

Social discontent boils over in East Timor protests

By John Ward and Peter Symonds
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At least two people have been killed and more than 20 injured in clashes with police and soldiers during two days of protests and rioting by students and unemployed youth in the East Timorese capital of Dili. The situation remains tense after the government imposed an overnight curfew on Wednesday and called for UN troops to help police guard key buildings and patrol the city's streets. Most shops and businesses, as well as the university and high schools, were closed yesterday.

A protest by students erupted on Tuesday after police entered a high school to arrest a student for alleged involvement in gang violence. On Wednesday morning, at least 500 students and others gathered outside police headquarters in Dili to protest the arrest. President Xanana Gusmao came to the police station to appeal for calm but was ignored and had to be escorted inside as stones began to fly.

Police responded to the stone-throwing by firing warning shots then shooting into the crowd, killing at least one student, and then stirred even more resentment when they tried to grab the body. Enraged students were joined by others in a rampage directed at the government, the UN and foreign-owned businesses. Protestors looted and burned shops, vehicles and other buildings, including the residence of Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri, the parliament building and the Dili mosque.

East Timorese officials have announced that two people were killed—one of them a 14-year-old student, Honorio Ximenes—but the death toll could be higher. Eyewitnesses claim that the police shot and killed up to five people. Saturnino Saldaha, a doctor at the Dili hospital, said the facility had been swamped by seriously injured young people and created an urgent need for blood. About 80 people have been arrested on

looting and other charges and are being detained at a UN facility at Tasiolo outside Dili.

Gusmao, Alkatiri and others immediately attempted to blame “outside provocateurs” and insisted that those involved would face the full brunt of the law. “There were those among them who were not from the [arrested student’s] school, and it was they who provoked it,” Gusmao claimed. Alkatiri dismissed suggestions that the protests reflected broader resentment at the government, declaring: “It has nothing to do with popular discontent but with a situation that was used by others.”

Interior Affairs Minister Rogerio Lobato baldly asserted that the protests were “an orchestrated manoeuvre to topple the government”. He and other officials alleged that the CDP-RDTL (Popular Defence Committee—Democratic Republic of East Timor) was behind the rioting. The group, which opposes the UN presence and calls for full independence for East Timor, has organised a number of anti-government protests.

The government is clearly looking for a scapegoat to deflect attention from the failure of their own policies. There is a huge social divide between a tiny elite of government officials, businessmen, foreign officials, aid workers and troops and the vast majority of the population, most of whom are unemployed and living below the poverty line.

Young people, in particular, are angry that their prospects for an education and a job are extremely small. Among the businesses ransacked on Wednesday was the Australian-owned “Hello Mister” supermarket, which specialises in supplying imported goods to UN and other foreign workers. While UN troops and officials are paid hefty living allowances of \$US100 a day, most East Timorese are struggling to survive from

day to day. The few who have jobs earn an average of about \$6 a week.

Estimates of the jobless rate vary between 70 and 80 percent. Moreover, it has worsened since East Timor formally declared independence on May 20, as the number of UN personnel has been reduced. The difficulties facing villagers in rural areas have been compounded by a severe drought. Even with the official poverty rate set at just US 50 cents a day, a UN survey last year found that 60 percent of people in rural areas were living in poverty. Education and health services are rudimentary.

Many East Timorese have begun to feel betrayed as the promises that accompanied the Australian-led UN military intervention into East Timor have failed to materialise. Clearly nervous about the situation, Australian Prime Minister John Howard phoned his counterpart in Dili to pledge financial assistance—to bolster the police and judiciary, not to alleviate the underlying social crisis.

The view that the Alkatiri administration governs for a small elite has been reinforced by its decision to impose Portuguese, the language of the former colonial power, as the country's official language. Most of the population—around 90 percent—speak only Bahasa Indonesia or Tetum and other local languages and are thus excluded from government jobs and alienated from parliament, the courts and other official institutions.

One of the issues fuelling hostility to the police are claims that their ranks include former members of the Indonesian-backed militia groups that unleashed a wave of violence against pro-independence supporters prior to and after the 1999 UN-sponsored referendum on East Timor's status. The government has been forced to concede that it will give preference in the future to former independence fighters for the few hundred available police jobs.

The appalling conditions facing many people had previously fuelled a number of anti-government protests. On November 28, while government officials held a ceremony to mark the anniversary of the first attempt to declare East Timor's independence in 1975, around 3,000 people gathered to protest against Alkatiri and his government's policies. At the official ceremony, Gusmao felt compelled to confess to the crowd that “we are more dependent than ever, living

from the power and skills of others”.

The attempt by Gusmao and Alkatiri to blame this week's protests on “outside agitators” simply underscores their increasingly isolated position. Unable to address the social and economic problems facing the majority of the population, the government is signalling its intention of cracking down on any political opposition. In doing so, it rests almost exclusively on 4,700 foreign troops and police still in East Timor under the UN flag. Significantly, Foreign Minister Jose Ramos Horta, speaking from Madrid, called on the UN to slow the present phased withdrawal of UN forces.

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