



Independence struggle

Timor Leste

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A parliamentary delegation from Portugal was supposed to visit East Timor in October 1991. This visit had been under negotiation for seven years. When the Indonesian government objected to the inclusion of some individuals, Portugal refused to accept Indonesia's veto and cancelled the visit entirely. Young members of the clandestine resistance had spent months preparing for the visit, possibly exposing themselves to capture by the Indonesian intelligence services. The cancellation resulted in a volatile atmosphere as all the pent-up frustration was suddenly deprived of an outlet. On 28 October 1991, within a day of the cancellation, soldiers attacked a crowd of twenty young East Timorese, who had taken shelter in the Motael Church in Dili, in order to evict them from the church. A clandestine activist named Sebastiao Gomes Rangel was killed along with another man, and about twenty-five others were arrested.

On November 12, 1991, fourteen days after the death of Sebastiao Gomes, mourners gathered in his memory at Motael Church. After an hour-long Mass beginning in the early morning, a procession left the Church and headed toward the Santa Cruz Cemetery on a winding, four-kilometre route. Also arriving at the Santa Cruz Cemetery from Taibessi (at the base of the southern foothills of Dili) were troops from the Indonesian military (including the riot-control police, which were part of the military at the time). These troops perpetrated what has come to be known as the Santa Cruz Massacre. According to an eyewitness:

Suddenly a few shots rang out, continued by an explosive volley of automatic rifle fire that persisted for two to three minutes. It sounded like the whole 15 in the front row had their fingers pressed firmly on the trigger. They were firing 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 the 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. British photographer Steve Cox, who was severely beaten, had taken graphic photos, which were also smuggled out. Amy Goodman and Allan Nairn, two reporters from the United States, were also present. Their camera was smashed and both were badly beaten but they survived and became the United States' best-known campaigners for East Timorese self-determination. When Stahl's film was broadcast a few days later, there was an international outcry. Portugal held a national day of mourning a week after the massacre, outraged by the film and deeply moved by the sight of dying East Timorese saying their final prayers in Portuguese. Indonesian groups supporting self-determination for East Timor were also formed in a number of cities across Java.

In the early 1990s the Indonesian occupying forces appeared to have the upper hand. But a spectacular example of strategic nonviolent action at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Jakarta in 1994 stole the regime's thunder, regained the initiative, and gave renewed confidence to Indonesian pro-democracy activists and East Timorese campaigners. With the international media present at the APEC summit, twenty-nine East Timorese students jumped the fence into the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta on 12 November 1994, the third anniversary of the Santa Cruz massacre, and demanded a meeting with visiting U.S. president Bill Clinton. Although they did not meet him, they made world headlines for 12 days at the height of what was supposed to be a showcase event for the Suharto regime. They later obtained political asylum in Portugal.

Protests inside East Timor continued, particularly when foreign journalists and activists on tourist visas



visited the territory. According to one foreign visitor, the clandestine resistance activists would let foreigners know 'that at such and such a time in such a place there would be a demonstration. It got to the point where they would almost demand the presence of TV cameras, without which it made little sense to run such risks.' The Indonesian authorities were frustrated by the protests and negative international publicity. In order to maintain the pressure on the population while somehow avoiding international criticism, they resorted to a strategy of plausible denial, commencing covert operations by training and deploying militia groups. In January and February 1995, Dili began to be terrorized by gangs of masked, black-clad men, known locally as "ninjas" who bashed and intimidated people between sunset and sunrise. Credible reports indicated that the gangs had been trained in Kupang (West Timor) under the supervision of Indonesia's special forces.

The existence of the gangs could not be disputed, not even by the vice-governor of East Timor, Brigadier Johannes Haribowo. Local youths organized themselves into self-defence squads to fight back against the ninja gangs. They soon captured two ninjas during an attack in Dili, beating them and taking them to the local police. The entire neighbourhoods were then mobilized into self-defence groups, with nightly patrols and early-warning networks. Many more ninjas were captured, beaten, and handed over to the police. The ninja strategy sometimes had embarrassing consequences for the occupying forces; on one occasion, a special forces commander was forced to fly to East Timor to obtain the release of his subordinate, Martinho Fernandes, who had been captured by Air Force personnel at their housing complex in Dili while operating as a ninja leader.

The ninjas disappeared following other embarrassing episodes but the concept was revived a few months later when they were reorganized into a paramilitary group called Young Guards Upholding Integration (Gadapaksi – Garda Muda Penegak Integrasi) on July 17, 1995, which is the anniversary of Indonesia's annexation of East Timor. Gadapaksi targeted the clandestine resistance and enjoyed strong links to Indonesia's special forces. Its members were also involved in petty criminal activities such as smuggling, gambling, and protection rackets. The clandestine resistance responded by infiltrating Gadapaksi, so much so that its leader Marcal de Almeida complained

that it was "full of spies". The Indonesian authorities intensified covert operations against the clandestine resistance. They captured the leader of the clandestine front, Pedro Nunes (better known as "Sabalae"), along with his driver, Remigio Tilman. Neither was ever seen again.

From 1996 onwards, several events combined to deal a severe blow to Indonesian rule. On January 29, 1996, three women entered the British Aerospace Military Base at Warton armed with household hammers. They smashed the radar nose and control panel of a Hawk ground attack aircraft, which was part of an order of twenty-four aircrafts destined for Indonesia. They called their act a Ploughshares Action, which was inspired by the biblical injunction "to beat swords into ploughshares." A British activist named Chris Cole had performed a Ploughshares action on British Aerospace three years earlier. The three women, borough counsellor Joanna Wilson, gardener Lotta Kronlid, and nurse Andrea Needham, were charged with illegal entry and criminal damage. The fourth member of the group was environmental campaigner Angie Zelter, who had supported them and publicly announced her intention to carry out another Ploughshares Action. Zelter was arrested the next year while on her way to a public meeting. International solidarity activists organized blockades, sit-ins, teach-ins, and other vigils at the trial, generating enormous negative publicity for the Indonesian occupation. Sensationally, the four activists were acquitted after the jury accepted their defence – they claimed they had acted lawfully because they were using "reasonable force" to prevent the much greater crime of genocide.

The negative publicity for Indonesia grew even more pronounced in 1996 with the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Bishop Belo and the pre-eminent East Timorese independence campaigner Jose Ramos-Horta. Belo visited the United States after the award was announced by the Nobel Committee. He met many influential members of Congress and spoke to large numbers of people. The Nobel Prize meant that U.S. president Clinton could no longer avoid meeting Belo, the first Roman Catholic bishop ever to win the Nobel Peace Prize, even though he still refused to meet Jose Ramos-Horta.

As the Asian financial crisis began in 1997, the first cracks in President Suharto's facade of invincibility were becoming visible. Suharto travelled to Vancouver, Canada, in November 1997 for the APEC Economic



Leaders' Meeting (AELM). Canadian activists had been busy mobilizing public opinion in the months leading up to the AELM. Public talks, leafleting, and other awareness-raising actions were carried out with growing intensity. A team of thirteen exiled East Timorese and several Indonesians crisscrossed the country, calling on the Canadian government to "bar Suharto or put him behind bars." Despite Suharto's wish to prevent any "affront to his dignity," the conference publicity was hijacked by issues completely unrelated to trade when a strong police response resulted in "the lasting image of the summit, seared in Canada's collective memory . . . of a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation television cameraman being pepper-sprayed by an irate-looking police officer."

By this time, Indonesia was facing a currency crisis that severely devalued the rupiah. Weeks of indecision went by as Suharto and his advisors considered the terms offered by the International Monetary Fund in exchange for assistance in arresting the plunge. Finally, Suharto closed sixteen insolvent banks and announced a series of austerity measures. This only accelerated the fall of the rupiah as financial panic ensued and demonstrations erupted across the country. As intense pressure built on Suharto at this time, the Indonesian military abducted and killed several Indonesian political activists. Protesting students at Jakarta's Trisakti University were shot by soldiers and more than 1,100 people were killed in Jakarta alone. Chinese women and children were made the target of a systematic campaign of murder and rape. Suharto finally resigned in May 1998, and B.J. Habibie replaced him as president of Indonesia.