

East Timor: More Australian troops sent after shootout

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East Timorese President Jose Ramos Horta was rushed to Darwin to undergo emergency surgery after being shot three times in a February 11 attack on his residence by armed rebels. The apparent leader of the assailants, Major Alfredo Reinado, was killed in the incident.

Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao, who escaped without injury when his car was riddled with bullets in a simultaneous attack, declared a state of emergency in response. Australian PM Kevin Rudd, responding to a call from Gusmao, increased the strength of the Australian-led International Stabilisation Force (ISF) that has occupied East Timor since 2006, dispatching an additional 270 soldiers and federal police and sending the HMAS Perth to Timorese waters.

This brings the number of Australian military and paramilitary in East Timor to over 1100. Speaking on ABC radio on February 15, Rudd would not rule out sending more troops.

Gusmao described the attacks as a coup attempt, a claim echoed by most of the media coverage. However other theories, such as a bungled kidnapping, have also been advanced. ABC Radio Australia reported on February 14 that at Reinado's supporters were claiming that he had not tried to kill Ramos Horta, but had been set up.

However, Reinado's own statements, particularly in 2 DVDs he released, suggested he nurtured a strong sense of having been betrayed by Gusmao and Ramos Horta, and revenge would seem the most likely explanation for the attempted assassinations.

If this is the case, the shootings can be understood as blowback from the murky conspiracies that surrounded the overthrow of former Fretilin PM Mari Alkatiri in 2006. Australia welcomed this overthrow, wishing to see a government more amenable to Australian corporate control of East Timor's maritime hydrocarbon resources.

Reinado, an officer in the military police, was trained at the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra. In May 2006 he led a mutiny of about 600 soldiers and police who claimed that they were being discriminated against by the Alkatiri government. This led to fighting between different factions within the security forces and between rival street gangs.

Gusmao, who was then president, called for Australian military support to restore stability — a call subsequently supported by other government figures including Alkatiri. However, the arrival of the ISF failed to stop arson attacks from increasing, eventually leaving over 150,000 people homeless, many of whom are still living as "internally displaced persons" in camps. The violence cost an estimated 37 lives.

While the majority of victims of the violence were Fretilin supporters, Gusmao and Ramos Horta, who was then foreign minister, expressed sympathy for the "petitioners", as Reinado's mutineers became known, and put the blame for the violence on Alkatiri, whose resignation they called for.

Australian government leaders, including then-PM John Howard, joined the call for Alkatiri's

resignation after the screening of a documentary on the ABC's Four Corners in July 2006 that accused Alkatiri of establishing a death squad to assassinate his opponents, including Reinado. Alkatiri resigned, but was later exonerated of the allegations by a UN enquiry.

He was replaced as Prime Minister by Ramos Horta. In May 2007, Ramos Horta won presidential elections. In parliamentary elections in July, while Fretilin won the largest number of seats of any party, they failed to get an overall majority and Gusmao became Prime Minister of a coalition of non-Fretilin parties. In both polls, Fretilin complained of hostile interference by Australian ISF troops.

By the time of the presidential elections, Reinado and the "petitioners" were waging a low-level guerilla struggle in the mountains of Same district. It was at this point that the first of his DVDs started circulating, in which he claimed that Ramos Horta and Gusmao had promised him high office in a post-Alkatiri government.

Following a May 4 clash with the Australian SAS, which left 5 "petitioners" dead, Ramos Horta called for an end to military operations against Reinado. The Australian forces meticulously observed this right up until the shooting of Ramos Horta. A week before the assassination attempts an Australian patrol had stumbled across Reinado, but backed away after the latter's troops fired warning shots.

In reality, Reinado's chance at a cabinet position was probably lost when he was arrested by Portuguese police on charges of murder on July 27, 2006. While the Portuguese police are under UN command, the legal status of the ISF is dubious, with it not being under a UN mandate or having its status regulated by any act of the Timorese parliament.

Father Frank Brennan, former director of the Jesuit Refugee Service in East Timor, wrote in the December 12 Eureka Street: "There is a growing perception among local critics of the Timor government that the Australian troops are the personal troops of the President, given their presence without full constitutional mandate and their ready response to Horta's arbitrary command, which showed little respect for the traditional separation of powers between the Executive and the judiciary."

It was Australian ISF troops who were "guarding" Reinado and his supporters when they walked out of jail a month after their arrest, and took to the hills with weapons.

Nonetheless, it was not politically expedient to allow a rebel charged with murder by the UN a position in the government. While Gusmao and Ramos Horta attempted to placate Reinado by allowing him to remain free, it is possible they underestimated his bitterness at being denied what he alleges he was promised.

In his second DVD, which began circulating about a month before the fatal shootout, Reinado directly implicated Gusmao in the 2006 mutiny, stating: "He (Gusmao) calls us bad people, but it was he who created us ... He is the author of the petition. He was behind all of this. Now as a Prime Minister, he has changed his tune and is washing his hands. He has turned against us, those who were ordered and created by him. It was with his support that the petition emerged in the first place ... I give my testimony as a witness, that Xanana is the main author of this crisis; he cannot lie or deny this."

While the DVD circulated widely in East Timor, it was banned from the government television station TVTL. It was barely reported in the Australian or international media. For whatever reason, it appears that Reinado decided to seek his revenge in a more direct manner, costing him his life.

Increasing Australia's military presence cannot increase stability in East Timor. Rather than a force

for stability, the ISF has been a participant in fomenting violence and instability.

The partisan and unaccountable nature of the ISF has made it a tool for political leverage. While in opposition, Rudd had argued that Australian forces in East Timor should be under UN command. Unfortunately, his decision to boost the unaccountable ISF suggests he intends to continue the previous government's policy.

P.S.

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