

Australian troops deployed to occupy East Timor

By James Cogan
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In a blatant act of neo-colonialism, the Howard government is sending up to 1,300 Australian troops to re-occupy East Timor. Special Air Service commandos are already in the capital Dili and advance units of infantry are expected to deploy by air and join them this evening. The main force, consisting of more infantry and armoured vehicles, is aboard warships which have been hovering in Australia's northern waters for the past two weeks, awaiting orders. They will arrive within 48 to 72 hours.

The reasons given by the Australian government—the well-being of the Timorese people, the preservation of stability and democracy and the protection of foreign nationals—are cynical lies. Nearly seven years after their so-called liberation by an Australian-led UN force, the vast mass of the Timorese people are just as impoverished as they were under the previous Indonesian dictatorship, while the Fretilin (Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor) government has ruled, in an increasingly authoritarian manner, on behalf of a tiny privileged ruling clique.

Canberra has used its economic and military clout since East Timor's "independence" to bully the tiny state into giving up its claims over significant oil and gas fields in the Timor Sea. Successive Australian governments supported Indonesia's brutal military rule over the half-island from 1975 to 1999, during which an estimated 200,000 Timorese were murdered. In exchange, Jakarta granted Australia a lucrative stake in Timor's energy resources.

The ostensible pretext for the new deployment is a request by President Xanana Gusmao and Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri for assistance in ending a rebellion by a faction of the army and police against the government. On Tuesday, at least one government and one rebel soldier were killed during clashes on the outskirts of Dili. Further fighting took place yesterday, with rebel troops

attempting to storm an army barracks. With thousands of people fleeing the city and rival armed mobs of youth allegedly forming, Gusmao and Alkatiri signed a letter last night asking for Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Portugal to send troops and police. The Australian force, positioned in advance off the coast, responded immediately.

Tensions have been building in East Timor since 591 soldiers of the 1,400-strong army were sacked by Alkatiri for going on strike over poor pay and conditions and alleged nepotism within the military. The rebellion has the character of a communalist conflict between soldiers from the west of the state, the *loromonu*, against those from the east, the *lorosae*. The rebels are predominantly from the west, while the troops and police who have remained loyal to the Fretilin leadership are mainly from the east.

On April 28, a demonstration by the rebel troops in Dili was fired on by pro-government police. At least six people were killed and dozens more wounded. Unemployed *loromonu* youth, who had joined the rebel demonstrations to express their own resentments towards the government, looted and burned markets and homes belonging to easterners. Fear of further attacks led as many as 20,000 residents to flee the capital.

The events that have followed give strong grounds to suspect direct Australian complicity in the escalating instability. As in 1999, sectarian violence and a refugee crisis are being used to justify military action.

In early May, a small squad of about 20 Australian-trained military police and paramilitary police, led by Major Alfredo Alves Reinado, joined with the rebels and issued a demand that President Xanana Gusmao dismiss Alkatiri or they would wage a guerilla war against the government.

Alkatiri responded on May 9 by requesting that Portugal—the colonial ruler over East Timor until the 1975

Indonesian invasion— sponsor an extension of the UN presence on the island and send 100 or more paramilitary police to assist his government maintain stability. The request dovetailed with a series of steps by Alkatiri over the past several years to try and lessen the dependency of East Timor on Australia and its US backer and to strengthen ties with Portugal and the European Union.

Alkatiri's government has also declined to accept any loans from the World Bank which would have required a series of economic reforms and, in 2004, it contracted CNPC, the major Chinese oil company, to explore for oil and gas fields in those areas of the Timor Sea under Dili's control. All of these moves have raised major concerns in both Washington and Canberra.

The Howard government's decision to dispatch two warships to the area has unfolded in this context. On May 12, after talks with the Bush administration, Howard announced the two warships would be sent to northern Australia for a possible deployment, without so much as notifying the East Timorese government. The following week, from May 17 to 19, a Fretilin congress was held where a faction of the leadership, including the ambassador to the UN and the US, Jose Luis Guterres, and the former ambassador to Australia, Jorge Teme, initiated a campaign to unseat Alkatiri as party leader and prime minister. The campaign received open backing from the Australian media.

But on May 19, Guterres' attempt to unseat the prime minister collapsed when the overwhelming majority of Fretilin delegates re-endorsed him in a vote on the floor of the congress. Later that day, the European Union announced a \$US30 million grant to East Timor. Three days later, on Monday May 22, five of the first six exploration contracts for Timorese fields were granted to Italian energy company ENI.

On Tuesday, the rebel soldiers ignored offers of talks from Gusmao and Alkatiri and provoked the violent clashes. Their openly stated aim has been to create a crisis, and force the hand of the government to allow the Australian troops in. SBS journalist David O'Shea reported on Tuesday, after interviewing rebel leader Major Reinado, that the rebel troops were "calling out for Australian peace-keepers".

Yesterday, Australian Prime Minister John Howard told a press conference in Ireland that there would be no Australian military intervention until his government received a written invitation, signed by both the president and prime minister of East Timor. The *Australian* reported this morning that Gusmao and Alkatiri had been

involved in a "shouting match" over the decision to invite foreign troops, which only came after lengthy phone calls between Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and his Timorese counterpart Jose Ramos Horta.

As the troops flood into Dili, the Australian political establishment is making no secret of its general sympathy for the rebel soldiers, its animosity toward Alkatiri and its desire for "regime change".

While Alkatiri was denouncing the rebels for making threats of "bringing down the state", acting Australian prime minister and treasurer Peter Costello told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that the rebels had "political grievances" and "industrial grievances" that an independent commission should investigate.

Today's *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial declared that responsibility for the split in the armed forces "lies with the Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri" and that "Alkatiri should consider stepping aside". The *Australian* denounced Alkatiri for having a "political tin ear" and that it was essential the Australian troops were seen "as the ally of the Timorese people, rather than the protector of politicians". The editorial referred to the rebels as "alienated former soldiers" who "suspect their leaders of mercenary motives".

It appears that moves are already afoot to launch another challenge to Alkatiri's leadership. Replying to a question about whether the invitation of troops amounted to an admission by Alkatiri that he had lost control, East Timor's foreign minister Horta declared it was an "acknowledgement of our inability to lead our people in a wise and effective manner".

Horta is regarded more favourably by the Howard government. Like Gusmao, he is being lined up to play a key role in replacing Alkatiri and ensuring East Timor remains a pliant Australian client state.

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