened fire. There was absolutely no time for any confrontation to take place. And I think the Indonesian versions later, which contradicted themselves almost daily, demonstrate clearly, quite aside from the film that I myself took, that this was a murder done in cold blood.

But I went back again in 1993, and I discovered something there, which, if possible, was even more shocking. Because the murder did not end that day. It did not end with the bullets that we've seen here. The massacre that was committed on the street outside Santa Cruz cemetery, like so other massacres before it, which are like bells in a recent history of East Timor, where if I had a map of East Timor here I could point to them, one after the other, all over the territory: the massacre of Caradas, the massacre of the people on Matabian mountains, the massacre of Raytana, so many massacres. It didn't end that day.

The students and the young people who were killed, in some respects were the lucky ones because those who were not killed were ordered to stand up and then stabbed. Those like some, like the man I spoke to for example, and his testimony was confirmed by that of many others who cannot speak openly because they are still in East Timor today. There was a man, this man came to the United Nations and spoke, and I can therefore speak about him straight forwardly. He was not shot at in the opening gunfire. But when the soldiers searched him and found no wounds on him they started to beat him. And they beat him so badly they broke his head and he had so much blood that they thought he was dead. In fact he was unconscious, they put him on a truck along with a pile of body so high that had he been underneath it he would have suffocated. It was more than a meter and a half high.

This was just one of eighteen trucks that took bodies like this to the military hospital. When he got to the military hospital, he and others heard the Indonesian saying: 'those who want treatment now should please stand up.' Two people stood up at the back of the truck and they were stabbed and thrown to the ground like pigs in the slaughterhouse. Some of them that were thrown to the ground were not dead and started to cry and to shout, and the trucks ran over them. They did this under orders, they didn't do it by accident. This guy was so badly beaten and so bloody that he was able to continue to pretend to be dead and he was taken into the mortuary. There he described what exactly what he saw, and I haven't got the time to go through the hours and hours of interviews I did and corroborating evidence.

But believe me, everything he described fits every single fact that it took me to research in more than a year of work on looking into this. And in this mortuary the bodies were piled so high that he couldn't walk without walking on his own colleagues. They were piled as he said like a ton of sand. He described seeing some friends of mine including the New Zealander Kamal. He stood up and the people were not dead some of them in the mortuary and they were asking him for water. But there was no water, there was only blood. And before he could identify more than a few people whom he named to me, the Indo-

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nesians came back and he lay down and pretended to be dead again. And then he saw two Indonesians come in, two soldiers.

I know the names of some of these people because this man was not the only witness. One of them had a large stone like this, a rock, like you'd build houses with in the mountain, he said. And he kicked the bodies and if they moved or shouted he threw the rock onto their heads crushing their skulls. This was seen by more than one person not just by this victim but by other people working in the hospital.

And they also brought poison, they brought a large bottle of pills. I have one of these pills with me. They gave handfuls of these pills to the wounded people. These pills I had analyzed later in London, in the police laboratory are formaldehyde. They are intended for fumigating hospital wards. They are for preserving, in liquid form, bodies. Because formalin, which is the base thing, kills all living matter. To take even a small proportion of one of these pill would be, to quote a doctor: 'dramatically poisonous.' They gave handfuls of these pills to people who were desperately in need of treatment. And they described the symptoms, and not only this man but others did. How the people who received them began to breathe heavily and gradually lose consciousness.

I can go on and on about this but I have written about it and if anybody here is interested in the evidence I have suitcases full of it. But I would like to make one point before I finish. This story that happened in 1991 was not confined to 1991. Of the more than five hundred people who today have lost their relatives from that massacre and the killings in the hospital and in the days shortly afterwards, not one of them have received the remains of their loved ones. Almost none of them had any information at all, about half the number do not know for sure if their people are dead or alive.

I investigated one of these who was supposedly missing. I discovered he'd been wounded, I knew he'd been wounded because I have pictures of him myself from when I was in the cemetery. He was taken to a military hospital where he disappeared. When the people know that, they know that they are probably dead, they know that they must be dead after two years. I'm sure that people here can understand the agony of those families who have lost their fathers and brothers and sisters. Many of them have no means of support today, and when they ask for information they get threats. These people are going through that right now.

And if you listen to the church in East Timor the bishop, for example Bishop Belo who for many years attempted dialogue with Indonesia, you will understand the desperation of the people for any reasonable means to justice. The people of East Timor do not suffer massacres every day today because it is not necessary. They are paralyzed, they have their hands tied, they're terrorized. Their only hope apart from their own determination to resist which is eminently illustrated by the continuing existence of the guerillas whom I also visited, and later on I will show some material about that and talk about them, are those who are outside and especially those who have shared something of their experience such as the Filipino people.

The message I, as a journalist, would like to convey here is that it seems to me that what has gone on in this conference and surrounding this conference has made very clear to anybody with ears to listen that democracy in Southeast Asia is not divisible. It's not for one person to be in jail and terrorized and for his neighbour to call himself a free man.

Max Stahl is an English filmmaker. He was responsible for exposing to the world the massacre in Dili in 1991.

