Comment

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East Timor

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The mountainous island of Timor has an area of nearly 12 000 square miles. It is one of the southernmost islands of the Indonesian archipelago and lies only 300 miles north of Australia, which is its nearest neighbour apart from Indonesia. The western half of the island, with the exception of the enclave of Oecusse, forms part of the Republic of Indonesia. East Timor, which covers some 7 400 square miles, comprises the eastern half of the island, the enclave of Oecusse in the north-west, the island of Atauro off the northern coast, and a small uninhabited island off the extreme eastern tip.

Estimates in 1974 put the population at between 650 000 and 680 000. In 1975, after the Indonesian invasion, the UN Special Committee on Decolonisation listed East Timor as the third largest non self-governing territory after Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia) and Namibia. Except for a few thousand persons of Chinese, European and mixed ancestry, the population is of Timorese origin. Though Portuguese was until recently the official language, several indigenous languages are spoken, of which Tetum is the most important. Most Timorese were animist, though the animist population has declined sharply; 50 per cent of East Timorese are now said to be at least nominally Roman Catholic.

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Economically the territory is extremely underdeveloped, the result of centuries of neglect by the colonial power. The main activities have traditionally been subsistence agriculture (corn, rice, tapioca and potatoes) and hunting (deer and pig). Coffee was introduced in the mid-19th century and became the principal export (80-90 per cent of exchange revenue), supplemented by rubber, tobacco, copra and peanuts. Commerce was largely controlled by Portuguese and Chinese traders until 1975. Few industries were created under Portuguese rule, though towards the end of the period mining companies had begun to evaluate the prospects of exploiting deposits of copper, gold, manganese and petroleum. There are also extensive stocks of fish and it seems likely that, under normal conditions, with a concerted effort in food production, East Timor could be self-sufficient in food and other basics.

The fighting and the social and economic disruption caused by the Indonesian invasion and occupation have, of course, destroyed any prospect of this for the time being. They have devastated the subsistence economy and the society based on it as the population has been forced off the land into centralised camps. Crops have been destroyed and the country's cattle virtually wiped out, with water buffalo, which are essential to the agricultural cycle, drastically reduced. Widespread famine has resulted and the deaths and general disruption have undone whatever progress had been achieved in the last years of Portuguese rule.

Historical background

Before the coming of Europeans Timor was known to the Chinese as a source of sandalwood. The first European settlement was established by Portuguese Dominicans in 1566, and for the next three centuries the Portuguese and Dutch disputed control of the island. A final division of the island between the colonial powers was not agreed until 1913. European control was long insecure, and revolts by the Timorese frequent. The last of these continued from the late 1880s until 1912, and was put down only after the arrival of troopships from Mozambique and a Portuguese gunboat. 3 000 Timorese were killed. During the Second World War the island was occupied by the Japanese, after Australian commandos had been landed. It is estimated that 40 000 Timorese died as a result of the Japanese occupation.

After the war the Portuguese once again assumed control. However, the repressive character of their colonial régime attracted mounting international criticism, and during the 1960s an educated élite with nationalist aspirations began to emerge, often the product of the Catholic schools, and in particular, of the Dili seminary. Nevertheless, it was not until the Portuguese revolution of 1974 that indigenous political forces could develop freely.

What were to be the three main political groups in East Timor were all formed in May 1975, the UDT, FRETILIN (originally the ASDT) and APODETI. Most important at first was the UDT, the Timorese Democratic Union, which favoured federation with Portugal. A more radical nationalist position was advanced by ASDT, the Social Democratic Association of Timor. Its manifesto called for the rejection of colonialism and racial discrimination and demanded the right to independence, immediate participation in local government and a campaign against corruption. The third group, APODETI, supported union with Indonesia. It had a much smaller popular base, but was supported and used by Indonesia as a vehicle for its aims.

The nationalist movement rapidly grew in strength, By September 1974 ASDT had assumed a more radical character and changed its name to FRETILIN, the Revolutionary Front for the Independence of East Timor. The UDT moved towards support of full independence. Encouraged by the Portuguese Decolonisation Commission and stimulated by clumsy Indonesian attempts to subvert the independence movement, the UDT and FRETILIN formed a coalition.

While the coalition operated successfully for a time, by the end of May 1975 it had collapsed, partly owing to Indonesian attempts to divide the two parties and partly owing to the rapid growth of FRETILIN. FRETILIN had considerably developed its ideas and organisation. It had launched an education programme based on the 'conscientisation' method of literacy training developed by the Brazilian educationist Paulo Freire. It had also introduced production co-operatives, together with some preliminary measures of land reform. FRETILIN had developed along the same lines as many other Third World nationalist movements, preferring a policy of self-reliance and strict economic controls, whereas the UDT favoured a substantial role for foreign companies in the development of East Timor's tourist and mining industries.

Throughout this period Indonesian pressure and propaganda was a destructive influence on political developments in Timor. In August 1975, having been told by Indonesian intelligence chiefs that Indonesia would intervene if FRETILIN gained power, the UDT leaders attempted a coup in a bid to force FRETILIN to expel its small but

vocal left wing. They seized key installations in Dili and Baucau and issued an ultimatum to the Portuguese authorities demanding immediate independence and the imprisonment of certain FRETILIN leaders. The Portuguese provincial government rejected the ultimatum but, having only 100 troops of its own, chose not to intervene. Its attempts to prevent violence failed, and fighting broke out in Dili and in the central mountain districts.

In all, some 1 500 - 2 500 people were killed on both sides during the civil war which followed, most of them in the mountain areas. However, Timorese troops in the Portuguese army deserted *en masse,* with their arms and equipment, to join FRETILIN, which already had the support of most of the rural population, and by September 1975 FRETILIN was in control of virtually all of Portuguese Timor.

The Indonesian invasion

In view of subsequent claims, it is important to stress that FRETILIN was opposed to an early declaration of independence. It continued to recognise Portuguese sovereignty and repeatedly called on the governor, who had transferred his residence to the island of Atauro during the fighting, to return to Dili and resume the process of decolonisation, which FRETILIN leaders believed would take up to five years. Portugal's refusal to do so, however, transformed FRETILIN into the *de facto* government, and between September and November 1975 it administered the territory. During this period FRETILIN leaders repeatedly declared their willingness to live in harmony with Timor's ASEAN neighbours, and invited delegations from Indonesia and Australia to visit Dili. Observers in Timor at the time recognised that FRETILIN governed responsibly, enjoyed popular support and, but for the Indonesian military intervention, could have developed an effective administration.

It had become evident well before the UDT coup, however, that Indonesia had designs on the territory. In 1974 José Ramos Horta, then secretary of the political committee of the ASDT, had visited Jakarta. His visit had been rewarded by a letter from the Indonesian foreign minister, Mr Adam Malik, which stated that 'the independence of every country is the right of every nation, with no exception for the people in Timor'. Soon afterwards, however, as a result of pressure from certain powerful generals, the Indonesian government began to retreat from this commitment, with the tacit support of the Australian prime minister, Mr Gough Whitlam, who declared on 24 September, during a state visit to Indonesia, that an independent Timor would be 'an unviable

state and a potential threat to the area'.

Although no major strategic or economic interests were at stake, the Indonesian government apparently feared that the proximity of an independent state with left-wing policies would subvert its authority in other Indonesian territories, such as Aceh and Irian Jaya, where there were already dissident movements. Both political and military policy was also motivated by simple expansionism. Indonesian discussions with APODETI in September were backed by broadcasts claiming that FRETILIN was communist and the UDT 'neo-fascist' and 'colonialist'. By December 1974 Adam Malik was stating that there were only two options for East Timor, union with Indonesia or a continuation of Portuguese rule.

Indonesian pressure increased throughout 1975. In March Indonesian Timor was closed to journalists, and after the FRETILIN victory in the civil war Indonesian forces mounted undercover operations into East Timor across the border. Their scale was revealed when five Australian television reporters (two with British passports) were killed by Indonesian troops inside East Timor in the border village of Balibó.

By November the Indonesian government had publicly announced its support for integration. On 28 November, in a bid to attract outside diplomatic support as invasion approached, FRETILIN leaders declared independence and proclaimed the Democratic Republic of East Timor. On 7 December Indonesia invaded.

The invasion took the form of a sea and air attack on Dili with bombers, paratroops and marines. It was followed by brutal treatment of the civilian population: indiscriminate killing and rape took place in the streets of Dili and buildings were sacked and burned.

War and occupation

Events in Timor had attracted little interest abroad, but the invasion provoked widespread international concern. After a full debate on 11 December 1975, the Fourth Committee of the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution, since reaffirmed annually, which recognised the right of the people of East Timor to 'self-determination, freedom and independence'. The resolution deplored Indonesia's military intervention and called on Indonesia to 'withdraw without delay its forces from the territory'. The resolution was adopted by 69 votes to 11, with 38 countries abstaining, among them Britain, France, the United States and West Germany. On 22 December the Security Council

unanimously adopted a similar resolution and urgently requested the UN Secretary General to send a special representative to East Timor. The Indonesian government ignored these resolutions in the knowledge that the United States and Australia would not take action to enforce them. Claiming that the fighting was being carried out by 'volunteers', not Indonesian regular forces, Indonesia increased the number of troops in the island and imposed an almost complete embargo on all contact with the outside world. The Indonesian presence has been maintained ever since, and in mid-1981 it was estimated that some 18 000 Indonesian troops, supported by naval and air units, were stationed in the territory.

It has become clear that the operation in East Timor proved much more difficult than the Indonesian government and military had anticipated. Though they enjoy vastly superior resources and have been able to isolate the island almost completely from the outside world, after six years their control is still not unchallenged. By the end of February 1976, three months after the invasion, they controlled less than a third of the country, and a FRETILIN-led counter-offensive made the London *Times* refer to 'Indonesia's Vietnam'. Since then the use of counter-insurgency tactics, including saturation bombing and the introduction of strategic hamlets, has greatly weakened Timorese resistance. In December 1978 the president of FRETILIN's government, Nicolau Lobato, was killed in an ambush, and isolation and hardship seemed to have fragmented the leadership. It is nevertheless clear that resistance continues, and in 1981-1982 the Indonesian army was carrying out large-scale sweeps in the Lautem region, in the east of the territory. According to some reports, at least 50 000 male Timorese — including boys aged 15 or less — have been conscripted to serve as a human shield for the Indonesian troops. Without pay and neither fed nor billeted, they are forced to advance unarmed ahead of the Indonesian forces, and to engage any guerrillas or local inhabitants they encounter.

These sweeps, named 'fence of legs', are only the most recent example of Indonesian military brutality. In January 1976 press reports in based on Australian intelligence monitoring of Indonesian communications, confirmed what had at first been treated as exaggerted FRETILIN allegations of indiscriminate killing during the invasion itself. In March 1976 the vice-governor of Indonesian-occupied Dili said that 60 000 Timorese had been killed during the two months after the invasion. Detailed descriptions of burning, torture, killing and looting by Indonesian troops were also collected by the former Australian consul in Dili, Mr J.S. Dunn, in extensive interviews with refugees in Portugal in 1977.

These direct casualties, however, were only the beginning. In response to continuing resistance the Indonesian military forced the population into strategic hamlets and bombed mountain areas inaccessible to ground troops. These tactics prevented the Timorese from supporting themselves by agriculture, with the result that in 1978 famine aggravated the effects of injury, disease and displacement. In 1978 and 1979 100 000 Timorese streamed down from the mountains, many dying of hunger. Experienced relief workers who took part in the severely restricted relief operation subsequently permitted by the Indonesians compared the situation with that of Kampuchea. Statistics for Timor are inevitably unreliable, but the scale of the suffering of the Timorese is sufficiently indicated by the estimate that of a pre-independence population of around 670 000, more than 100 000 have died.

Recent reports from church and refugee sources continue to contradict Indonesia's claim that it has established order and enjoys popular support. These claims constitute one of the Suharto government's main justifications for its intervention. The formal procedure of integration has never been internationally recognised. Even Indonesia's supporters pass over the charade in silence, and the United Nations regards the 'Timorese People's Assembly', which in May 1976 requested Indonesia to incorporate East Timor, as an unrepresentative body acting under duress. The assembly, consisting of 28 Timorese selected by the Indonesians, met for two hours in Dili under military supervision while fighting was still widespread and approved a petition for the integration of East Timor into the Indonesian State. Two months later, on 17 July 1976, President Suharto formally declared the incorporation of East Timor as a province of the Republic of Indonesia. How many of the people of East Timor have become resigned to Indonesian rule in the intervening six years is not clear, but the population as a whole certainly does not accept or desire it. In June 1981 a report to President Suharto from the same Indonesian-selected 'Regional People's Representative Assembly' complained of constant murder, violence, torture and abuse of Timorese by Indonesian troops, and alleged that Indonesian control had led to economic stagnation, mismanagement and exploitation by Indonesian monopolies, and corruption among officials.

These allegations were corroborated in November 1981 by the leader of the Roman Catholic Church in East Timor. In response to an enquiry from Australian Catholic Relief, Mgr Martinho da Costa Lopes broke a six-year

silence to speak of the danger of famine and denounce the killing of 500 Timorese the previous summer during a siege at the shrine of St Anthony at Lacluta.

The legal position

There are two tenable views of East Timor's position in international law. FRETILIN argues that its unilateral declaration of independence on 28 November 1975, nine days before the Indonesian invasion, was an act of self-determination, accepted as such by 12 states, which recognised the Democratic Republic of East Timor. It argues that its authority over the territory also met the UN's normal conditions for the recognition of an act of self-determination. Portugal, on the other hand, has not accepted FRETILIN's declaration of independence, but firmly rejects the Indonesian law of incorporation of July 1976. The Portuguese view is that East Timor has not yet exercised its right of self-determination and that Portugal has a continuing responsibility to assist the territory to independence. Both these views deny Indonesia's title to East Timor and reject Indonesian claims that an administrative vacuum and a breakdown of law and order in 1975 made its intervention necessary.

The United Nations has consistently called for the withdrawal of Indonesian forces. Its condemnation clearly implies that Indonesia's initial assertion that the forces in East Timor were Indonesian 'volunteers' and not regular troops was a fiction. Other arguments advanced by the Indonesian government — contiguity, the island's historical unity and the claims of regional stability — are equally specious. More important, all these arguments are contradicted by the Suharto government's formal declaration before 1976 that it had no claims on any territories which had not formed part of the Dutch East Indies. Under international law, according to the International Court of Justice, such declarations by a state are binding on its future conduct.

International responsibility

The case in law against Indonesia is unanswerable. The bulk of international opinion, represented in the UN, is also solidly opposed to Indonesia's claim to East Timor. Furthermore, the colonial authority, Portugal, has continued to claim that the island has not completed its passage to independence. In 1980 and again in 1981, Portugal indicated to European countries and to the United Nations that it was willing to lead a diplomatic initiative to bring about a settlement acceptable to the Timorese people and to Indonesia. It is clear, however, that any Portuguese efforts will have to be supported by states which are

politically and economically better placed to influence Indonesia. Portugal broke off diplomatic relations with Indonesia after the invasion of East Timor.

If legal responsibility for East Timor lies with Portugal, moral responsibility must lie with the international community, and in particular with Indonesia's international supporters and aid donors, including the countries represented in the Inter-Governmental Group on Indonesia (IGGI) of which the United States, Britain, most of the EEC countries, Australia, New Zealand and Japan are members. So far these countries have been prepared to sacrifice East Timor to the maintenance of harmonious relations and trading links with Indonesia.

Although the case of East Timor has features in common with other territorial disputes in the region, the ASEAN States have also supported Indonesia's claim to the territory, in order to preserve the unity of the group's foreign policy.

Unlike most members of IGGI, which abstain, the United States has voted in favour of Indonesia in the UN over East Timor. As early as 1976, a State Department Representative described his country's attitude as 'more or less condoning' the Indonesian invasion, and congressional hearings in 1977 and 1978 made it clear that the US government had been aware of the impending invasion in 1975. The following year US military aid to Indonesia was increased, and the administration lobbied for the defeat of an amendment calling for the suspension of aid because of the invasion of East Timor. Indonesia is important to the United States; the largest nation in South-East Asia, it supplies oil to Japan and will become increasingly important as a supplier of energy and raw materials to the United States. There are substantial US investments in the country and it occupies a strategic position between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Militarily, Washington is also anxious to ensure that its nuclear submarines continue to pass unhindered through the deep straits of Ombai-Wetar.

Australia, Timor's nearest neighbour, was in a unique position to influence events in Timor. From diplomatic and intelligence sources the government was well informed both about Indonesian intentions and events in Timor, and might have supported Portugal's attempts to decolonise and encouraged Jakarta to permit the people of East Timor to exercise their right to self-determination. Apart from an initial hostile vote in the United Nations, however, successive Australian governments have consistently deferred to Indonesian policy. In January 1978 Australia recognised Indonesia's incorporation of East Timor and subsequently

voted with Indonesia in the UN. The Canberra government has also refrained from pressing Indonesia on humanitarian issues, maintaining that it was for Indonesia to take the initiative in facilitating the departure of refugees.

Britain, according to a government spokesman in November 1981, believes that 'it is primarily for the Indonesian and Portuguese governments to bring about the conditions for a settlement of the East Timor question'. The language of the statement reflects Britain's continuing refusal to recognise the incorporation of East Timor into Indonesia and its simultaneous unwillingness to antagonise Indonesia. Formally, Britain is committed to self-determination for East Timor, but has abstained every time the issue has come before the UN. The 1974-79 Labour government gave credibility to Indonesian propaganda that Indonesia's invasion had been made necessary by the breakdown of law and order in East Timor. In 1978 Britain also sold eight Hawk fighters to Indonesia, knowing these could be used for counter-insurgency operation in East Timor. In doing so, it joined many other countries which have sold Indonesia military equipment since 1978: these include the Netherlands (corvettes), West Germany (submarines), Yugoslavia (a training ship), South Korea (ships), Australia (maritime patrol aircraft) and France (tanks). Most of Indonesia's military purchases are from the United States.

In contrast, non-aligned nations have continued to support the right to independence of the people of East Timor. The Summit Conference of Non-Aligned Nations discussed East Timor in 1976 despite Indonesian protests and listed it among the non self-governing territories still to be 'liberated', and reaffirmed that position in 1979. Many African countries, particularly those which are Portuguese-speaking, have continued to express support for FRETILIN and concern for the fate of the Timorese people.

The Roman Catholic Church in East Timor has acquired an increasingly important role under the Indonesian occupation, and has greatly increased its membership. This is partly because it is one of the few Timorese institutions which has been able to retain its identity. It has also been active in distributing aid channelled through the Indonesian Catholic Development Agency, LPPS. Since 1975 the Church has been under the direct jurisdiction of the Vatican, though in recent months the Indonesian government has exerted pressure on the Indonesian Bishops' Conference to persuade the Vatican to integrate the East Timorese Church with the Church in Indonesia.

The future

It now seems that the people of East Timor are unlikely to recover their freedom or independence outside the framework of a negotiated settlement involving Portugal, the United Nations, the non-aligned countries and, eventually, Indonesia's allies. This will probably be a lengthy process. There are, however, humanitarian issues which cry out for immediate attention and can be tackled in advance of a comprehensive settlement. The problems of hunger, disease and refugees are the most obvious of these.

The administrators of previous relief programmes have admitted that relief so far supplied fell far short of the need, and there were reports in early 1982 of the imminence of a new famine. The number of people who wish to leave East Timor is difficult to ascertain precisely because of the Indonesian blackout on information, but only half the number accepted by the Australian government have so far been allowed to leave, and there are believed to be many more who wish to do so. Several hundred Timorese in Portugal wish to go to Australia either to rejoin families and friends or to be closer to their homeland. Progress towards alleviating the plight of all these people has been unconscionably slow.

However, humanitarian issues cannot be separated ultimately from wider issues of human rights. The deaths, disease, hunger and break-up of families in East Timor are not the result of a natural disaster but of Indonesian policies, condoned by the international community, and apparently still in operation. Hunger and disease are aggravated by the disruption of East Timorese social life and agriculture resulting from the removal of the population from their traditional areas to 'resettlement sites'. There are also reports that thousands of opponents of the Indonesian takeover continue to be detained. It is essential that any future humanitarian relief should include the prison visiting and family reunion which the International Committee of the Red Cross traditionally carries out, but which it has so far been prevented from performing in East Timor. The absence of independent monitoring will further reinforce the doubts of those who fear that relief operations are being used as an arm of the Indonesian government's 'pacification' policy, just as the blackout on information about Timor which Indonesia has imposed since 1976 must be presumed to indicate that the Indonesian government has reason to conceal the truth about what is happening on the island.

The economic and strategic interests of the major Western powers in Indonesia make it unlikely that they will

of their own accord take up the case of East Timor. This places an even greater responsibility on non-governmental organisations and the press to ensure that it is not forgotten. In Australia Roman Catholic aid agencies and the press have consistently resisted their own government's attempt to treat the issue of East Timor as closed, and it is largely due to their efforts that the Australian Senate is to hold an enquiry into human rights in the territory in March 1982. Pressure from agencies in other countries which have economic links with Indonesia could be equally effective, and the press could play a crucial part in opposing the news blackout which makes any attempt to understand, let alone relieve, the situation, so difficult. The Roman Catholic Church, too, which has given such prominence to justice and peace issues in recent years, is uniquely placed to give international support to the people of East Timor. It has even a duty to defend the people in whose name Mgr da Costa Lopes spoke in November 1981, 'the innocent children, the pregnant women and the defenceless people without any crime except the desire to be independent of all oppression'. Continued inaction will inflict still more suffering on a people whose fate, on its own scale, ranks with any example of inhumanity in recent years.

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