

Standing by East Timor

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Contents

- [SUMMARY](#)
- [INTRODUCTION](#)
- [WAS THERE EXTERNAL MANIPULATION](#)
- [THE BLAME GAME](#)
- [COMPETING INTERESTS](#)
- [WHO FAILED EAST TIMOR?](#)
- [CALLS FOR REGIME CHANGE](#)
- [STANDING UP FOR EAST TIMOR](#)

SUMMARY

East Timor is currently undergoing a serious political and humanitarian crisis where domestic security has broken down, over 30 people have been killed, many more wounded and over 150,000 displaced from their homes. Rebel factions have established bases in the hills while armed, rival gangs are creating terror in the streets of Dili. Peacekeeping troops from four countries are currently in East Timor to restore law and order. Rebel factions and opposition leaders demand the resignation of Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri as a condition for laying down their arms.

There are indications that internal political differences may have been manipulated by external forces. East Timor is a country of interest to many of its neighbors (and some distant powers as well) for its oil and gas reserves and its geographically strategic position. The biggest contenders for power in East Timor at present are Australia and Portugal, both of who have sent their troops to restore law and order. Indonesia is biding its time and more likely to operate through ASEAN in the immediate future. The US seems content to act through Australia at least during this crisis, since it is too overstretched elsewhere to send peace-keeping troops.

The current crisis is being portrayed in the international news media as a case of “state failure.” However, the UN and donor countries are not willing to examine the failure of the “nation building” and “post-conflict reconstruction” model that they forcibly imposed on a country emerging from over 200 years of colonialism and violent occupation. More than 50 per cent of the US\$ 3 billion of “reconstruction aid” went to foreign consultants, tied procurements and expatriate salaries. The huge expatriate community of the reconstruction industry created a bubble economy which collapsed when the UN mission started to wind down. As the reconstruction industry upped and left, it was easy to see what they left behind: unemployment, hunger and resentment.

Much of the international community has been quick to blame the current crisis on Mari Alkatiri and the Fretilin government. This dovetails well with the views of Alkatiri-Fretilin critics within the country, who charge that Fretilin manipulated the faith of the Timorese people to put in place a patron-client form of government that serves its own interests rather than those of the Timorese people. There are even calls for “regime change” in the international press. It is clear that external forces are in a strong position to manipulate and exploit East Timor’s internal struggles and failures.

It is imperative that East Timor's leadership comes together at this juncture to resolve the current crisis collectively. Decisions about who governs and leads East Timor must be made by Timorese people, and not hijacked by Australia, the UN, US, New Zealand, Indonesia, Japan, ASEAN, the World Bank, or the private companies coveting the country's resources. The most urgent priority now is to rally around the people of East Timor in their struggle for sovereignty, peace, and economic and political justice.

INTRODUCTION

East Timor is in the grip of an escalating political and humanitarian crisis. What began as a protest by soldiers in the country's national army has over the past two months, spun out of control into what now resembles an incipient civil war.

In February, 591 soldiers of East Timor's military—the Falintil-Forças de Defesa de Timor-Leste (F-FDTL)—sent a petition to the government complaining of discrimination in the army based on ethnicity and region. The petitioners, who come from the country's west, claimed that they were being passed over for assignments and promotions in favour of their colleagues from the country's east. In protest, the petitioners left their barracks and were considered as Away Without Leave (AWOL) by the F-FDTL command. A month later in March, the Timorese Government sacked the 591 petitioners—almost half of the F-FDTL force of 1400—for desertion. On April 24, representatives from the petitioners group led by Lieutenant Gastao Salsinha met with Timorese President Xanana Gusmao and demanded that the President, the Parliament and the Supreme Court urgently address their complaints and resolve the situation. Shortly thereafter, what seemed to be a peaceful demonstration erupted in violence between the demonstrators and stall owners in a local market. It is unclear who instigated the violence. On April 28, a demonstration of over 3000 people to protest discrimination in the army erupted into riots and F-FDTL soldiers shot at the crowd, leaving 5 dead and many more wounded. [1]

By April, the Timorese army and police force (the Polícia Nacional Timor-Leste or PNTL) had started to splinter into 'rebel' and 'loyalist' factions that turned against each other and against civilians suspected of being allied with one or the other factions. The rebels established their base in the hills surrounding Dili and are armed with automatic weapons and other artillery. Rebel leaders Major Alfredo Reinado and Lieutenant Gustao Salsinha repeatedly called for international peace keeping forces—especially Australian troops—to take over domestic security and disarm what they call Fretilin [2] party militias in the capital city Dili and in the rural areas. Major Reinado has charged that Alkatiri ordered the loyalist F-FDTL soldiers to fire at innocent civilians during the April 28 demonstration which was peaceful.

The situation became further complicated by the involvement of local gangs composed of unemployed youth proficient in martial arts and armed with machetes, knives and in some cases, firearms, who are said to have close ties with different rebel factions, as well as with militias in West Timor. The gangs now more or less rule the streets and have been instrumental in spreading terror in Dili and beyond.

The violence that erupted in and around Dili since April has left more than 30 people dead, many more wounded and over 150,000 displaced from their homes. There are indications that the unrest is spreading in rural areas. Food, clean water and cooking fuel are in short supply and the fledgling national health-service is gravely over-stretched in its attempts to treat those wounded by the violence. Equally serious are the fear and absolute lack of trust and security that have gripped the majority of Timorese as a result of continuing raids on homes, markets, office buildings and

churches, street violence, looting and arson by local gangs, despite the presence of over 2000 peace-keeping troops and police from Australia, New Zealand, Portugal and Malaysia. While expatriates living in Dili have the option of evacuation to safer areas, most Timorese do not, and have either fled to the hills or sought refuge in temporary shelters at airport, aid agency and church compounds. Gang violence is also hampering attempts by international relief agencies to supply those displaced with food, water and healthcare.

In early May, the government established a Commission of Investigation to look into the petitioners' complaints and authorized a subsidy to be paid to the petitioners as a means to reintegrate them into civilian life. The government also decided to order F-FDTL troops to return to their barracks and PNTL members carrying automatic firearms to withdraw from patrols. These decisions were taken to reduce the levels of fear felt by the public and to convince them that the government was in control of the situation. [3]

By late May, Australian Defense Force (ADF) troops had landed in East Timor, soon followed by police forces from Malaysia, Portugal and New Zealand. On May 31, President Xanana Gusmao declared a "state of grave crisis" for a period of 30 days and assumed control over the country's security forces. On June 1, directed by President Gusmao, Prime Minister Alkatiri sacked the Minister of Interior Rogerio Lobato and Minister of Defense Roque Rodrighes and on June 2, Foreign Minister Jose Ramos Horta took over the defense portfolio. Rebel leaders are not placated and demand that Gusmao must also sack Alkatiri as Prime Minister. Alkatiri, however, is refusing to step down, insisting that he has the backing of Fretilin and that Fretilin is the country's legitimate elected government. Alkatiri has also claimed that the current crisis is an attempted coup d'etat in order to divide the country and topple East Timor's democratically elected government ahead of next year's national elections.

The latest twist in events is claims by Commander Vincente da Conceicao, alias "Railos", that he and about 30 former anti-Indonesia guerillas were recruited in early May by former Interior Minister Lobato to intimidate and assassinate dissident army officers and Parliament members who oppose Alkatiri's leadership. These claims are backed by the leader of the Democratic Party (one of East Timor's opposition parties) Fernando de Araujo, who says that he had to go into hiding after being informed by sympathetic local intelligence officers that they had orders from "high levels in government" to kill him. Both Railos and Araujos also claim that Alkatiri ordered the distribution of weapons to militants loyal to Fretilin and orchestrated the violence in the country. [4] Alkatiri and Fretilin deny these allegations. On 11 June, Foreign Minister Ramos Jorta announced that the Timorese Government has requested the UN to establish an independent Special Inquiry Commission to look into the events and issues that have precipitated the current crisis. [5]

WAS THERE EXTERNAL MANIPULATION?

Some Timorese insiders and foreign analysts have raised concerns that external agents manipulated political differences within the country to exacerbate a situation that could have been settled in a less conflictual manner.

Despite Fretilin's dominance in parliament, the country has an active opposition made up of several political parties, who challenge the legitimacy of Fretilin's leadership and even question whether the parliament was democratically elected. Those opposed to Alkatiri's government say that he is willing to take extreme measures to remain in power. Added to this are differences among the country's top leadership: President Xanana Gusmao, Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri and Foreign Minister Jose Ramos Horta, who led the country's transition independence under the supervision of an interim UN

administration. While Gusmao and Horta favoured the adoption of a presidential system, Alkatiri was able to leverage a parliamentary form of government which greatly curtailed Gusmao's powers over government. But Gusmao is widely viewed as the father of East Timor's independence and his backing of any government is considered critical to ensuring its legitimacy. Alkatiri's aloof and top-down leadership style is clearly at odds with Gusmao's populist grassroots leanings and Horta's inclinations towards Euro-American style liberalism.

The desertion by the first batch of disgruntled soldiers (also called the "petitioners") and the subsequent actions of the rebels display high levels of organisation and confidence with regard to their safety and calls for international support. [6] Some Timorese insiders say that the petitioners did not take any arms with them when they left their barracks. Yet, the rebel factions and many gang members seem well armed, leading to suspicions that arms are being brought into the country illegally.

Also unusual was the apparent readiness of ADF troops to move into East Timor well before an official request was made by the Timorese Government for assistance. About ten days before the Fretilin Party Congress on May 19, two Australian navy ships had already moved to Australia's northern waters on "stand-by" so that they could reach Dili quickly if called by the Timorese Government. While Australian press and media portray the ADF intervention in East Timor as driven purely by a commitment to restore peace and stability, many analysts within Australia attribute more sinister motives to the deployment and suspect that it is aimed more at bringing about a "regime change" and replacing the Alkatiri government with an administration more responsive to Australian interests. [7]

The United States (US) has been surprisingly muted in its response to the current crisis. Although it has offered support to the Timorese Government, for the moment it seems content to let Australia take the lead. [8] However, US support for "democracy promotion" activities in the country have been viewed with mistrust by Fretilin and many Timorese civil society organisations. In 2003, rumors were rife in Dili that the USAID funded International Republican Institute was supporting a shadow government. In 2005, the US Embassy in Dili supported Church led protests against the government's efforts to make religious education optional in state run schools. These protests transformed into demands for the criminalization of homosexuality and abortion, the removal of "communists" from government and for the resignation of Mari Alkatiri. [9]

Gang violence also does not appear to be random, but rather directed at specific targets. On May 31, the office of the Serious Crimes Unit (SCU) in the East Timor Attorney General's Office (AGO) was looted by unidentified gang members. According to Attorney General Longuinhos Monteiro, all 138 computers in the office were seized by the looters and the SCU lost 99 percent of the evidence gathered over the past five years on crimes committed by Indonesian soldiers and Indonesia-backed militias against the Timorese in 1999. A few days later, the office of the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in East Timor (CAVR) in Dili was similarly attacked, although here, documentation of military and militia crimes were not lost. Rice stocks, agricultural equipment and reserve stocks of rice, maize, bean and sorghum seeds stored in government warehouses were also looted, crippling the government's ability to respond to food shortages and support thousands of subsistence farmers in case of crop failure. For people in and around Dili, the current situation revives terrifying memories of the scorched earth strategy of the Indonesia backed militias in 1999, when their own neighbors turned into deadly foes.

The presence of well-armed foreign troops with high-tech weapons, equipment and armoured personnel carriers did not deter gang violence. The first two tasks the Australian military undertook upon reaching Dili were to secure the Dili airport, and confine the remaining Timorese army and police forces to their barracks. They made no attempts, however, to disarm the rebel groups. Also

disturbing are reports of repeated meetings between ADF command and Reinado, indicating that the ADF possibly views Reinado as having an important role in the country's future. [10]

THE BLAME GAME

International analysts, the press and UN officials seem to agree that an important cause of East Timor's current troubles is that the UN Transitional Authority for East Timor (UNTAET) —especially the police — left the country too soon and before it was ready to handle its own security. Senior UN officials, including Secretary General Kofi Annan, are cautioning international peace-keeping forces against leaving conflict "hot-spots" too soon. UN Member states have been criticized for their rush to downsize security operations in East Timor despite reports from the UN Office for Timor Leste (UNOTIL) that the situation inside the country was fragile and sensitive. Australia and the US in particular, opposed even a 12 month extension of the UN mandate this year, in sharp contrast to their military deployments elsewhere. Obliquely referring to the US, Japan and Australia, Annan recently stated, "There is a lesson here for all of us," he said. "We [the UN Secretariat] had indicated that the UN should remain in East Timor a bit longer, but governments - some governments - were quite keen that we scale back as quickly as possible." [11]

However, the lion's share of the blame has been directed towards East Timor's current government and Mari Alkatiri's controversial leadership. The consensus among political leaders, think-tanks, analysts and the press seems to be that East Timor has plunged into chaos and lawlessness because of the Timorese Government's "failure to govern," thus necessitating renewed international intervention. The government messed up big time, say most press and media reports, many of them written by influential academics and policy analysts from Australia, New Zealand, the US, Singapore and Malaysia. Alkatiri in particular has been described as "arrogant," "aloof" and "authoritarian" in the mainstream press. Had he acted urgently to address the concerns of the petitioners, none of this would have happened. And if East Timor collapses as a state, no one is to be blamed but the Timorese themselves.

Another factor frequently invoked in the press is the ethnic-political divide between the country's easterners (lorosae) and westerners (loromonu). When Indonesia invaded East Timor, the western parts of the country were pacified earlier than the eastern parts, thus allowing more enduring pockets of resistance in the eastern areas. Many Timorese argue, however, that this does not constitute an east-west divide and that resistance to Indonesian rule was uniformly fierce across the country; even Falintil guerrillas living in jungles in the east survived with the support of underground resistance movements in the west. While Timorese acknowledge that ethnic differences do exist among numerous groups across the country, some also believe that the Lorosae-Loromonu divide is being inflated to provide cover for other vested interests.

COMPETING INTERESTS

For over 200 years, East Timor has been colonized and/or occupied by Portugal, Japan and Indonesia. Now, even at its independence, the country is subject to a slew of competing pressures from old and new imperial powers.

Posturing by the region's economic and military powers indicates that East Timor may well become a buffer zone between Indonesia and Australia as they carve out their respective neo-colonial spheres of influence. Diplomatic relations between Jakarta and Canberra have been strained since

1999, when Australia supported independence for East Timor. Relations have been particularly frosty since Australia granted asylum to 42 West Papuans. Canberra and Jakarta are poised to enter into new military/security and bilateral cooperation agreements which will include increased military cooperation, intelligence sharing, joint naval surveillance, countering terrorism, combating international crime, preventing illegal migration and government-to-government assistance. Most important, Australia will pledge support for Indonesia's territorial integrity. The new treaty comes on the heels of full resumption of military ties between the US and Indonesia, which had been frozen since the November 1991 massacre of more than 200 Timorese youth by the Indonesian military at the Santa Cruz cemetery. [12]

Indonesia is making every effort to project its innocence in relation to East Timor's current troubles. Early on in the unrest, it closed its borders with East Timor and since then has consistently offered humanitarian assistance. On 8 June, Singapore's daily newspaper, the Straits Times, reported, "It would be disingenuous for anyone to point an accusing finger at Jakarta. In fact, the Indonesians have been studiously staying out of harm's way, lest they be accused of instigating the current civil strife." [13] Breaking away from the official Indonesian position that East Timor's problems are its own "internal affairs," Amris Hasan, a member of Indonesia's Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs recently claimed that Australia was responsible for the current crisis in East Timor. [14] According to Hasan, Timor was not ready for independence in 1999, but Canberra pushed hard for independence in order to further its regional, super-power ambitions, and then withdrew its troops before the country was stable.

Australia's primary economic interests in its northern waters are the oil and gas fields of the Timor Gap. Emulating US unilateralism, Australia withdrew from the maritime boundary dispute resolution mechanisms of the International Court of Justice and the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea two months before East Timor's independence. This left East Timor with no legal recourse to claim their fair share of oil and gas wealth as per international law. The language of past and present Australian leadership indicate that they view the region encompassing East Timor, West Papua, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands as an "arc of instability" in which Australia must act decisively in order to ensure its national and regional interests.

Also important here is a tug of war between Australia and Portugal over who exerts greater influence in East Timor, which the Australian press routinely refers to as "Australia's own backyard" or "Australia's doorstep." Australian Prime Minister John Howard's recent assertions that the crisis in East Timor was due to "poor governance" were roundly criticized by Portuguese Foreign Minister Diogo Freitas do Amaral as "interference in the internal affairs" of East Timor. Conservative elements in the Australian press have called Portugal "Australia's diplomatic enemy in East Timor" and claim that Portugal is propping up Alkatiri to maintain control over the country's policies. [15]

Tensions between the two countries are also evident in the current peace-keeping operations in East Timor. Lisbon rebuffed Canberra's demand that the four-country peace-keeping force answer to a single Australia led command. The ensuing stand-off was finally resolved by setting aside the suburb of Comoro in Dili as an "exclusive zone" of operations for Portuguese police, which will gradually expand to cover the entire city. [16] In the meantime, Australian Justice Minister Chris Ellison was in New York in early June trying to win UN support for an ongoing Australian-led force in East Timor. According to Ellison, ADF intervention in East Timor would be modeled on Australia's Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) where key state institutions such as the police, prisons, courts and finance, are in the hands of Australian officials installed to run the administration for at least a decade. [17]

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is also in the picture. According to the Malaysian Defence Minister, Alkatiri made a personal appeal to Malaysia for peace-keeping troops

and Malaysia responded because it was concerned about the lack of an ASEAN presence in East Timor to quell the crisis. If ASEAN did not act now, its own relevance as a peace-broker in the region would be in question.

WHO FAILED EAST TIMOR?

Over the past month, policy analysts and the news media have repeatedly called East Timor a “failed state,” or a nation on the brink of “failure.” But they have avoided the more fundamental question of who failed East Timor. [18]

When Indonesia invaded and occupied East Timor in 1975, the most powerful members of the international community turned a blind eye. The US, Britain, much of Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) all financed Indonesian President Suharto’s ability to build a killing and occupying force. But by 1999, they were quick to join the East Timor independence bandwagon with offers of aid, policy advice and a slew of reconstruction and development programmes. Sticking to their principle of “non-interference” in the internal affairs of another member state, ASEAN member countries were silent about the invasion. But by 2000, they were contributing troops to UN peacekeeping forces in East Timor and shamelessly bidding for reconstruction contracts.

The UN programme for “nation building” and post-conflict reconstruction in East Timor was expensive, poorly coordinated and hostage to competing donor priorities. It placed many demands on a fledgling, inexperienced and understandably nervous Timorese Government, but left it without the infrastructure, resources and logistical support required to carry out its responsibilities. Instead of expanding the government’s ranks to create jobs, administrative and governance capacity and build a public sector capable of responding to local peoples’ needs, East Timor’s donors demanded a small, efficient and private sector oriented government.

Since 1999, an estimated US\$3 billion was committed by international donors to East Timor for “post conflict reconstruction” and much of this was routed through the World Bank managed Trust Fund for East Timor (TFET). More than half of this foreign assistance went towards the salaries and consultant fees of foreign experts and advisers. A European Commission evaluation of the TFET noted that over a third of the allocated funds were eaten up by foreign consultants’ fees, overheads and tied procurements. Little of the reconstruction honey pot was left in Dili, and even less went outside of Dili to address urgent problems of hunger, malnourishment, long term food security, clean water, preventable diseases and unemployment. Both Australia and the World Bank refused to help the Timorese build a rice industry or become self-sufficient in food production. And as is evident now, very little of this money was used to build the infrastructure and capacity to handle crises such as the one that East Timor is facing today.

Equally shocking were the disparity in salaries among foreigners and Timorese, and the differences in employment opportunities for locals and foreigners. A senior international consultant often earned in one month what twenty Timorese officials colleagues earned together in an entire year. The salary of a UN driver was likely to be more than that of a university lecturer-if the university functioned at all.

The presence of a highly paid expatriate community created an artificial economy which was entirely dependant on the presence of the reconstruction industry. Food, housing, services, recreation facilities and business opportunities abounded for international peacekeepers, administrators, development and security professionals, NGOs and contractors, while the majority of the local population struggled with dysfunctional infrastructure, non-existent or poor quality services and

dead-end jobs. It is hardly surprising that the obvious disparity in living standards between local communities and reconstruction industry beneficiaries resulted in resentment, suspicion, rising crime rates and social unrest. At the same time, the presence of the reconstruction industry also meant jobs, albeit temporarily. It did not seem to occur to the numerous “advisors” that building a viable and self-sustaining economy from scorched earth takes time, and that as soon as the UN mission started scaling down, this economic bubble would burst. Today, unemployment in East Timor is over 50 per cent, and majority of the unemployed are young people, ripe for recruitment into gangs and militias.

Those who lament the lack of professionalism and ethics in East Timor’s security forces would do well to look back at how “capacity building” in this area was handled. In 2001, it was agreed that Falintil (the armed wing of the pre-1999 independence movement) soldiers would be incorporated into the FDTL and the PNTL. In order to create “modern” military and police forces, new “professional” standards for recruitment—such as education levels, height and health—were introduced, which many Falintil soldiers did not meet. Plus, there were more Falintil soldiers than there were jobs available. As a result, many Falintil veterans were “reintegrated” into civilian life society through a World Bank-IOM (International Office of Migration) programme which failed, thus leaving veteran fighters of East Timor’s liberation army poor and destitute in a liberated East Timor.

Under pressure from the US and Australia to separate the FDTL and PNTL from “politics,” UN authorities overlooked the sensitivities likely to arise from the assignment of military posts and responsibilities. According to Rahung Nasution, a well known Dili based filmmaker, “The transformation of Falintil, a national liberation army, into a regular army destroyed the relationship which evolved along the struggle. The relationship between the armed guerrilla fighter and the people along the history of resistance can be compared to that between the fish and the water. The fundamental relationship such as this was never considered as important in the process of establishing the F-FDTL institution.” [19]

The training and education of the new military and police forces was also wracked by inter-country wrangling and competition. There were frequent disagreements about which country’s police systems, protocols and practices the F-FDTL and PNTL should follow (the main contenders then as now, were Portugal and Australia), creating confusion among recruits who were completely unfamiliar with any form of security activity apart from guerilla warfare, or with a support structure other than grassroots mobilizing. If East Timor’s security forces are a problem today, those tasked with training them have themselves to blame.

Australia has refused to give up its dominance over the oil and gas fields of the Timor Gap-fields that Australia received from Indonesia as a price for not opposing Indonesia’s invasion of East Timor. Timor Gap revenues are estimated to be over US \$30 billion, much of which belongs to East Timor by international law and is money that the country desperately needs to build essential social, physical and institutional infrastructure.

A financially independent East Timor would be a politically independent East Timor, unwilling to cave in to pressures by the World Bank, the ADB and powerful donor countries to put in place a full scale market capitalist economy that provides cheap labour and raw materials to private corporations. It is hardly surprising that having experienced at close quarters the failure of the nation-building and reconstruction model imposed by the “international community,” East Timor’s government has attempted to take a different development path for the country.

CALLS FOR REGIME CHANGE

The most disturbing confluence of internal and external interests is in the calls for “regime change,” targeted at East Timor’s controversial Prime Minister, Mari Alkatiri. Within the country, rebel factions and members of the opposition are demanding Alkatiri’s resignation. Led by Manuel Tilman, an opposition leader, a small group of “intellectuals” are trying to convince President Gusmao to suspend the constitution, dissolve the parliament and appoint a transitional government until the 2007 general elections. The campaign to oust Alkatiri is not new, and came out in the open last year when the government proposed that religious education in state schools be optional rather than compulsory. The enraged Catholic Church denounced Alkatiri’s government as “extremist” and alleged that democracy was being endangered by a cabinet containing secret “Marxists” intent on turning East Timor into a communist country. [20]

Such views are also echoed by opinion leaders in Australia, New Zealand, the US and ASEAN. In a lot of Australian and international news media, Alkatiri has been variously referred to as a disastrous prime minister, a Yemeni Arab Muslim, a wily Marxist and a communist. Counter-posed to these appellations are the “universally loved and admired” Xanana Gusmao and the “ever-obliging” Nobel laureate José Ramos-Horta. [21]

In the early days of the current unrest, “regime change” was almost as much as called for in the mainstream Australian news media, especially once Australia launched its military intervention. [22] Although such language has now been toned down, the sense communicated by many Australian and regional analysts is that Alkatiri’s days as Prime Minister are numbered and that Jose Ramos Horta might well be the country’s next Prime Minister. Worried that the “failure” of East Timor will undermine ASEAN’s attempts to build an ASEAN Security Community, it suits the ASEAN leadership just fine that Gusmao and Ramos Horta “assert their leadership” to prevent “the disintegration of the Timorese state.” [23]

US and Australian opposition to Alkatiri stems from the fact that he has rejected the neo-liberal ideology that constitutes the mainstay of post-conflict reconstruction models. This rejection is based on his recognition of the practical consequences of such a model on African countries during his years in exile in Mozambique.

For many Timorese, Alkatiri is not a demon. He is an “economic nationalist,” striving with Fretilin to build a “peoples’ state” rather than a “capitalist state.” [24] East Timor is said to have one of the most progressive constitutions in the world. Alkatiri has steadfastly refused to accept loans from the World Bank and ADB in order to avoid falling into the debt trap at such an early stage. Despite being one of the poorest countries in the world, East Timor remains debt free. Alkatiri has opposed the privatization of essential services such as water, education, electricity, transportation and healthcare. His government has prioritized health, education and agriculture for public and private investments, and has promoted domestic rice production to reduce dependency on rice imports (according to a UNDP report, rice production increased from 37,000 tonnes in 1998 to 65000 tonnes in 2004). He has made alliances with Cuba, China, Brazil, Norway and Malaysia in an effort to diversify the country’s economic relationships and counter Australian and US imperial ambitions. Cuban volunteer doctors are currently assisting in the provision of healthcare in many remote parts of the country. Hundreds of Timorese students are now studying medicine in Cuba through Cuban scholarships. East Timor has set up a State Petroleum Company and a Petroleum Fund to manage oil and gas revenues and to ensure that they are used for investments in the public sector.

Alkatiri has also proved to be a thorn in Australian Prime Minister John Howard’s flesh with regard to the Timor Gap negotiations. He has proved to be a tough and astute negotiator and has spoken

out against the Australian Government's bullying tactics. Although East Timor has still not got its fair share of oil revenues, it is certainly several billion dollars better off than it would be in the deal that Howard brought to the table. [25]

But for Australia, the US and other economic powers, gaining control over East Timor's resources and geographically strategic position are more important than Alkatiri's abilities to lead the country towards economic independence.

STANDING UP FOR EAST TIMOR

The label of a "failed state" is an extremely dangerous one for East Timor and a convenient one for its neighbors. In today's global security scenario, a "failed state" evokes images of terrorist havens and dens of transnational crime. The label legitimizes military invasion and occupation in much the same way that Indonesia used the threat of East Timor becoming a "communist state" to invade and occupy the country 31 years ago.

East Timor's current crisis is not a case of state failure, but a tragic example of persistent and on-going international betrayal. In 1999, the people of East Timor chose independence. Instead of the help and solidarity they hoped for and were promised, they have been subjected to political manipulation, economic opportunism, and paternalistic arrogance by the world's most powerful countries.

This is not to say that East Timor's leaders are blameless for what is happening. Alkatiri and Fretilin are accused by many Timorese of corruption and nepotism. But other top figures in Timorese politics are also implicated. Deep seated suspicions, animosities and alliances towards certain diasporas have undermined the project of nation building. The collapse of the national security apparatus, and the terror created by the recent violence have undermined the faith of the Timorese people in the government. Underscoring this are high levels of poverty, unemployment, malnutrition and preventable diseases. Majority of the country's population lives in rural areas that are poorly connected to the capital and devoid of basic public services. Many nurse grief and resentment that perpetrators of the slaughter leading up to independence were never brought to justice. Vulnerable communities are easy targets for manipulation, especially if they lose confidence in their core institutions and leaders.

Certainly if anyone could have calmed the situation, it is Xanana Gusmao, and some wonder why he did not take charge of the situation earlier. Without clear, strong and unified leadership, internal struggles and failures are open to exploitation by external forces. President Gusmao is now showing the importance of such leadership. In his address to the Timorese Parliament on June 14, he acknowledged the collective responsibility of all elements of the Timorese state for the crisis and committed to uphold the Constitution until the end of his mandate in 2007, thus distancing himself from rumors that he might support plans to topple the Alkatiri government by suspending the constitution. [26]

Decisions about who governs and leads East Timor and how, are the prerogatives of the Timorese people, not of Australia, the US, New Zealand, Indonesia, Japan, ASEAN or the private companies coveting the country's resources. The futures of East Timor's political parties and leaders should depend on a genuinely Timorese political process, and not on interference from external forces to secure economic, political and military interests. In 2007, East Timor will again go to the polls. But unless serious and concerted efforts are made by the Timorese and the international community to rebuild what has been destroyed in the past few months, Timorese people will vote in a climate of fear and under severe economic duress.

Over two decades of colonial occupation and war have left Timorese communities fractured and prone to shifting allegiances based on ethnicity, parochialism and often sheer pragmatism with regard to ensuring their survival. The colonial strategy of “divide and rule” ensures that national unity does not necessarily emerge with the formation of an independent post-colonial nation. Building peace, trust, security, collectivity, community and eventually a nation take time. East Timor must be given this time.

In the present crisis, the first priority is to ensure the physical and economic security of Timorese people, including immediate access to food, healthcare, water, housing, etc. Next, we must collectively watch for and oppose all signs of political meddling from external forces under the guise of restoring law and order under a UN mandate.

The UN Security Council has agreed to the Timorese Government’s request for another tour of peacekeeping forces. While Indonesia is not likely to be in these forces, we need to also argue for a much reduced role for Australia. In the UN Security Council meeting going on at present, Australia has already expressed opposition to a UN force taking charge of peace-keeping in East Timor. Australian Ambassador Robert Hill has told the Council that the UN should focus on East Timor’s longer term needs and let Australia take care of security. East Timor, however, has stated that a UN force with the involvement of more countries such as Fiji, Singapore and Thailand is essential to “reduce political and diplomatic tensions.” [27] The Australian position is extremely worrying, especially since UN forces are not likely to be on the ground before six months. Not only should peace-keeping in East Timor be led by a UN supervised international force, but rebuilding Timorese capacity for ensuring its own security must be a crucial task of these operations. East Timor should not be forced to accept Australia’s or any other country’s forces as proxy policemen.

And when a second round of “post-conflict reconstruction” begins—as it almost certainly will—we must advocate at every possible fora for the rights of Timorese to design their own development and reconstruction plans and ensure that the needed resources are made available to assist them in rebuilding their communities, society and nation.

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