



Dili massacre

Timor Leste

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The Dili Massacre (known inside East Timor as the Santa Cruz massacre) occurred on 12th November 1991.

A parliamentary delegation from Portugal was supposed to visit Indonesian-occupied East Timor in late 1991. The delegation was to be accompanied by twelve international journalists. The visit was suspended after Indonesia objected to the presence of certain journalists on the delegation. However, young members of the clandestine resistance in East Timorese youth had spent months preparing for the visit, possibly exposing themselves to capture by the Indonesian intelligence services. One group of youth activists painted banners on the grounds of the Motael church in Dili, monitored continuously by the authorities. Late at night on 27 October 1991, a group of provocateurs working for Indonesian intelligence began taunting them in an attempt to draw them into a fight. More provocateurs joined them as tensions rose. A fight broke out between the provocateurs and pro-independence youth, resulting in a fatal blow to the head of a provocateur, Afonso Hendrique, and the fatal shooting of a youth activist, Sebastiao Gomes. The two bodies were found near the church early in the morning of 28 October.

On 12 November 1991, fourteen days after the death of Sebastiao Gomes, mourners gathered in his memory at Motael church. After an hour-long Mass that ended at 7 a.m., a procession left the Church and headed towards the Santa Cruz Cemetery on a winding, four-kilometer route. Some 1,500 people began the procession, but they were joined en route by many hundreds more, including schoolchildren on their way to classes. Some activists displayed pro-independence banners and flags. When the procession arrived at the Santa Cruz cemetery, another 500 mourners were already waiting for them there.

Also arriving at the Santa Cruz cemetery from Taibessi (at the base of the southern foothills of Dili) were troops from Brimob 5486; troops from A Company,

Battalion 303; D Company, Battalion 303; and a combined company – formed in an ad hoc fashion the night before – of Brimob 5486 and C Company, Battalion 303. A detachment from the Dili-based Battalion 744 and personnel from Kodim 1627 were also present. What has come to be known as the Santa Cruz Massacre occurred next. According to eyewitnesses, there were rapid gun-shots followed by an explosive volley of automatic rifle fire that persisted for several minutes. Soldiers fired directly into the crowd. Civilians were shot in the back as they tried to escape the shooting. Soldiers kicked and stabbed the wounded and other survivors inside the cemetery. More wounded civilians were killed in neighbouring villages, on the way to the hospital and in the hospital itself.

Unknown to the Indonesian authorities, British journalist Max Stahl had captured the massacre on film, which he buried in the cemetery. He was searched on his way out of Dili but some of the key tapes were smuggled out to Jakarta and then to the Netherlands by a Dutch reporter, Saskia Kouwenberg. Only nine months before the massacre, Australian foreign minister Gareth Evans had stated that East Timor's human rights situation had conspicuously improved. When Max Stahl's film was broadcast to the world, Evans described the massacre as an aberration, not an act of state policy. But the massacre was a major setback for Indonesian diplomacy. Almost a decade after the Santa Cruz massacre, Indonesia's foreign minister Ali Alatas said that it was a turning point for Indonesia's control over East Timor. International support for the Indonesian occupation began to decrease after the massacre.