

EAST TIMOR

It's time to talk

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The case for a new international initiative

The East Timor issue remains fundamentally unresolved both internally and internationally. The East Timorese people are not reconciled to integration with Indonesia and progress internationally towards an acceptable political settlement has been minimal. Trends in Indonesia and internationally, however, have never been so favourable to East Timor. It is time for a new approach: conflict-resolution through dialogue.

1. Talks

The basic proposal is that there be talks between the East Timorese and Indonesia to resolve the conflict. The talks would be round-table, without pre-conditions, and conducted under the auspices of the United Nations. The timetable, location and content of the talks, and who would represent each party, would be the subject of negotiations between the parties. The process would, however, require the participation of the East Timorese resistance. The UN and Portugal would both have substantial roles.

2. Origins

The offer to talk comes from the leader of the East Timorese resistance, Xanana Gusmao. Late last year Xanana told the Australian lawyer Robert Domm: 'I am ready to discuss any project for a solution, without preconditions, under the auspices of the United Nations'. This offer has been repeated in recent months and has been conveyed to the governments of Indonesia, Portugal, Australia and Japan, and to the United Nations. It is consistent with calls for consultation made by the Bishop of East Timor who speaks for 80% of the population.

3. The case for dialogue

The talks proposal is a new approach to a tragic long-running issue. It offers an alternative to continued conflict, violence and repression. It is based on a proper recognition of the East Timorese people's right to self-determination, but also acknowledges Indonesia's concerns and interests. It is not confrontational and does not call for diplomatic, economic or military sanctions. Support for dialogue does not require condemnation of Indonesia or support for East Timorese independence but commitment to a search through democratic processes for a sustainable settlement.

International trends favour this approach.

- 3.1 The renewed quest for self-determination is a widely acknowledged international phenomenon exemplified most vividly in recent times by the Baltic States declaration of independence and the conflict in Yugoslavia. According to John McCarthy, a senior Australian Foreign Affairs official, 'the trend is unmistakeable and probably irreversible'. McCarthy recently told the UN that 'new understandings, structures and institutions' were needed to address the challenge.
- 3.2 Conflict-resolution through dialogue is being widely applied at present to many long-standing issues. Some examples are Palestine, Cambodia, El Salvador, Cyprus, Bougainville, Northern Ireland, Afghanistan.

- 3.3 The UN is giving increasing attention to outstanding decolonisation questions. The 1990s have been declared The Decade for the Eradication of Colonialism. Namibia and Western Sahara are recent beneficiaries. The UN Secretary-General told MPs earlier this year that East Timor enjoys the same status and entitlements as Namibia and Western Sahara.
- 3.4 East Timor remains an issue at the UN on several levels. The UN Secretary-General was mandated in 1982 to find a comprehensive settlement and continues to act on this mandate mainly by facilitating talks on the question between Portugal and Indonesia. The UN will participate in the forthcoming visit to East Timor of a Portuguese Parliamentary mission. The UN Decolonisation Committee addressed the question again in August and the UN's expert on torture will soon visit East Timor.
- 3.5 East Timor is an issue of concern within the European Community and Portugal. The EC is calling for a 'just settlement' in accordance with UN principles and 'the legitimate interest of the East Timorese people'. Portugal, which will chair the EC in 1992, has successfully promoted talks between Angola and UNITA and is involved in EC diplomacy on Yugoslavia. Portugal is currently taking action against Australia in the World Court over the Timor Gap Treaty. East Timor is also a concern in the Japanese Diet and to significant numbers of the US Congress.
- 3.6 The crisis in communism has removed threats from this quarter to Indonesia. Indonesia, which is significantly stronger economically and politically than in 1975, can no longer justify its East Timor policy on these grounds.
- 3.7 The winds of change blowing across the international landscape are also impacting on Indonesia. Indonesia can no longer ignore international and internal pressures for democratisation and respect for human rights. In his recent Independence Day address (17 August), e.g., President Suharto called for more openness and freedom in Indonesia. This should be extended to East Timor and to talks with the East Timorese.

In summary, the international context has changed dramatically since 1975 and offers a significantly more favourable climate for a resolution of the conflict in East Timor than at any point during the last 16 years.

4. Objections

4.1 It's too late.

The successful bid for independence by the Baltic States of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania demonstrates that events can change suddenly and that causes once seen as hopeless in the face of military might can triumph. Other examples can be quoted to challenge the irreversibility argument (the reunion of the Germanies, the political transformation of the Soviet Union and countries like Poland and Czechoslovakia) or to demonstrate what can be achieved when the international community acts collectively and decisively (e.g. the Gulf crisis, South Africa).

4.2 The Indonesian military would never agree to talks.

The Indonesian military do have strong military, economic and emotional interests in East Timor. However, field commanders (with the support of some of their superiors) did engage in talks with Xanana Gusmao in 1983 which led to 3-4 months of ceasefire. The hawkish military line on East Timor is under some challenge from Foreign Affairs officials who want to advance Indonesia's interests internationally and to appear more reasonable on the issue, while proponents of democratisation are questioning the military's dominant role in Indonesia's wider political and economic life. Others, such as University of Gadjah Mada researchers and Australian Parliamentarians who visited East Timor in February 1991, believe that East Timor is suffering from an 'overdose' of the military and should be demilitarised. Like some younger

Indonesians, some elements in the military are less chauvinistic than the older generation who fought for Indonesia's independence.

4.3 Indonesia will never let East Timor go because this would fragment the Republic.

National unity is a major preoccupation, but the uniqueness of the East Timor case should be stressed. Indonesia is based on Dutch colonial boundaries and never claimed East Timor, a Portuguese colony. This is acknowledged by the international community which, through the UN, regards East Timor as a non-self-governing territory entitled to self-determination. These conditions do not apply to other parts of Indonesia. Further, the East Timorese have never laid claim to West Timor and cannot be said to have worked to subvert Indonesia's national unity. People concerned about East Timor respect Indonesia's integrity and are working not to fragment Indonesia but to apply international principles. It is patent nonsense to argue that an independent or autonomous East Timor would be a threat to Indonesia. Indeed, it would be arguably less of a problem than it is now.

4.4 Indonesia considers the East Timor issue an internal affair and will not cooperate with any international initiatives.

Indonesia claims East Timor is its 27th province and routinely protests UN discussion on the issue. In practice, however, Indonesia is less inflexible. (1) It dialogues on the issue with Portugal (with whom it has no diplomatic links) under UN auspices. (2) It will allow a Portuguese and UN team to visit East Timor soon. (3) It has agreed to a visit to East Timor by the UN's expert on torture, Professor Kooijmans. (4) Under international pressure, it has opened up East Timor to visits by journalists, aid agencies and others.

5. Australia

The Foreign Minister, Senator Evans, has rejected any talks mediating role for Australia on the grounds that Australia recognises East Timor as a legal part of Indonesia. According to Senator Evans, the process of 'reconciliation' between the East Timorese and Indonesia is nearly complete and the resistance should surrender. Further, there is no political basis for an initiative because of the lack of international concern. Canberra argues that it can only assist the East Timorese through development projects and representations on individual cases of human rights abuses and that this can only be done if it has a good relationship with Indonesia. Though virtually unheard on the issue, it is thought the Opposition shares this general view.



The following points are relevant:

- 5.1 Supporting talks is not incompatible with Australia's need to have a good relationship with Indonesia. The UN has the primary responsibility to resolve the issue, not Australia, but Australia should not work against the UN as it currently does and should seek opportunities, privately if necessary, to promote the talks proposal both in its dealings with Indonesia and with the power centres of the US, Japan, the EC and the UN. The East Timorese have specifically requested Australia to assist.

- 5.2 The talks proposal is fully consistent with ALP policy on East Timor. At its national conference in June 1991, the ALP 'regretted' there were no proposals in support of self-determination and 'called on the Australian Government to support all international initiatives to settle the East Timor problem'.
- 5.5 The talks proposal is receiving wide support within the Australian community including from bodies such as the ACTU and ACFOA and a range of prominent individuals.
- 5.6 There can be no sustainable or meaningful 'reconciliation', 'development' or 'human rights' in East Timor until the underlying political conflict is honestly addressed.
- 5.7 Australia supports 'talks without preconditions' between Beijing and Tibet, and is promoting conflict-resolution measures on issues such as Yugoslavia, Sri Lanka, Bougainville, Northern Ireland, Cambodia and Western Sahara (to the extent, in the case of the latter two, of providing troops to UN peacekeeping forces).

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