

A Second Rebirth for East Timor?

By Arnold Kohen | August 15, 2006

In recent months, East Timor has witnessed a tragic renewal of violence. In May, after the government dismissed about one-third of the country's soldiers, fighting broke out among the security forces. Gangs of unemployed youth, possibly manipulated by some political leaders, set much of East Timor's capital of Dili ablaze. Amid warnings of a full-scale conflagration, a temporary Australian-led international peacekeeping force entered the territory to quell the violence. At least 37 people have died since conflict reignited. About 150,000 displaced persons are taking refuge in camps for fear of fresh fighting.

With the current peacekeeping mandate set to expire on August 20, the UN Security Council is meeting this week to discuss East Timor's future. Before the Council is a report by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan based on a recent country assessment by a team of experts. The report outlines the unresolved grievances among the population as well as the conflicts within and between the local military and police, and calls for a sustained commitment by the international community to East Timor in the years ahead. This would consist of a renewed UN mission focused on an international police presence, revamped training of local security personnel, and a variety of measures, including anti-poverty efforts, aimed at genuinely stabilizing the territory. A UN Special Commission of Inquiry is also investigating the violence of April and May.

These UN discussions and investigations are crucial not only for determining the fate of East Timor, which became independent in 2002 after a storied fight for freedom, but also the future of UN efforts at what is loosely called "nation building." With a history of involvement in the island's history, the United States will also play a central role in the outcome. There is good reason to be optimistic

about East Timor's prospects—but only if the key actors, including the UN and the United States, are mindful of the country's painful history.

Roots of Conflict

In December 1975, then-U.S. President Gerald Ford and his secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, went to Indonesia on the eve of that nation's brutal invasion of the Portuguese colony of East Timor. Although the Indonesian archipelago spans an area the size of the continental United States and East Timor is about the size of New Jersey, Indonesian leader Suharto apparently feared the establishment of an independent left-wing state in his region. Washington sympathized. Indeed, the testimony of various U.S. officials plus documents released in recent years through the National Security Archive make it clear that Washington could have prevented the Indonesian invasion with timely diplomatic action. Moreover, throughout Indonesia's 24-year-long occupation of East Timor, the United States backed Jakarta both with arms shipments and by blunting criticism of the regime in Congress and the UN.

East Timor's truth and reconciliation commission has determined that at least 180,000 people, more



than a quarter of the population, perished from the effects of Indonesian rule from 1975 until 1999. After East Timor voted to leave Indonesia in 1999, Indonesian-backed militias laid waste to the territory, killing at least 1,000 East Timorese and destroying much of the territory's infrastructure. The United States missed a second chance to avert a calamity. If the Clinton administration had challenged Jakarta, international peacekeepers may well have been present months earlier and might have prevented the militia rampage. East Timor's bishop at the time, 1996 Nobel Peace Prize co-Laureate Carlos Ximenes Belo, repeatedly urged the United States to take a strong position with Indonesia, but his words were not heeded until it was too late.

Despite such warnings, the Bush administration, in order to save money on peacekeeping costs, began to push for the withdrawal of UN troops as soon as East Timor became independent in 2002, and by 2005 most had departed. The eruption of the conflict in April 2006 has exposed the folly of this policy.

The United States *did* ultimately help secure Indonesia's withdrawal from East Timor in 1999, and U.S. forces did play a role not only in establishing the subsequent UN peacekeeping mission but also in helping to warn off militia elements still threatening the territory in 2001. In 1999, when the UN began its transitional rule of East Timor, Bishop Belo warned that the history of division

brought about by the Indonesian occupation underlined the need for at least a decade-long international administration.

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A New U.S. Policy

The Bush administration appears likely to back Kofi Annan's proposal to establish a 1,600-strong police contingent backed by 350 troops that together will help maintain order in East Timor until the 2007 elections. But a much longer mandate is needed.

At their height in 1999-2000, UN peacekeepers in East Timor numbered 7,500. By 2006, all but a tiny handful had been withdrawn. The recent outbreak of violence and destruction suggests an international police force backed by some troops will be needed to build long-term security in the country. Additional UN involvement is necessary, including institutional support for the new peace-building commission that is working on reconciliation in East Timor and involving churches and civil society in the governance process. The UN must also be mandated to organize the upcoming elections in 2007 and appoint an electoral committee. Otherwise, the possibility of unfair elections, and further turmoil, is very high. In other words, the UN—with U.S. support—must not only undertake a peacekeeping mission but also fulfill the larger mandate of nation building.

The UN must also reexamine the kind of support it has given. The Secretary General's August 8

report acknowledges that “independent technical evaluation of advisers is needed” and that “adequate measures should be taken to ensure that recruitment and contract renewals are undertaken on technical and professional grounds” in the next phase in East Timor. Although half the hundreds of millions of dollars in reconstruction aid reportedly went into the pockets of foreign consultants and expatriate officials, relatively few of the international advisers and consultants working in East Timor really added value to the process. The balance of available funds could be much better used for widespread skills training, job creation, and other public works initiatives to engage unemployed veterans and youth, with a special emphasis on women. Such an approach, in East Timor and elsewhere, could foster genuine stability.

These suggestions echo calls from East Timor’s Catholic bishops that U.S. and other international economic aid—and, importantly, proceeds from East Timor’s natural gas revenues—must be directed toward boosting local employment. With widespread feelings of injustice among youth and former resistance fighters, and more than 50% of young people and other veterans of the independence struggle without jobs, upheaval in East Timor is guaranteed to be endemic unless effective counter-measures are taken.

How should the East Timorese example influence future UN efforts at nation building? Certainly, the UN should institute long-overdue competency testing. It should also direct an overwhelming proportion of its “nation building” budget to productive employment for local people. At a deeper level, the UN should give people knowledgeable about local history real decision-making power—which would help to tap authentic public sentiment—rather than dismissing their comments as too “negative.”

The record of official American diplomatic and military support throughout most of Indonesia’s 24-year occupation of East Timor gives the United States a solemn responsibility to help the people of East Timor to achieve a better future. Justice for the crimes of April and May 2006 is only a small part of the equation. Washington should also support the demands for justice and accountability for the crimes of 1999. Secretary General Annan has also declared that there should be no immunity for these crimes.

Prime Minister Jose Ramos Horta will head up an interim government until elections in May 2007. Horta is making extraordinary use of the skills that helped him build international support for his nation’s independence over many years and for which he shared the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize with Bishop Belo.

Despite these huge problems and the dire newspaper reports, East Timor is on the road to recovery, with life returning to normal and numerous pledges of international assistance pouring in. The country is fortunate to have a host of effective leaders in government, church, and civil society. One of these, Prime Minister Jose Ramos Horta, will head up an interim government until elections in May 2007. Horta is making extraordinary use of the skills that helped him build international support for his nation’s independence over many years and for which he shared the 1996 Nobel Peace

Prize with Bishop Belo. Together with East Timor's popular President Xanana Gusmao, Horta should be able to successfully address existing grievances and midwife a second rebirth of the country.

Arnold Kohen, international coordinator of Global Priorities, has written extensively about East Timor, including From the Place of the Dead (St. Martins Press, 1999), which received the Christopher Award for Non-Fiction.

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