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East Timor – a backgrounder

The 17-year long resistance of East Timor, with its tiny land mass and population, to the rule of Indonesia, the world's fifth most populous country, is a feat of courage and commitment not fully portrayed or admitted to by world governments. Last November's Dili massacre is the most recent of a succession of murderous acts by the Indonesian government in which a greater percentage of the population (about 30%) has died, than in Kampuchea. An estimated 90% of the people have been forcibly resettled.

Historical background

East Timor is the eastern half of a mountainous island of nearly 12,000 square miles, lying in the east of the Indonesian archipelago, some 300 miles north of Australia. It has an area of 7,400 square miles. The island was disputed by the Dutch and the Portuguese, who dominated in the eastern half, from the late 16th century until a treaty signed in 1913 arbitrarily divided it between the two colonial powers. The western half has formed part of Indonesia since the republic was established in 1945.

The centuries of Portuguese rule were a period of neglect, with periodic uprisings against the colonial power. Few roads were built and almost no health or education services introduced. Until recently many of the Melanesian people led a predominantly subsistence lifestyle. Sandalwood and coffee have been the main export. In the 1970s it was estimated that 70% of East Timorese adults were illiterate. Though Portuguese was until recently the official language, indigenous languages are also spoken, of which Tetum is the most important. Before the 1975 invasion by Indonesia, one third of the population were thought to be Catholic. Since then the figure has risen to 80%. The church has been one of the main sources of information since East Timor was closed by the Indonesian government until 1989.

During World War II Australian troops were landed on neutral Portuguese East Timor to prevent it from becoming a stepping stone for Japanese

expansion. In the ensuing battle for the island 40,000 East Timorese and only 40 Australian troops died. In 1974 the population was estimated at 650,000. Since the 1975 invasion 200,000 people are said to have died, through forced resettlement where they died of famine, military operations and arbitrary killings of non-combatants.

The 1975 invasion and subsequent events

The 1970s were a difficult period for Portugal which had problems at home as well as with its colonies in Africa. It therefore began to withdraw from East Timor and prepare it for independence. Fretilin, the "Revolutionary Front for the Independence of East Timor", is the political party that emerged as the most powerful after the brief civil war which ensued. Although including Marxists in its ranks it was not necessarily the hard line socialist party depicted by some western governments. But this provided the excuse for the invasion by Indonesia which feared that an independent state would subvert its authority in other parts of the archipelago, particularly in West Papua (Irian Jaya).

The takeover has never been accepted as legitimate by the United Nations which continues to treat Portugal as the administering power. It was widely believed that the military occupation would be completed in a short time. But Operasi Seroja (Operation Lotus) lasted until August 1977 and involved an estimated 32,000 Indonesian troops. It was followed by Operasi Keamanan (Operation Security) in 1981-2.

Despite major defeats inflicted on the guerillas, Fretilin regrouped in 1981 under the leadership of Xanana Gusmao, the current leader, and a clandestine resistance network was established throughout the country. In March 1983 a ceasefire was arranged. It lasted four months and was followed by Operasi Sapu Bersih (Clean Sweep). Operasi Kikis (Elimination) was carried out between 1985 and 1987. A new offensive began towards the end of

1990 reportedly using 25,000 troops, two helicopter squadrons and Timorese conscripts.

In 1983 Fretilin estimated their resistance fighters numbered 6,800. The Indonesian operations have involved up to 40,000 troops. Their strategies have included using East Timorese as human shields in their advances, forcibly moving people from villages into concentration centres, deporting people to the island of Atauro and confiscating food stocks.

They have also constructed roads, bridges, harbours, introduced television, and established more than 500 schools, a polytechnic and a private university. Despite these improvements, opposition to the regime remains widespread. It is fuelled by the presence of large numbers of Indonesian migrants settling permanently in East Timor. At least 20% of Dili's population of 120,000 is non-Timorese.

That East Timor did not become a major international issue until last November's Dili massacre is the result of the Indonesian government's sealing off the territory and preventing information reaching their own people as well as foreigners. In 1989 the government eased constraints on political activity and reporting in East Timor and the situation became better known and discussed both abroad and by Indonesians concerned with human rights. However since the November massacre, the area is once again closed to foreign journalists and independent observers.

Amnesty International and the Catholic church report that the situation has worsened. The Indonesian government continues to blame the military for the recent killing of civilians at Dili, rather than acknowledging that this was a consequence of its on-going policy.

In late April this year the *NZ Herald* reported that the Indonesian Government had turned down a request from two senior United States senators to visit East Timor. Claibourne Pell, head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and David Boren, head of the Select Committee on Intelligence, were due in Jakarta on April 23. Indonesian State Secretary Murdiono said the visit to East Timor was unnecessary. The people of East Timor should be left undisturbed and calm to carry on developing their territory, he said.

Western powers have played down the issue of East Timor. They have refused to insist on verification by independent observers of unofficial reports of

atrocities and have failed to ensure entry into East Timor by the Red Cross. They have continued to supply Indonesia with arms. The Indonesian economy is underwritten by a consortium of countries and international organisations called the Intergovernmental Group on Indonesia (IGGI). In 1988 the IGGI granted the ailing Indonesian economy US\$5700 million, almost 10% of its GNP. Since the Dili massacre, the Dutch government whose foreign affairs minister chairs the aid consortium, has postponed all new aid, as have Canada and Denmark. The European Community has called for the EC and the UN to embargo weapons sales to Indonesia.

Political implications

Indonesia provides a market of huge potential, particularly for New Zealand and Australian goods. East Timor borders the Ombai straits which are considered of strategic importance to Washington for the passage of Poseidon and Trident submarines between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

The sea bed to the south of East Timor, called the Timor Gap, is known to be rich in oil. In November 1989 Australia and Indonesia signed the Timor Gap Zone of Cooperation treaty under which they are jointly prospecting and exploiting the sea's oil and minerals.

Successive New Zealand governments have recognised the Indonesian takeover of East Timor as "irreversible." Trade considerations as well as adhering to the US and Australian line appear to be the major reasons. Foreign affairs ministers have tended to minimise human rights abuses. They have supported the 1982 UN General Assembly resolution calling for negotiations but have not insisted that these include the East Timorese. The NZ government thus ignores the rights of the East Timorese to a genuine act of self-determination as laid down in the UN charter and security council and general assembly resolutions.

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