

EAST TIMOR: A NEW DAWN?

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1. The Horta shooting - A botched affair?

On the surface the scene that greeted me in East Timor was the calmest I had encountered in three years. It clearly not only contradicted those efforts that had portrayed the new nation as being on the verge of collapse, it also contradicted the latest warning notice issued by the Australian Foreign Ministry. In effect the long-running rebellion involving army dissidents came to an end early in my 5-week visit, with the surrender of Lieutenant Salsinha and the rest of the so-called petitioners, as well as Reinado's personal followers, including those involved in the attack on President Horta's residence. I was able to take a close look at that incident, which supported my earlier belief that the attack on 11 February was neither a coup attempt nor a plan to assassinate East Timor's leaders. Almost certainly it was a botched attempt by the rebel leader, Alfredo Reinado, to corner the President and seek further assurances that the proposed surrender conditions, culminating in his pardon, would in fact be carried out.

The plan went tragically wrong because Reinado's target was not there. The President was not at home, but out on a very early beach walk. Reinado's men disarmed the guards and occupied the residence grounds, but two soldiers turned up unexpectedly and shot Reinado and one of his men at what was apparently point blank range. Hearing the shooting, Horta hurried back to the residence where he was shot by one of Reinado's men, a rebel enraged at the killing of their leader. It is likely that this angry reaction caused another rebel party to fire on Prime Minister Xanana some time later. There was no way that these attacks could have resulted in a coup, while the assassination of the two leaders on whose goodwill Alfredo Reinado depended for a pardon and an end to a dissident existence he had become tired of, made absolutely no sense. There are some loose ends, however. Had Reinado been receiving some support from Indonesia (militia remnants or Kopassus, or a combination of both)? An international enquiry may be needed to clear up this matter, without putting undue pressure on relations between Dili and Jakarta.

It is wrong to presume that with the shooting incident over and the surrender of the army rebels, the way ahead will now be easy. Events of the past two years merely added to a lack of confidence, a kind of trauma that continues to haunt a people who have suffered a history of calamities, starting 75 years ago with the Japanese occupation. The problem is that the full impact of these ordeals has never been properly addressed by governments or even the relevant international agencies. The way these calamities have affected the thinking of the Timorese people is also too little understood by the international community, including many of the Australians now working in East Timor. But we, of all people, should know better, for our past governments share responsibility for both invasions invasions, and until recently did little to atone

for our actions, even opposing or discouraging investigations into past crimes against humanity. The suffering of these people during the Japanese occupation was never the subject of a formal investigation, nor did Australia call for justice for the victims of a harsh occupation that was the tragic outcome of an illegal intervention by our forces. As for the recent Indonesian occupation, at the insistence of some East Timorese leaders, the government of East Timor appears to have decided to put behind them a cruel and unforgettable past that has deeply scarred the East Timorese people.

2. A New Dawn?

It is against this background that East Timor is opening a new chapter. The Timorese are a bit more confident about the future, but they remain cautious, hardly exuding the euphoric optimism that existed at the time of independence. The course of the new nation's experience with democracy has not been easy. National unity has been hampered by the political hostility that surfaced between the leaders of the AMP coalition and Fretilin. They added to the tensions arising from those artificial divisions created by the Indonesian occupiers. One outcome is that the leadership failure to resolve this discord and to improve the miserable economic conditions endured by most Timorese, has led to a significant decline in respect for the once revered leaders.

The huge gap between the living standards of ordinary Timorese and the sizeable international community is a matter of underlying dissatisfaction and scepticism, especially to the former, many of whom now see the gap as being unbridgeable. True, the Timorese have long been accustomed to a kind of dual economy, in colonial times as well as under Indonesian rule. The present phase, however, has grown out of the international presence which promised a transformation to democracy and respect for human rights. Once the situation was considered temporary, but with virtually no narrowing of the gap in almost a decade, a mixture of frustration and resentment is now present.

The notion that East Timor has returned to a colonial condition would be considered an affront to most of the international community, but to many Timorese the colonial nature of its appearance is inescapable, for they see themselves as second class citizens in their own country. In particular it is strongly resented by the youth, and helps explain the enduring appeal of gang membership.

Much of the development in Dili has been in response to the needs of the large, well-heeled foreign community. The capital abounds with restaurants, hotels and shops whose prices are well beyond the wages of even the better off locals, and here we need to include public servants and members of parliament who earn less than \$420 a month. A cabinet minister does better, getting about \$850 a month, but that is a mere fraction of the income of the lowest paid UN official, or foreign workers (the community of volunteers aside). These disparities inevitably lead to corrupt practices. While more jobs have become available, most of these are so poorly paid that they offer little prospect of a significant advance from East Timor's status as the poorest country in the Asian region.

East Timor is of course benefiting from an extensive range of aid programs, but unhappily so far too few of these are bringing much-needed relief from the poverty still experienced by some 80 percent of the population. Many are still without electricity and clean water. True, in health major improvements have taken place, but few benefits go beyond the major cities and towns.

Here I want to stress the exception, the community to community aid programs, most of them initiated by concerned Australians, often with little support from our federal government. These programs are not only improving conditions in poor areas: they are also creating a unique people to people understanding,

something rare in the experience of our relations with Asian countries. They are helping by, to use their own jargon, walking together; they give hope to villagers that a better future awaits them. They assist with the development of schools and health centres, with the provision of fresh water supplies, and often give valued advice to the Timorese farmers. These programs should be upgraded in terms of official support and encouragement.

Australia may be the leading aid donor in East Timor, but many other countries are also big donors, giving an international flavour to the aid community. These include the European Union, and individual countries like Ireland, Portugal, Norway, and Brazil and in Asia, China, South Korea and Japan. Some ASEAN countries like Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore are also involved. And of course our neighbour New Zealand is a not insignificant aid contributor, as well as its contingent in the ISF.

3. The Gang Culture

East Timor still abounds with gangs, their numbers having increased significantly in the past six months or so to more than 180,000. One encouraging development, however, is the sharp reduction in violence, but they are still a reminder of the distrust of a large proportion of the young people in government and political leadership. However the gangs have always been diverse in nature, and now an increasing number of them have a declared preference for non-violent activities. Some social workers and UN officials now believe that these organizations could become a positive force in the development process, but much depends on a sharp increase not only in employment prospects, but in trade and technical education. Also with the improvement in security, many refugees, or IDP's, have returned to their houses, enticed by a payment of over \$4,000 to enable them to repair their home repairs. However, in the present climate they will also need the kind of regular food assistance that had added to the appeal of the IDP camps.

Despite these problems it could be said that a cautious optimism prevails, especially in the capital. With the formal ending of the rebellion there is clearly hoped for a new dawn, and the start has been encouraging. The refugee numbers have been reduced to less than 50,000, as many return to their houses, their reluctance to do so overcome by the financial incentives referred to above. As I have already mentioned, gang violence has been at a very low level since the Horta shooting. However, if there is to be an enduring peace a process of national reconciliation is very necessary, and already several moves in this direction are under way, with support and encouragement from the UN and other international agencies. Australia should be an active supporter of these programs for they are essential to the creation of that sense of national unity, of the meaning of nationhood, which has been weakened by events over the past couple of years, and of course the divisive impact of the Indonesian occupation.

On the face of it, East Timor's economy is not in bad shape. Royalties from Timor Gap operations now amount to some \$2,900,000,000, boosted by rising oil prices (in Treasury bonds in New York), but most of this is being kept for a future, when such lucrative revenues will no longer be available. The problem is that East Timor is finding it extremely difficult to develop its non-oil economy. Tourism is a realistic alternative, but thanks to those travel warnings from DFAT and the exorbitant cost of air travel between Dili and Darwin, there has so far been little success in this regard. As for craft industries, the Timorese will find it difficult to compete with lower cost ventures already well-established in nearby Indonesian islands. Agricultural production could reap the benefit of increasing food prices, and good harvest of rice and maize are expected for this year. However, much more needs to be done in this sector for East Timor is yet to reach its full potential in food production.

What needs boosting immediately is national morale and national self confidence in the new nation's future – its security, its economic development and its viability as a newly independent state. Despite the hundreds of millions of aid money pouring into the country, for the ordinary Timorese there is scant evidence of any change in their impoverished circumstances, and without a change in this situation, uncertainty, insecurity, disillusionment and unrest will undermine the confidence of the people in the integrity of nationhood.

4. Australia and East Timor

Australians are major players in almost every sector of activity in East Timor, and their contribution is large and, generally speaking, positive. From the point of view of winning hearts and minds, our most costly effort, the provision of most of the troops and infrastructure for the International Stabilisation Force, is our least successful. At the insistence of the Howard Government, backed by the Bush Administration, and against the advice given to then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, the UN mission was not given the usual PKF status. Instead the ISF differs from a PKF in that it is directly under Australian command, an arrangement that seems to me to weaken the essential coordinating function of the UN mission. It has also led some Australians, including members of the ISF, to lack confidence in the idea of UN operations.

There is no question about the professionalism and discipline of our troops, who are quite well respected. However, they stand aloof from the rest of the international presence and the Timorese, in what some see as an overbearing way, with their automatic weapons ever distrustfully at the ready. Also the policy of non-fraternization keeps them at a distance from the local population (though less so in outlying posts). I feel that this muscular military presentation may be appropriate, indeed essential, to our operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, but it is quite out of keeping with the situation in East Timor, even when Reinado's rebels roamed about the mountains. The latter did not engage in attacks on UN posts or violence in areas where they operated. They certainly did not threaten ISF posts. Now there is no rebellious challenge, and East Timor is hardly a country awash with Kalashnikovs.

However, Australia continues to bear a heavy responsibility in a whole range of areas, not least in relation to East Timor's economy, the self-sustaining non-oil side as well as ensuring the new nation gets its rightful share of the Timor Gap resources. Of special attention is the tourism industry, whose success will depend largely on the Australian response. Then there is the guest worker proposal which could help ease unemployment. In the final analysis we must never forget our past role in contributing to the two terrible ordeals that these people endured in the past 75 years. In each case we not only placed our perceived selfish interests ahead of those of the Timorese; we also did nothing to atone for the suffering inflicted on these people.

5. The Justice Issue

It is in this context that we may have another challenge ahead of us, with the imminent release of the CTF report. As far as I have been able to gather, the report will do little to address the fundamentals of the issue of responsibility and justice for the crimes against humanity committed in East Timor during those 24 years of Indonesian occupation. There are already calls for an international tribunal to achieve that end, and the big question is – what will be Australia's response, at a time when we are seeking to improve our relations with Indonesia? Once again, my guess is that Australian Government policy will lead to efforts to downgrade the importance of those gross abuses of fundamental human rights for the sake of relations between Jakarta and Canberra. This would be a short term, narrow national interest response, because surely the progress of Indonesian democracy, very much in our long term national interest, would be best

advanced by exposing to the Indonesian people the brutal culture of their military as well as the suffering it caused their small neighbour. The best way to do that, at this time, would probably be an international tribunal. Many of Indonesia's democracy supporters would welcome such a move, and in the long term it would be more likely to strengthen relations between Dili and Jakarta than to weaken them.

6. East Timor's Defence Force

The role of East Timor's Defence Force has been attracting increasing attention. Recently the TLDF has become a bit more assertive leading to criticisms that they have been exceeding their authority. They frequently appear heavily armed, at a time when it hardly seems necessary. Unfortunately the ISF practice seems to have encouraged East Timor's defence forces to do likewise. They, too, tend to brandish their weaponry in a way inappropriate in the present relatively calm circumstances. This excessive display of weaponry is worrying the UN mission, but it is proving difficult to introduce some disarmament while the ISF continues its unnecessarily muscular approach to its task in East Timor.

The position of East Timor's Defence Force has been a subject of some debate. There are reports of excesses by TLDF troops, including minor clashes with police and UN officials. My strong impression is that the role of the TLDF needs review and redefinition. Its role is too focused on the kind of military duties that are hardly appropriate for East Timor, and the lack of a clearly defined role has led to some restlessness, and distrust of the nation's political leadership. What would seem to be more suitable for the new nation's circumstances would be a composite national guard type force, with clear non-military as well as military responsibilities – a military cum emergency service. In the long term the security of the new nation will be more effectively ensured through international arrangements rather than by a defence force whose capability is heavily constrained by cost factors. There is plenty of scope for these troops to engage in wider responsibilities that would do much more to attract popular respect than a military role. Meanwhile, monitoring the development and performance of the defence and police forces remains an important task for the UN mission and its partner, Australia. It is essential to the task of implementing the high human rights standards adopted by the new nation, a process that began under Sergio Vieira de Mello's tutelage during UNTAET's administration.