

Australian government insists on independent military presence in East Timor

By John Roberts and Peter Symonds
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Political tensions have once again resurfaced in East Timor, as Canberra, in the wake of its military intervention in May, seeks to consolidate Australian influence in Dili against its rivals, particularly the former colonial power Portugal.

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer flew to East Timor on Sunday following the “escape” on August 30 of rebel leader Major Alfredo Reinado and 56 others from Dili’s jail. Reinado, who received training in Australia, initiated the violent clashes that provided the pretext for the dispatch of Australian troops in May. He and his fellow prisoners reportedly walked out of the jail’s main gate amid a diversionary disturbance.

East Timor’s Prime Minister Jose Ramos-Horta publicly criticised the Australian military for failing to provide adequate security. “I am personally puzzled why in spite of our repeated requests for static forces to be outside the prison this was not done,” he told ABC radio last Friday. “I assume the Australian forces... as experts in security, they thought it was not necessary, although we had asked repeatedly.”

Australian Prime Minister John Howard immediately dismissed the suggestion that Australian troops were responsible for the jailbreak. Downer, who was due to meet Ramos-Horta, East Timorese President Xanana Gusmao and Indonesian Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda yesterday, declared that “the East Timorese have to accept responsibility for their own affairs”.

Canberra’s sensitivity over the role of Australian troops follows disagreements in the UN Security Council over the leadership of an international security contingent in East Timor. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan backed by Portugal, China and three other members of the Australian-led intervention force—New Zealand, Malaysia and the Philippines—proposed that

all police and military be brought under the command of the new UN Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT).

The Howard government, however, has demanded that the military force remain under Australian control. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Australian ambassador Robert Hill told the Security Council that the UN should concentrate “on the roles it could fulfill efficiently, such as providing a policing presence and helping to build East Timorese institutions, and leave the military role to a multinational force headed by Australia.”

Canberra’s insistence on an independent military presence is aimed at defending Australian economic and strategic interests in the small impoverished state, above all the lion’s share of the Timor Sea oil and gas reserves. Its intervention in May had nothing to do with any concern for the plight of the East Timorese, but was driven by growing concerns over former Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri’s links with Portugal, China and other countries.

Of the 2,300 foreign troops and police currently in East Timor, about 1,500 soldiers and 200 police are Australian. The rest are from Malaysia, New Zealand and Portugal. In the debate in the Security Council, the US, Britain and Japan sided with Australia and pushed through a resolution on August 25, authorising a civil component of 1,608 police for six months with the possibility of further extensions. By default, the military forces remain under Australian control.

Hinting at the neo-colonial character of the Australian operation, Brazil’s UN delegate Piragibe Tarrago expressed concern during the debate about “a tendency to transfer the responsibilities of the United Nations to individual countries. While such expediency might help in emergencies, it carried many risks,

ranging from an association of the United Nations with condoning ‘trusteeship’ ... to damaging the image of the UN... as a neutral and impartial provider of assistance.”

Significantly, East Timor’s Prime Minister Ramos-Horta opposed Australia’s push to maintain an independent military force. Ramos-Horta sided with the Australian intervention and played a key role in Canberra’s efforts to oust Alkatiri. After Alkatiri resigned in late June, the Howard government made no secret of its support for Ramos-Horta, who has a long association with Canberra, as the preferred replacement.

Ramos-Horta’s current manoeuvring reflects the extremely unstable political situation in Dili. Alkatiri has been forced to resign but his Fretilin party still holds a majority in parliament and virtually all of the cabinet posts. Despite being pushed back by the Australian intervention, Portugal retains strong political ties in its former colony, particularly within Fretilin.

Ramos-Horta appears to be trying to play both sides of the fence—pressing for parliamentary endorsement of a Timor Sea oil and gas agreement that would benefit Canberra, and, at the same time, arguing against an independent Australian military presence to maintain the support of Fretilin and Portugal. His questioning of Canberra over the failure of Australian troops to prevent the jail break places a further question mark over their role.

Reinado’s “escape” will be a further destabilising factor. He will undoubtedly link up with other hard-line anti-Fretilin parties and militia, who backed the Australian intervention, as a means of ousting not only Alkatiri, but the Fretilin government as a whole. In a TV interview last Friday, Reinado described Ramos-Horta as weak and blamed his government for the continuing violence in Dili.

Reinado was being held on charges of attempted murder and illegal possession of weapons. Prior to his escape, another leading figure in the violence in May, Vincente da Conceicao, also known as “Railos”, escaped to the hills as the Office of Prosecutor-General was about to issue a warrant for his arrest on weapons charges. Even though Railos was obviously hostile to Alkatiri, his unsubstantiated claims that Alkatiri had authorised him to form a “hit squad” to kill Fretilin’s opponents was the central accusation in Canberra’s

campaign to oust the former prime minister.

In Dili, youth gangs connected to Fretilin’s opponents have again attacked refugee camps. Last Friday 300 thugs invaded a camp near the city centre. Four gunmen opened fire with police-issue pistols and an automatic rifle, injuring at least eight people, two critically. Jose Sousa-Santos, a youth worker, told the weekend *Sydney Morning Herald* that gangs of unemployed youth involved in violence in Dili were being manipulated for political and criminal purposes. “The kids are a very buyable commodity,” he said.

In the midst of this growing instability, Australian Foreign Minister Downer’s visit is aimed at safeguarding Canberra’s interests and pressuring East Timor’s parliament into giving an immediate go-ahead for the exploitation of Timor Sea oil and gas.

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