

Australia heading for a "quagmire" in East Timor

By Peter Symonds
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Just over a week after the Australian-led International Force for East Timor (Interfet) began landing in the capital of Dili, the realisation is dawning in Canberra that the operation could become bogged down in a protracted and dirty guerrilla war.

The heavily-armed Interfet troops remain confined mainly to Dili, where they are far from in control of the situation. Small groups of soldiers have been sent to the town of Dare, 20 km to the south, Bacau, 80 km east, and Liquica to the west of the capital. Last week's killing of the Dutch journalist Sander Thoenes, a correspondent for the British-based *Financial Times*, allegedly by pro-Indonesian militia members, has highlighted the potential dangers of a tense and unstable situation.

Australian commander Major-General Peter Cosgrove has ordered more combat troops to be ferried in earlier than planned. "The style of violence being used in East Timor is a difficult one to stop immediately because of the disguised nature of it, the random nature of it, the selective nature of it," he said. "We always knew that this was going to take weeks; we have been here multiples of days. This is going to be a protracted peacekeeping operation."

Cosgrove called on militia members to lay down their weapons and to participate in the political debate over the future of East Timor. But an estimated 10,000 militia members, armed with a variety of weapons, have retreated to the western areas of East Timor, at present beyond Interfet's control, or across the border into Indonesian West Timor.

On Monday, militia leader Eurico Guterres warned that his members would take up arms against Interfet unless it proved its neutrality in dealing with pro-Indonesian and pro-independence forces. "If within three weeks they cannot stop... their unfair actions, then I will act," he told a newspaper in West Timor. "Although the [Interfet] have sophisticated weapons, they do not know East Timor as well as the militias. It is not possible for the tanks to go into the jungle." Guterres and other militia leaders have demanded that East Timor be partitioned.

In an interview with the Australian-based *Bulletin* magazine, Indonesian President Habibie's adviser Dewi Fortuna Anwar warned: "There is a danger that Australian soldiers could become like the US soldiers in Somalia. If this is handled poorly, Australia could find itself in a quagmire." Reflecting the bitterness in ruling circles in Jakarta at the Australian-led force, she added: "Too much macho language had been used in Australia about Indonesia. Australia is a regional power pushing its way around. It's behaving like the Godfather of East Timor."

As the *Bulletin* article noted: "The greatest danger for Australian soldiers doesn't lie in head-on conflict with the militias. In such a confrontation, the superiority of Interfet could be quickly established. But if the militias, backed by Indonesia's special forces, Kopassus, were to engage in 'hit-and-run' operations, their familiarity with local conditions and terrain would make them a potent threat not easily dealt with by foreign troops."

Indonesia is rapidly pulling out most of its remaining 15,000 soldiers, leaving only a nominal force of about 1,500 in East Timor. In some cases,

troops have burnt their own barracks and government offices to prevent their use by Interfet or any UN-administration. After a closed door meeting with Cosgrove on Monday, Major General Kiki Syahnakri, commander of Indonesian forces in East Timor, insisted that responsibility for security in the territory was now in Interfet hands—a claim that Cosgrove denied. Indonesia still retains nominal control of the province until its People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) deliberates on the outcome of the UN-organised referendum that strongly favoured secession.

In remarks reported in the *Jakarta Post*, Kiki warned Interfet against pursuing militias over the border into West Timor, saying: "The Indonesian Army will not stand still if our territory's borderlines are breached." He also warned of possible attacks on Dili: "Many militias are now staying in Maliana and Atambua and have [so far] declined to launch attacks on the city because of the Indonesian military's presence."

The stage is being set for an expanding conflict with the militia, and potentially with Indonesian troops in West Timor. While the UN has no mandate to extent its operations into Indonesian-controlled territory, military logic dictates that troops be able to pursue militia members into their bases, even if these happen to be across the border.

Between 100,000 and 200,000 refugees are estimated to have either fled to West Timor, or been herded into camps there against their will by militia forces. In a report dated September 24, Amnesty International documented patterns of violence against tens of thousands of people displaced in East and West Timor and across Indonesia. Based on eye-witness accounts and refugee testimonies, it said: "The situation of the East Timorese people forcibly displaced to West Timor and other parts of Indonesia is becoming more critical every day. Independence activists are being hunted down at checkpoints, on boats and in house-to-house searches. Militia and members of the Indonesian army continue to intimidate, threaten and attack the displaced East Timorese with total impunity."

The plight of refugees in the West Timor camps has become the basis for calls for further action against Indonesia. After a meeting on Sunday with East Timorese separatist leader Xanana Gusmao—who is in New York for discussions with the UN, IMF and World Bank—US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said Indonesia risked losing American aid and investment unless those in the camps were protected. "The government and armed forces of Indonesia should understand that what happens in West Timor and to East Timorese living elsewhere in Indonesia is as important to the United States as what happens in East Timor itself."

Anton Pain Ratu, the Catholic bishop in the town of Atambua near the border with West Timor, on Sunday urged the UN to declare its authority over all of Timor, including Indonesian territory, in order to defend the refugees. "It is essential for the international community to foresee the humanitarian problem of the whole island of Timor, not just East Timor alone," he said.

The military operation in Timor has raised doubts about the adequacy of

the Australian-led force. By Monday, only 3,800 out of the projected Interfet force of 7,500 troops were on the ground. Most were Australian combat soldiers, backed by smaller contingents of British Gurkhas and New Zealand troops, as well as a French surgical team and 159 Filipino civilians including engineers, medical staff and dentists.

About 20 countries, large and small, have signed up to Interfet. The Western powers pledging contingents include the former colonial ruler of East Timor, Portugal (1,000 troops, two frigates, a C-130 transport plane and four helicopters), as well as New Zealand (700 troops, a frigate and a supply ship). Also on the list are France (500 troops, a frigate from the South Pacific, a helicopter carrying warship and three tactical cargo planes); the United States (several hundred intelligence, communications and logistics personnel, plus pilots and planes); Canada (600 troops); Italy (200 to 250 troops); Sweden (10 police officers).

Thailand, one of Indonesia's partners in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), has been appointed Interfet's second-in-charge, in an attempt to allay concerns in Jakarta about Australian dominance. Both Malaysia and the Philippines appear to have volunteered for Interfet at the direct request of the Indonesian generals, for similar reasons. Russia has offered a contingent of unknown size, as have China, Japan, Malaysia, Fiji, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Argentina. South Korea has pledged 400 troops, and Brazil 50 police, with Singapore sending medical and logistical units.

Sharp differences have emerged over Interfet's role. Last Friday an unnamed Thai military spokesman, speaking in Bangkok, criticised the "aggressive" and "provocative" character of the Australian forces, saying that Thai troops—not due to arrive until the end of October—would take a more "softly softly" stance. Thai Major-General Songkitti Chakrabhat, who is to be second-in-command to Cosgrove, was in Jakarta at the time visiting General Wiranto, Indonesia's Defence Minister and Armed Forces (TNI) chief.

An article in the British-based *Financial Times* on Saturday summed up the tensions: "The debate highlights the conflicting pressures facing one of the most diverse peacekeeping groups ever assembled. Those pressures grew steadily this week following the attacks on journalists, and were worsened by rumblings from governments contributing troops including the US, UK and Thailand. While the US and UK pressed for stronger action against the militia and rogue army elements, Thailand and other Asian countries urged caution." Such divisions will deepen as time wears on.

On Monday, the same newspaper drew attention to the inadequacy of the Interfet force and the lack of US military involvement. "Across the riot-torn territory of East Timor, terrorised for weeks by pro-Indonesian militias, a tiny UN-mandated peacekeeping force is struggling to restore order. Numbering just 3,000 today, and eventually due to grow to 7,500, it is far smaller than the 41,000 western force deployed in Kosovo, although East Timor is 50 percent larger than the Yugoslav province."

In Australia, critics have pointed to the inability of the army to equip and sustain its contingent of 4,500 in East Timor. In part, they argue for a substantial military expansion. Professor Hugh Smith of the Australian Defence Force Academy said the East Timor crisis had shown that Australia was critically limited in land, air and sea capabilities. He said the army needed more helicopters, new all-terrain vehicles and transport aircraft. It has had to ask the US for heavy-duty flak jackets for East Timor.

The Australian army only numbers 24,000 and most of its readily deployable troops are either in East Timor or on their way there. The media has highlighted the fact that the troops will have to remain in East Timor on a nine-month tour of duty—substantially longer than the usual four to six months—due to the lack of replacements. Calls have already been made for former soldiers, particularly with specialist skills, to rejoin to fill out the ranks.

Meanwhile, the scale of the human tragedy created over the past few months has become clearer. After two brief tours of parts of East Timor, one by helicopter and one by road, the United Nations described the province as "more than half-destroyed," with three-quarters of houses razed. A helicopter patrol of the towns of Ainaro, Same, Suai, Ermera, Liquica and Maliana found them almost completely deserted. Suai was the most devastated, with approximately 80 percent of the town destroyed.

Lacking adequate transport and infrastructure, relief agencies are struggling to cope with the widespread lack of food, medicines and other essentials. The World Food Program (WFP) produced estimates on Friday that some 740,000 people would need food aid for six months, including 214,490 in West Timor. This exceeded the 600,000 food aid recipients in Kosovo. Yet, the WFP reported, only 130 tons of food had been airdropped in East Timor, using two Australian and one French C-130 plane. The WFP's first "snow drop" of six tons of high protein biscuits only took place on September 24.

Earlier, the East Timor International Support Centre (ETISC) reported two desperate satellite telephone calls, one from the Dare area, in the hills near the East Timorese capital of Dili. There, more than 30,000 people were camped without food or shelter. "Children are crying all night, without food, and many hundreds of babies have diarrhoea, which in these circumstances is death dealing," ETISC said.

In a September 21 statement, the French-based Doctors Without Borders/Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) asked "why nearly three days after the first multinational forces entered East Timor, the humanitarian community is still being blocked from direct access to people in need of assistance in East Timor". There had been no doctors in East Timor for almost three weeks. MSF said it had 14 medical and logistics staff and 26 metric tons of medicines, sanitation material and shelter on standby in Darwin.

"I can't understand why they are not allowing us to go to Dili and help these people," said Dr Susanne Cristofani, MSF's medical coordinator who was expelled three weeks ago from a hospital in Bacau. "We can be operational within hours. Every day matters in saving a life. As a medical person it's hard to understand that for three days now dozens of journalists have been transported by the UN and military planes and we have to sit here and wait."

Even measured against its own stated aims, the Australian-led intervention in East Timor is in danger of rapidly unravelling into a military, political and humanitarian disaster.

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