EAST TIMOR'S BORDER WAR

AN EYE-WITNESS REPORT FROM ROGER EAST

Roger East was an Australian journalist who left a well-paid job with the Darwin Reconstruction Authority to become the head of the fledgling East Timor News Agency in November 1975. He was only allowed into East Timor by the Australian Government after many protests.

According to a message from Alarico Fernandes, East Timor's Minister for Internal Security, received in Australia on January 4, Roger East was killed by Indonesian troops at 8 a.m. on December 7 last, near the hotel in which he was staying in Dili, when the Indonesians launched a massive attack on the city.

In this article, one of the last he wrote, he tells of the border war that raged between September and December, as a prelude to the full-scale invasion. The picture he gives of the war, and how it is being fought remains true today for the whole of East Timor. It is worth noting, for example, that on May 25, this year, 127 Indonesian soldiers were killed at the village of Memo, which is right on the border, and a few kilometres west of Maliana.

Today, the Indonesians are certainly, as East says in his last line, "haemorrhaging to death".

We print this article both in tribute to the East Timorese people, and to Roger East.

Australia's nearest neighbor, East Timor, has cast the die. In three convulsive months this tiny Portuguese colony has springboarded from passive politics into an armed camp crusading for independence. The standard-bearers are Fretilin, a loosely knit grouping of many political shades cemented together only by the beckoning beacon of freedom. It is unchallenged now, and unchallengeable. Their opponents, UDT and Apodeti, were thrashed on the battlefield of their own choice and are now despised by the Timorese for accepting the patronage of Indonesia to recoup their losses. For Australia to pretend the situation is otherwise must reflect either on their intelligence or their integrity. Canberra's studied neutrality has elevated the possibility of Indonesia embarking on all-out war against the East Timorese.

BOGONARO (on the border): The monsoonal rains are now whooshing down on these mountain passes to create a new scenario for this border war. Within days, these snaking rivulets will be fast-flowing streams. Beneath me, at this hour, on the now sodden valley, the Indonesian-led troops are marooned in Maliana.

They know they are going nowhere in the next five months except to a wider war or the comforts of home. The Fretilin soldiers viewing the foe are exuberant. In this dense low-lying cloud cover and driving rain, they are being provided with a custom-made camouflage for their hit-and-run forays.

The initiative has passed to Fretilin. The firepower which, to date, has blunted their offensives will be dramatically reduced by the weather.

Thousands of mortars and shells have rained on them in the past eight weeks, most to
explode harmlessly against the mountain face or valley bed. Fewer than 20 have died as a result. In their rock crannies, it is a weapon they treat with contempt. On the valley floor in the open countryside it wins a grudging respect.

The Indonesian firepower has been massive on occasions. Yet they are largely beleaguered in their bases at Maliana, Balibo and Batugade on the coast. Their numbers have been estimated by Fretilin commandos at around 5,000, but they admit their counting could be faulty. These Indonesian forces, which include the survivors of the East Timorese political parties, UDT and Apodeti, are now anchored along the border in a corridor about 40 kilometres long and which juts no deeper than eight kilometres into East Timor.

Earlier reports emanating from Djakarta of fighting near Bacau, Aileu and Dili were either patently untrue or the singular exploits of a phantom army.

On October 16, Indonesia’s censored war began with a ship and shore bombardment of Maliana. At dawn that day, Fretilin forces were in disarray following their first real encounter with shell and mortar.

Thirty kilometres away, Balibo was falling in the same offensive. That was the morning the five Australian newsmen died. Ten kilometres towards the coast, Batugade was already occupied. Maliana was captured within hours and the Indonesian led force swept on to overrun Sabarai and the mountain strongpoint of Tapo, roughly ten kilometres from the frontier. This was their deepest penetration into East Timor.

(In the second week of September, a 100-strong force over-ran Atsabe, about 50 kilometres from Maliana, and killed 30 villagers before being repulsed. It is now believed they were largely Apodeti recruits.)

Fretilin was to re-muster and counter-attack in the mountains and offensive became a rout. By the evening of October 17, the Indonesians were back in Maliana.

One of Tapo’s two military commanders, Lemos Furrill, told what happened. “They swarmed across the valley and up the mountainside. It was the first time we had seen the Indonesians. We were being shelled and mortared and we kept falling back. We backed off all that day and through the night.

We had crossed a mountain range, a valley, and were climbing another mountain. Next morning we were surprised to see the Indonesians sitting down, lying down and leaning against trees. They were completely exhausted.

We attacked and they offered little resistance. They were running and falling back they way they came. It was easy killing them.”

And so ended the first and only real attempt by this across-the-border force to penetrate East Timor’s hinterland.

In Maliana the guns are rarely quiet. The harassed defenders are daily switching their fire to five different mountain targets in an arc of almost 270 degrees. Their 90-degree sanctuary is a road corridor to the border and a craggy hill two kilometres distant. All else is No-Man’s Land, or Fretilin’s.

Along the corridor, three helicopters scurry during lulls in the fighting. Two are white and display the red cross. The third is equipped with machine guns. The two Second World War bombers which stooge around each morning are largely toothless at this hour. From the safety of about 3,000 metres they machine-gun at random. To date, no bombs have been dropped and their daily targets are mainly the former Portuguese cavalry outpost at Bogonaro or Atabae to the north. One is silvery white, while the other is brown, and both are unmarked.

Casualties are few and will get fewer when soldiers and civilians learn to give up gawking and go for cover. Three times in the past four days I have been in the line of fire which reflected neither competence nor a high degree of courage on the part of these cloud-clinging warriors.

Excited soldiers occasionally ignore orders and release a fusillade from their Mausers. Stone-throwing would be equally effective.

Whither Indonesia?

It is obvious from here that it must commit its forces to a full-scale intervention or accept the verdict that its proteges, UDT and Apodeti, are a part of history. It was here in these regions that UDT had its greatest strength and this rested largely on a platform of independence and its respectability in the eyes of both the Catholic Church and the Portuguese Administration.
The church leadership is now fragmented and the Portuguese have gone. UDT is now being judged as either war criminals or quislings and they face short-lived lives if they return.

The anger is genuine and the bitterness deep.

UDT's leadership is now split three ways. Some are languishing in Timorese jails and others in the more comfortable surrounds of Australian cities. The remaining standard-bearers are in Indonesia, hosted and promised a triumphant return, albeit in the wake of mortar bombs.

Their platform of independence which, only a year ago, saw them in a political alliance with Fretilin, is now abandoned. They are opting for Indonesia after 450 years of Portuguese domination.

Apodeti is a bad bar-room joke. Its political rallies could be staged in the proverbial ten by four room which includes a table. Founder and president is Arnaldo Araujo, 62, a respected horse thief, who is currently being detained at Fretilin's pleasure in Aileu. The prison routine revives for him memories of former times. The Portuguese Administration jailed him for nine years for war crimes committed against the Timorese during the Japanese occupation.

This leaves only Fretilin which would embrace an offer of a UN-supervised plebiscite in the knowledge that it would win by the handsomest of margins. This "front" would appear to have struck the right note at a historical moment. It gathers in intellects, passions and aspirations of varying degrees and intensity.

The mortar that binds them is the singular and irrevocable process towards independence. East Timor will settle for nothing less. This commitment to independence is symbolised in the clenched fist and the unspoken "strength and unity" which this implies. It is the greeting at all hours and in any situation.

The fists belong to children, their parents, the elderly, the soldier, the peasant, the peddler. Young women, clutching traditional household appliances, emphasise their emotional intensity by the whiteness of their knuckles.

Moral reasons are necessary to wage an immoral war. And Djakarta has elected to win support for its nervous neighbors by attaching the Red label to Fretilin. Visions of Chinese sampans, Hanoi dhows and Russian cruisers riding at anchor in Dili harbor is sufficient for ASEAN states, countering communist insurgencies, to see the threat and applaud its removal.

Fretilin is indisputably anti-colonial which may be accounted for by the $30 per capita income it enjoys after 450 years of Portuguese rule.

Its initial planning is a blending of socialistic and co-operative policies which would again appear natural for a colony bereft of secondary industry and winning from the soil a subsistence existence.

The membership by an Australian measure would include thinkers from the centre to the extreme left, the latter a fringe grouping in the 500-strong Central Committee, Fretilin's policy council.

Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Jose Ramos Horta, admits that the committee's views vary on many issues, the sole exception being independence.

"I expect to see a multi-party set up in East Timor after we cross this hurdle", he observed.

"We are a tolerant people who have waited a long time for the democratic process. We'll share it when it comes."

The crucifixes on the chests of Fretilin's soldiers are the trademarks of their education. Many are outspokenly anti-communist, but how the majority thinks must await events.

Refugees who fled East Timor, many under duress, have told on their return of forced labor conditions in Indonesia, primarily on building roads to the frontier.

Djakarta's generals may now be weighing their options. Certainly the construction of tourist autobahns into East Timor is not among them. It would appear that the generals are prevailing and that an open conflict may be in the offing. If it comes, the curtain will be lowered on the censored war and raised on an aggressive one. Such an event will embarrass East Timor's neighbors, including Australia, in the short term and shame them in the long run.

Indonesia's 130 million has certainly the numbers and the military hardware to subdue 650,000 Timorese, but only along the coast and in the few centres of population. On-present border form, its army in the hinterland will haemorrhage to death.