

# Protests after Australian troops kill East Timorese youths

Thursday 8 March 2007, by [HEARMAN Vanessa](#) (Date first published: 2 March 2007).

Australian soldiers fired on three youths in Dili on February 23. One youth died at the scene — a camp for internally displaced people (IDP) near Dili Airport. The others were injured; one later died in hospital.

An Australian Defence Department statement claimed that the soldiers had fired in self-defence on two occasions, which occurred when they “responded to a disturbance” at the IDP camp. The youths allegedly fired at the soldiers with steel arrows, which were “potentially lethal weapons”, the ADF statement said.

Brigadier Mal Rerden, Commander of the Joint Forces in East Timor, has claimed that “attacks against international forces” were orchestrated to try to destabilise the country. On February 24, the *Australian* newspaper reported Rerden said, “We are aware that some elements do think that the future of East Timor is better served by not having international elements who are neutral and impartial operating in the country.”

On February 25, a funeral convoy of a few hundred people took place in Dili for the two slain youths. The route took them past the Australian embassy and cars and trucks were adorned with banners, some of them reading, “Australian Army, get out”.

UN police have been arresting people for organising what they term “illegal demonstrations”. The UN News Service reported that two protesters were arrested on February 20 “for organizing an unauthorized demonstration, while UNPOL [UN police] is on alert for another demonstration planned for the capital on [February 21]”. It is unclear which demonstrations are being targeted by the police.

Pre-election rallies by Fretilin have been occurring in many parts of East Timor, such as in Baucau, Gleno (Ermera District), Oecussi and Same. In Oecussi, more than 10,000 people rallied in support of Fretilin, whose presidential candidate is Francisco Guterres (Lu’Olo), the parliamentary speaker. Fretilin has complained that these rallies are being attacked or threatened by provocateurs.

President Xanana Gusmao’s go-ahead for Australian soldiers to arrest Major Alfredo Reinado, who deserted the Timorese Defence Force last year during the country’s crisis, shifted attention from the killings of the youths to the Australian Defence Force operations against the rebel soldier and his supporters.

Reinado and his supporters had been allowed to remain “holed up” in various places, including Ermera and Same, following their escape from Becora Prison last year. Gusmao’s decision came after February 25 raids on police stations in Maliana and Suai districts in which police weapons were stolen.

The IDP camp killings came amid increased crackdowns on gang activities in Dili. During February, more than 100 arrests were made. On January 31 alone, 47 people were arrested in one night.

Weapon searches were also conducted by UN Police and Australian troops. On February 20, six houses were burned and one person killed following a dispute in Kampung Alor, Dili. In response to the recent increase in unrest, 5000 people have left their homes and four more IDP camps have been created to cater for the increased numbers of the internally displaced.

Some of the increased unrest has been blamed on shortages of rice. On February 20, the UN announced that UNPOL was investigating the theft of 700 bags of rice from a World Food Program warehouse. Following the theft, the WFP suspended the rice distribution program.

To ease the rice shortages, the Timorese government began selling rice “lent” to them by the WFP on February 23. Estanislau da Silva, the agricultural minister and deputy prime minister, rejected allegations from anti-Fretilin Catholic priest Domingos Soares that the government was hoarding rice supplies and providing it only to Fretilin supporters. Da Silva said rice shortages were due to the timing of harvests in Thailand and Vietnam and that the country had sufficient potato and maize supplies to avoid starvation.

On February 22 the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1745, extending the mandate of the UN mission in East Timor for a further 12 months and boosting UN police by 140 during the period before and after the April 9 presidential election. The “United Nations Mission in Timor-Leste” was created in August last year following the country’s crisis. Its mandate will now expire on February 26, 2008.

Confirmed presidential candidates so far are Lu’Olo; current prime minister Jose Ramos Horta; lawyer Lucia Lobato; MP Joao Carrascalao of the Timorese Democratic Union party; Fernando de Araujo, an MP from the Democratic Party; Manuel Tilman, an MP from Association of Timorese Heroes (KOTA) party; and Avelino Coelho da Silva from the Socialist Party of Timor.

On February 8, *Suara Timor Lorosae* reported that Coelho’s key policies include “defending the economy for the people, as it is the main factor for social injustice in the country”. He promised that if he won, he would pressure the government and the parliament “to define the investment policies and become partner in the investment process with the population”.

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