

International pressure for intervention into West Timor after UN staff killed

By Mike Head
11 September 2000

Australia and other Western governments have seized upon last week's militia killing of UN staff in West Timor to raise the prospect of lengthening the Australian-led UN military intervention into East Timor, and extending it into the Indonesian-controlled western half of the island.

Three international UN employees, Samson Aregahegn, Carlos Caceres-Collazo and Pero Simundza, were hacked to death and three unnamed local staff are thought to have been murdered last Wednesday September 6 by Indonesian military-backed militias at Atambua, a refugee centre near the East Timor border.

Between 50 and 100 militia members stormed the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in the town, after hearing that former militia leader Olivio Moruk had been decapitated the night before. The Indonesian police and military took no action to protect the UN staff.

The murders have sparked the withdrawal of UN and international aid agency staff from West Timor, leaving some 90,000 to 120,000 East Timorese refugees without access to assistance and food aid.

The attack came on the first anniversary of the announcement of the results of the UN ballot on the secession of East Timor from Indonesia. The overwhelming vote for separation sparked an Indonesian military and militia onslaught of burning, looting and killing against the East Timorese people, forcing an estimated 300,000 refugees to cross the border into West Timor.

A year ago, Australia, together with other capitalist powers, utilised the violent response to the UN ballot to send in thousands of troops to occupy East Timor and set up a UN protectorate, ending nearly 25 years of Indonesian rule. The militias and their supporters withdrew to West Timor, where they have established control over many of the refugee camps.

Australian media proprietors have called for the widening of the military intervention, using the same pretext as that employed a year ago—that of defending the humanitarian interests of the Timorese people.

“Military commitment by Australia and other concerned nations to East Timor is not only looking much longer term than first envisaged, events may be pushing the international community into a wider theatre in eastern Indonesia,” wrote Hamish McDonald, the *Sydney Morning Herald's* foreign editor, on September 8.

“Assume that Indonesia continues unable (on the part of its civilian government) and unwilling (on the part of its military) to

crack down on pro-Jakarta militias holding some 90,000 deportees from East Timor in grim camps across the border.

“Consideration will have to be given to international intervention in West Timor itself, with the finite aim of evacuating those deportees who wish to return home, and then getting out.”

While McDonald spoke of a limited operation, military intervention has a logic of its own. It can easily spark a wider and more permanent involvement, as is already the case with the original East Timor operation. At the recent first national congress of the Timorese National Resistance Council (CNRT), the leadership of Xanana Gusmao and Jose Ramos Horta called for Australia and other powers to keep troops in East Timor indefinitely after the UN formally withdraws from the territory.

Any intervention into West Timor will mean further intensifying the Western pressure on the Indonesian government of President Abdurrahman Wahid and the military. The September 8 editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* spoke of cutting off aid to Indonesia: “If multilateral organisation staff can't be protected by Indonesian security forces on Indonesian soil, the country is going to seriously undermine the aid flows which support its economy.”

The editorial staked Australia's claim to lead a military mobilisation into West Timor, as it did in East Timor. “If Indonesia is prepared to accept UN troops in West Timor, Australia will undoubtedly have a key role,” it stated.

Rupert Murdoch's the *Australian* immediately agitated for intervention. Its banner front-page headline on September 8 was “Why Carlos was left to die”, referring to one of the murdered UN staff, Carlos Caceres-Collazo, an American citizen. The article asserted that the UN workers died because Australian and New Zealand military helicopters, only minutes away in East Timor, were not sent to rescue them. The article and an accompanying editorial criticised the need to obtain permission from the Australian and Indonesian governments for such operations.

The Australian government demanded that the Jakarta regime apprehend the killers of the UN staff, protect foreigners and close down the militia-dominated refugee camps. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer called for the immediate detention of militia leader Enrico Guterres. Downer advised all Australians to leave West Timor.

The Clinton administration has also been prominent in escalating the pressure on the Indonesian government. President Clinton used an address to the UN Security Council during last week's Millenium Summit to condemn the killings of the UN staff and to

demand that Indonesia “put a stop to these abuses”.

The UN Security Council adopted a resolution expressing outrage at the attack on the UNHCR office and further reports the next day of the killing of 20 civilians in a refugee camp at Betun. It called on Indonesia to immediately disarm and disband the militias. The council announced that it would send a mission to Indonesia and East Timor to investigate the resurgence of militia activity against UN workers and civilians in both East and West Timor.

“We must face the facts,” declared Richard Holbrooke, the US ambassador to the UN, before the vote. “The Indonesian military, or to be more precise, elements within the Indonesian military, are directly or indirectly responsible for these outrages.”

There is clear evidence of Indonesian military and government support for the militia operations. The unstable administration of Wahid and Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri rests increasingly on the military and associated nationalist tendencies. Megawati recently appointed Guterres, the most prominent Timorese militia leader, as head of Banten Pemuda, the youth wing of her party, the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI-P).

But the underlying responsibility for the mayhem in Timor rests with the same Western authorities now professing concern for the plight of the Timorese people. For 25 years, Australia, the US and the UN supported—either explicitly or tacitly—the Indonesian annexation of East Timor, turning a blind eye to the killing of an estimated 200,000 Timorese people.

Both Washington and Canberra regarded the Suharto dictatorship as a vital strategic ally and actively encouraged its 1975 invasion of the former Portuguese colony. Australia became one of the few countries in the world to formally recognise Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor, in return for the signing of the 1989 Timor Gap Treaty that gave Australia the lion's share of the considerable oil and gas reserves beneath the Timor Sea reserves.

The US and Australia shifted their ground in the late 1990s because with the end of the Cold War, Suharto's regime was no longer essential as an anti-communist bulwark. Suharto's style of crony capitalism, under which the military and its associates monopolised areas of the economy, had become a barrier to the exploitation of Indonesia's natural riches by global banks and corporations. The 1997-98 Asian financial crisis was used to demand the dismantling of Suharto's economic order.

The same processes saw the revival of claims by Portugal, backed by the European Union, for its return to the enclave that it had ruled for four centuries. Seeking to head off Portugal's claims, the US and Australia pressured Suharto's successor Habibie into holding a UN-supervised referendum on autonomy for East Timor. The CNRT leaders, seeing UN intervention as a means of being installed into power, also switched their position, from calling for a 10- or 15-year delay in an autonomy ballot to backing last year's sudden vote.

Each of the key participants in the UN ballot—Portugal, Australia, the US and the CNRT—knew that if Habibie's autonomy plan were defeated, the Indonesian generals and their militia thugs would reply with a “scorched earth” policy of destruction and murder. The Australian government had detailed intelligence

reports, obtained from its extensive electronic surveillance of Indonesia as well as a network of Australian Secret Intelligence Service agents, that Indonesian commanders had prepared an onslaught on the East Timorese people.

The Western powers calculated that heavy casualties would provide the catalyst for armed military intervention. Their purpose was not to save the lives of the East Timorese people, but to secure order and establish a neo-colonial administration. By the time that the Australian-led and UN-sanctioned INTERFET force entered East Timor on September 20 last year, the militia devastation of the territory had already been completed.

Now, 12 months on, having helped create the disaster that has engulfed the Timorese people, the capitalist powers are seeking to exploit it to extend their military intervention. Once again, the banner of “humanitarianism” is being utilised. In his article, the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Hamish McDonald asked rhetorically: “How could such intervention be engineered?” His answer was: “UN Secretary-General Kofi Anan advocated last September that ‘humanitarian intervention’ could override sovereignty concerns.”

The emerging UN doctrine of “humanitarian intervention” signals a new volatile stage in wider conflicts over the control of Indonesia. Throughout all the twists and turns of their policies toward East Timor over the past quarter century, the essential thread running through the stance taken by the capitalist powers has been the pursuit of their commercial and strategic interests in the region.

Apart from the multi-billion dollar oil and gas fields off Timor's coast, the entire Indonesian archipelago remains one of the most lucrative sites of mining and cheap labour exploitation in the world, and huge investments are at stake. Located astride the shipping channels between Asia and Europe, and the Pacific and Indian oceans, Indonesia is also a vital strategic and military prize. As they were in 1975, Timor's people have been reduced to pawns in the considerations of the major powers.

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