

On the Razor's Edge

After East Timor is savaged by thugs, Indonesia agrees to let in peacekeepers from the United Nations

By TERRY McCARTHY

THE TIMORESE WAS A DEAD MAN WALKING when American teacher Pamela Sexton found him. The militiamen had used machetes on his arms, chopping repeatedly down to the bone. His stomach was slashed open. Blood covered his frame. "Where do you put a tourniquet on someone who has been sliced all over?" asked Sexton, a U.N. observer evacuated last week from East Timor. She took him to the Motael clinic in Dili, but he soon died. The militia later came back and burned the clinic to the ground.

Asia has a new killing field—East Timor. After a majority of the population voted for independence from Indonesia Aug. 30, pro-Jakarta militiamen rampaged through the territory, killing, burning and looting with impunity. Priests and nuns were among those singled out for execution last week as shops, churches, radio stations and clinics were torched. The Roman Catholic humanitarian agency Caritas said "a large part" of the 40-member Caritas team "has been murdered." Some 200,000 people—about a quarter of the population—have fled the territory. By the end of the week, the militias seemed to be withdrawing, and on Sunday evening, amid boiling international pressure, Indonesian President B.J. Habibie agreed to allow U.N. peacekeepers into East Timor. A U.N. team had visited the town on Saturday and gave the world some inkling of what to expect: hundreds of thousands of refugees and a moon-scape of devastation.

The tragedy is that everyone saw East Timor's violence coming, from U.N. officials on the ground to diplomats at U.N. headquarters in New York

City. But it was a sign of the limits of international cooperation that while everyone saw it coming, no one knew what to do. As gruesome images piled up in newspapers and popped up on the nightly news, Americans were perplexed and worried. Why wasn't this like Kosovo? they asked in call-in shows and letters to Congress. The White House responded to the growing public anger with strong condemnations of its own. Said Bill Clinton: "It is now clear that the Indonesian military is aiding and abetting the militia," and called for "an international force to make possible the restoration of security." But presidential advisers made it clear that realpolitik ruled: the U.S. had no plans to fight

its way uninvited into a territory that supplies little more than a specialty coffee bean to Starbucks. "Because we bombed Kosovo doesn't mean we should bomb Dili," said National Security Adviser Sandy Berger.

But the U.S. did push hard for international peacekeepers. And it

seems inevitable that American logistics expertise will gird the multinational force that descends on East Timor. The peacekeeping agreement came after a week of difficult diplomacy, led by U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Annan publicly tried to persuade Indonesia to invite an international peacekeeping force. Privately, he pushed other nations to issue an ultimatum to Jakarta: permit such a force or it will be sent in uninvited. A failure to permit peacekeepers into a killing zone like East Timor, he warned Jakarta, was perilously close to a crime against humanity. When Habibie called Annan at home in New York on Sunday morning to announce his change of heart—Annan told aides he was "relieved" to get the call—the President said there would be no conditions. East

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Timor could have its violently won freedom.

Hints of the fury that struck East Timor had been apparent since January. When Habibie unexpectedly offered locals a referendum on independence, militia groups who wanted continued ties with Jakarta began to organize and acquire guns. Even before the vote, independence campaigners were intimidated and dozens killed. Although the militias were clearly supported by elements of the Indonesian armed forces, the international community in May agreed to entrust security during the referendum period to Indonesia. It was a fatal misjudgment, as the bloodbath showed. Why the killing? There were all kinds of theories. Perhaps the military, angered at having to give up territory it had fought so hard to pacify, wanted to get a few last licks in before pulling out. The military leadership was also clearly afraid that other restive provinces like Aceh and Irian Jaya would use the East Timor precedent to push for their own secession—and so, the theory goes, they wanted to make an example of East Timor. Others argued that regional commanders intended to defy Jakarta and reduce East Timor to a state of anarchy to cancel out entirely the result of the referendum. “The military feels insulted,” says Harry Tjan Silalahi, a think-tank director in Jakarta. “Some may want to restore order, but those in the field have a much different purpose.”

Violence is not new to East Timor, an arid territory about the size of Connecticut. Colonized by the Portuguese in the 16th century, it was invaded by Indonesian troops in December 1975 with the tacit consent of President Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Jakarta’s forces met bitter resistance—some 200,000 East Timorese died as a result of the occupation, and Indonesia’s annexation of East Timor was never recognized by the U.N.

It was to get rid of this diplomatic embarrassment that President Habibie proposed the referendum, ignoring the warnings of powerful military leaders, including armed forces chief General Wiranto. Habibie should have listened. Within hours of the Sept. 4 announcement that nearly 80% of the electorate had voted for independence, Dili and other towns echoed with gunfire as mili-



tiamen took over the streets, unchecked by the military. Civilians began pouring into churches, convents and U.N. compounds seeking safety. “If there is a devil, these militia guys work for him,” said a photographer evacuated from Dili.

If there was any light to be found in East Timor last week, it was in the U.N. compound in Dili, where a small group of aid workers kept up a heroic mission. Though Annan had ordered the compound shut on Wednesday, his local representatives revolted: fearing the 1,500 refugees in the compound would be massacred once the foreigners left, the staff members announced they would stay.

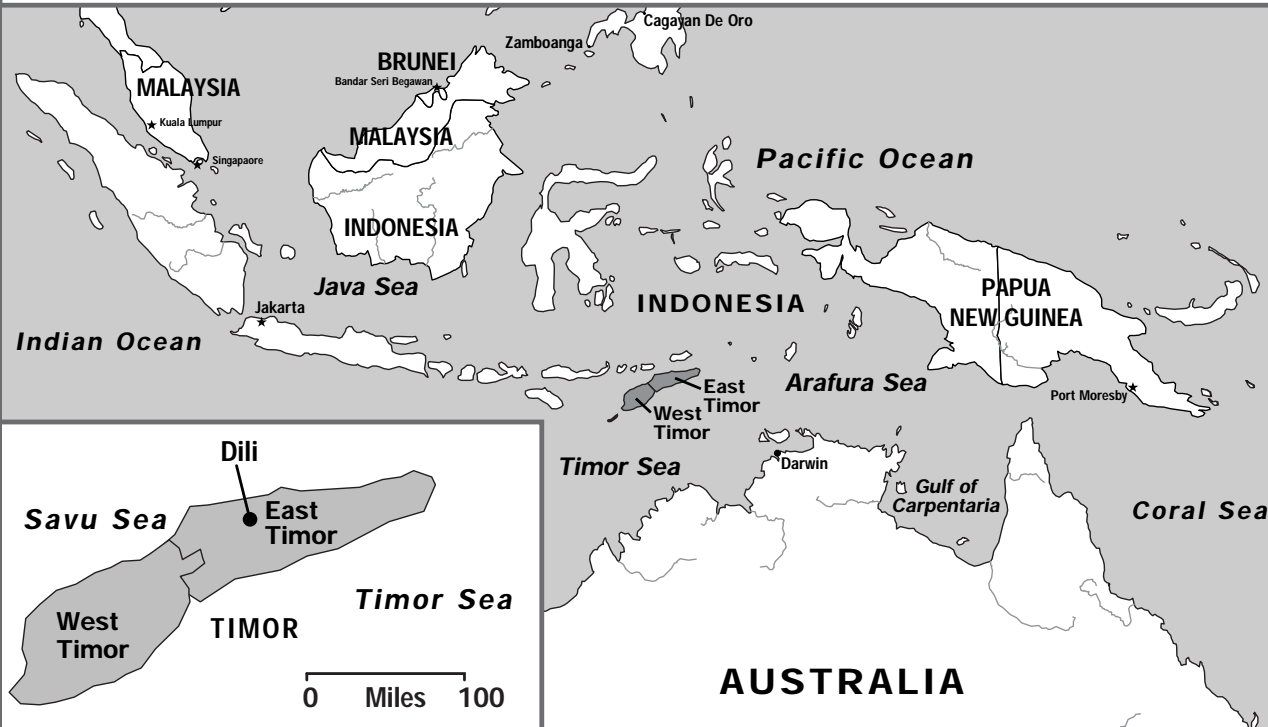
The future for East Timor is uncertain. Much of the territory’s infrastructure has been demolished, and even with topflight international help, it will take years to sculpt the shell-ruined jungles and villages of East Timor into a real nation. In Jakarta, politicians seemed to be coming to terms with the fact that East Timor must be freed. But that may be a more difficult sell on the streets of Dili, where pro-Jakarta militias must still be disarmed and—in some cases—arrested and tried for their crimes. That task now belongs to the U.N. As well as two other tasks: resettling the nation’s 300,000 refugees and asking the rest of the world how, less than six months after Kosovo, it allowed this kind of civil horror to strike again. ■

Questions

1. What does the writer mean when he says that “the tragedy is that everybody saw East Timor’s violence coming”?
2. What theories account for the violence in Dili?



East Timor's Independence Struggle



With the information on this page as background, read "On the Razor's Edge" on page 30. Then check your understanding of the conflict in East Timor by answering the questions below.

Facts About East Timor

People: The majority of the 800,000 residents are indigenous. Others are immigrants from neighboring parts of Indonesia. The vast majority of East Timorese are Roman Catholic, while most newcomers are Muslim.

Geography: With an area of 5,600 square miles, East Timor is a half-island territory lying 1,250 miles east of Indonesia's capital, Jakarta. Its coastline is framed by beaches, rocky cliffs and coral reefs. Its interior is dominated by high and rugged mountains.

History: Portugal abruptly ended 400 years of colonial rule in 1975. In the political vacuum, a fledgling independent government was immediately embroiled in a civil war with rival factions that supported intervention by neighboring Indonesia.

Indonesia invaded in December 1975. An estimated 200,000 people—a quarter of the population—died during the military crackdown and famine that followed. A group of separatist guerrillas fought against Indonesian troops. East Timor's Roman Catholic Bishop Carlos Belo and exiled indepen-

dence activist Jose Ramos Horta jointly won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996. After President Suharto's fall in May 1998, Indonesia agreed to the holding of a U.N.-supervised ballot.

Economy: Coffee is the main cash crop. East Timor could lay claim to Indonesia's share of the Timor gap oil and gas field that lies in water between Timor Island and Australia.

Ballot Questions: East Timorese voters at home and abroad were asked two questions on the ballot: "Do you accept the proposed special autonomy for East Timor within the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia?" or "Do you reject the proposed special autonomy for East Timor, leading to East Timor's separation from Indonesia?" Ballots were counted by U.N. electoral officers.

Sources: AP, CNN

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is the geographical relationship between East Timor and Indonesia?
2. How did East Timor become part of Indonesia?
3. What issue was at stake in the ballot referendum? What was the result of the voting?
4. Why was the referendum followed by violence? How has the Indonesian government responded to this violence? How has the international community addressed this crisis?