



Operation Flamboyan

Timor Leste

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Operation Flamboyan was the second of three strategic-level operations conducted by the Indonesian Government against East Timor. Named after the flame tree known as Flamboyant (Royal Poinciana), it involved armed, covert action against East Timor. Operation Flamboyan began after the internal armed conflict in East Timor resulted in a victory for FRETILIN. Indonesia therefore launched a campaign of covert warfare by means of an undeclared overland intervention from West Timor under the leadership of Major General Ali Murtopo.

The Indonesian military intended to intimidate FRETILIN's leadership by sea, air and land. The Indonesian Navy sent its destroyer escorts Monginsidi and Nuku to patrol the south and north coasts of Portuguese Timor respectively. The Indonesian Air Force moved ground parties and aviation fuel into the airfields at Bima, Rembiga and Maumere in the Lesser Sunda Islands; these airfields were intended to provide emergency landing grounds for any major airlift of troops and equipment into Timor.

Two Indonesian special forces teams of about 100 men each entered East Timor on the evening of 3-4 September 1975. They split into a number of teams and conducted probing attacks in the first half of September in order to test FRETILIN's response and capabilities. In these attacks, members of Indonesia's Special Warfare Command (Komando Pasukan Sandhi Yudha, Kopassandha) divided into three teams (Team Susi, Team Tuti and Team Umi) and worked alongside a group of East Timorese known as Partisans, causing the largest number of deaths from pre-invasion covert military operations. On 8 September, Team Susi entered Ermera and confronted FRETILIN forces. Each side lost a man in the fighting. Team Susi retreated to Haekesak in Atambua, West Timor, and then re-infiltrated through Asulau and Matarobu-Borro in Ermera. At least 70 civilians were killed in the fighting.

On 14 September, Indonesian special forces and East Timorese partisans attacked towns in the western districts of Ermera, Bobonaro and Covalima. They

entered Batugade but were unable to hold it due to fierce resistance by FRETILIN. Finally, on 7 October, a force of 100 special forces troops and partisans retook Batugade, triggering an international armed conflict to which the 1949 Geneva Conventions applied. Three days later, President Suharto approved a plan to set up small enclaves just inside East Timor in order to nibble away at FRETILIN. By the first half of October 1975, Indonesian forces had seized territory to the west of the line linking Batugade, Balibo and Maliana. In late November, Indonesian forces attacked Bobonaro and Atabae in order to increase the pressure on the Fretilin leadership in Dili. Indonesia attacked Atabae on 20 November with naval and air support. Two days later, Fretilin launched a large counter-attack against the Indonesian position at Maliana in order to disrupt the Indonesian build-up and relieve the pressure on Atabae. Fretilin forces were very capable and effective but they lacked a significant reserve element as well as naval and air support. Atabae was captured on 27 November.

FRETILIN declared independence on 28 November 1975, one day after the fall of Atabae. Indonesia commenced Operation Seroja (the full-scale invasion of East Timor) nine days later.