ROGERIO LOBATO is Minister for National Defence in the government of the Democratic Republic of East Timor, and commander of FALINTIL (East Timor National Liberation Forces).

He was sent out of East Timor with three other Ministers, by his government, a few days before the full-scale Indonesian invasion on December 7, 1975 to carry out the important diplomatic struggle abroad and to seek support for the war against the Indonesian invaders.

Mr. Lobato has remained in constant contact with his government in the liberated areas of East Timor. His whole family, including his elder brother, Nicolau Lobato, Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of East Timor, remain inside East Timor.

In the past year Rogerio Lobato has visited many countries including China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Cuba, Mozambique and Angola, where he has also studied the liberation struggles of these countries against imperialism.

As an officer in the Portuguese colonial army, Rogerio Lobato played a key role in rallying Timorese soldiers to defeat the reactionary coup attempt by the UDT group in August 1975. He also played an important role in containing the Indonesian invasion along the border with Indonesian Timor from September to December 1975.

This exclusive interview, made in Europe in January 1977, gives an excellent insight into the heroic struggle of the East Timorese people against the invasion. What emerges quite clearly is that the struggle is not simply a spontaneous one, but one led by Fretilin, equipped with a clear concept of the nature of the struggle, of a people's war, specifically adapted to the conditions of East Timor.
What is the military strategy Fretilin forces are following in East Timor?

Our strategy is defensive; we are not fighting a positional war. But as part of this strategy, we launch many small offensives, at the level of guerrilla attacks, or with a concentration of a large number of troops.

For example, when the Indonesians advance with many troops, we avoid facing them directly. But whenever there is the opportunity of destroying a part of this force, or of an ambush, we will attack. Through our intelligence service, we get information on the number of troops operating in certain areas. Then, against smaller groups of the enemy, we will use very big concentrations of our forces to annihilate them.

Our strategy is to defeat and liquidate the enemy - not just defeat them, and have them run away to fight another day.

If for example the enemy advances with 100 troops, we will attack with 500 and close all possibility for them to retreat and destroy them completely.

Similarly, if the enemy leaves a garrison of 100 or 200 troops in a village or to protect the road, then it is good for us. We study carefully their situation and prepare very carefully a plan of attack, using a force several times greater than theirs. We attack by surprise, often at night, to win a short, sharp victory, to annihilate the enemy totally, and capture their war materials and medical supplies, before they can call reinforcements.

So, in general, the enemy is on the offensive, but we make small offensives within our defensive strategy.

Our strategy is that we want to destroy as many of the enemy forces as possible and conserve our own forces. We therefore disperse our forces, but concentrate them to destroy the enemy and disperse them immediately after having carried out the attack.

Secondly, we seek to capture the maximum amount of war materials from the enemy, to conserve our own resources and to build a situation where we equal the enemy in numbers and military equipment. Then we will go to an offensive strategy, to inflict a final defeat on them.

We seek to kill as many enemy soldiers as possible, and minimise our own casualties. We seek to capture as many weapons and as much ammunition as possible, and use as little of our own stocks as possible.

Another factor in our strategy for a protracted war arises from our analysis of the enemy. In general, the enemy faces very big economic problems and so cannot face
the perspective of a long war against Fretilin. Our tactics are not only to kill as many enemy troops as possible, but also to destroy them economically.

So we must cut all the roads, destroy all the bridges and force the enemy to move by expensive means—helicopters, planes, warships.

Could you give some examples of how this strategy is applied?

On the road south of Manatuto to Laklubar, we have destroyed the road at a mountain pass at Henuk.

On the south coast, where conditions are very bad for the enemy to move, even during the dry season, we have made it more impossible for them to move.

We have changed the courses of rivers to flood the plains and stop tanks moving ahead. At the same time, we developed tactics to capture tanks—a technique used by the Vietnamese and Cambodians. We have captured some tanks and destroyed many tanks and armoured cars. Similarly, in fighting against helicopters we have also learnt many techniques used in Vietnam and Cambodia in their national liberation wars against American imperialism.

We take many days to prepare an ambush. We know the exact number of enemy forces. We mobilise the people in the area to go to there. Our plans are completely secret. Each soldier knows exactly his own tasks, what he must do, whom he must shoot and when. At every ambush, a well-trained commander is present.

For example, the enemy tried to go in a big convoy from Dili to Manatuto, along the main North coast road. We let them go as far as Subao, a very difficult part of the road which winds around a very steep cliff face, going straight into the sea. We planned the ambush—trenches were dug and each soldier given exact instructions. We shot the drivers of the last and the first vehicles. The enemy was confused, whether to go forward or retreat, neither of which were possible. We hit with the maximum force and surprise, with our troops as close as 20 metres from the enemy. The enemy is very afraid of fighting at close hand because they cannot use their artillery. We completely destroyed that convoy. And since then the enemy has not tried to use that road.

In the many attacks on enemy camps, we follow a similar tactic. First we must take them by surprise in a well-planned attack. The guards must be removed silently, then, with a very big force, we overwhelm the enemy in a short period, capturing their weapons and withdrawing immediately. Secondary forces on the roads stop reinforcements reaching the camp attacked.

And how do you estimate the enemy's strategy in East Timor?

The Jakarta generals are seeking to divide East Timor into compartments—by cutting the territory from north to south and controlling the roads which cross the country. This can be seen by looking at a map of East Timor and the areas penetrated by the enemy.

For instance, they landed at Dili, and went south down the road to Aileu and Maubisse. They landed at Betano, and went north to Same, to link up with their forces in Maubisse.

In achieving this strategy, they used as a tactic the deployment of a very big force, covered by bombing planes, warships and heavy artillery, and using tanks and armoured vehicles to move down these roads.

In face of this massive attack, Fretilin retreats, but not passively. At some other time we will fight, ambushing the enemy, attacking smaller units.

The enemy hopes to stop Falintil moving freely throughout the territory. They want to bottle Fretilin forces in small areas. To do that garrisons of one or two hundred are left along the road, and in smaller villages.

But that is good for Fretilin. We can concentrate three or four times the number of their garrisons and wipe them out in a well-prepared surprise attack, one by one.

That is why the Indonesian forces only control these roads theoretically. In practice, we can move freely throughout the territory. So the enemy strategy is a failure.
They don’t go off the roads into the surrounding mountains. They only go where tanks can go. To climb the mountains is to be an easy target for Fretilin. It is very difficult for the Indonesians to fight in East Timor, because they don’t know where Fretilin is - Fretilin is everywhere. Moreover, the Indonesians are fighting in a strange country - they don’t know the terrain.

How are Fretilin forces organised?

The Fretilin forces are divided into four sections.

First there is the regular army, made up of all Timorese troops that were in the Portuguese colonial army and all Timorese who had already done military service and were in the reserves. These troops are very mobile and have the task of fighting all over the country - from the border to Tutuala. They are the troops who can concentrate for a large scale attack and then disperse to conserve our forces.

Second, there are the regional troops which operate only in a certain region, for example, from Baucau to Viqueque. When attacks are made, the regional troops coordinate with the regular troops.

Third are the guerrillas. Mainly composed of militia they operate in very small areas and are very widespread. They coordinate with the regular and regional troops for attacks.

And finally there are the self-defence forces, composed of a big majority of the people. They fight with everything useful to kill the enemy. They rely mainly on traditional weapons - bows and arrows, blowpipes, traps. They also combine with the regular, regional and guerrilla forces for actions.

That is why the war we are fighting in East Timor is a people’s war - all the people are engaged in the struggle, but with different tasks both militarily and on other fronts.
And one of those other fronts is to produce food?

Yes, that’s a very important front in the struggle. And it’s not just a task for the people but for the army too. Together, the people and Falintil work together to produce all they need to eat, to maintain the struggle.

Every military unit has its own gardens. How do the soldiers fight and yet maintain their gardens?

It is very simple. They must create conditions where they have the possibility of a break from fighting to work in the gardens, to feed themselves. The gardens are very far from Indonesian-controlled areas where it is difficult for the enemy to infiltrate.

Not only has there been a very big increase in the area of rice fields, but we have also begun agriculture in the forests.

When a unit is, say, operating from a forest for one or two weeks, they plant all they need - tapioca, sweet potatoes, marrows, etc. When they return in a month or so, they find there a store of crops to feed themselves. Moreover, there is plenty of wild game in the forests - wild deer, buffalo, cassowaries etc. Our people know very well how to hunt such game with traditional weapons - there is no need to use ammunition.

Not only are we growing more food, but we are also trying to improve the nutrition of the people, to give them better, more varied food than they have had in the past.

We also encourage people living in one village to learn from one another. For example, there is one village in East Timor where they have a highly developed system of firing arrows on an artillery basis which fall in a rain of arrows on the head and body of a wild animal. It is a system used for hundreds of years. Now, not only is that village using this system to catch game, but also to fight the enemy - and they are teaching it to other villages. Previously they kept it a closely guarded secret.

Nevertheless, many people in Australia think that the people of East Timor must be starving...

In colonial times in East Timor, even with the terrible exploitation of the people by the Portuguese colonialists, there was never starvation in the country. No one has died of hunger for hundreds of years. When the Portuguese said the people were hungry, they meant they had no protein in their diet. In fact, the people always had enough food to eat, but not good enough in quality - in protein and nutritional value.

Today, as I said, Fretilin is trying to solve that problem too.

In the forests there are traditional foods. For instance, wild beans grow in plenty, but they have to be cooked six or seven times to get rid of the poison. The people gathered them in times when there was not enough rice or corn. There are sago palms and wild leaves that can be eaten, and have been for hundreds of years.

When people in Australia say that, maybe they are thinking about living standards in Australia.

You must understand that, under Portuguese colonialism, the people were divided; they were discouraged from working in groups or collectively.

Now, led by Fretilin, they have formed cooperatives throughout the country, and work collectively, to support each other very tightly. Now they can grow more food together than they ever could individually. You must remember, too, that we have many types of corn and rice, including rice that grows in the mountains.

How do the people cope with attempts by the enemy to destroy food crops and supplies?

The enemy cannot go by foot into the liberated areas, so they try to destroy crops by bombing.

But the people are mobilised. They find ways to continue production even under bombing. We have the examples of Vietnam, Laos and Kampuchea where the people grew enough to eat to fight a thirty year struggle under very heavy bombing. The Indonesians do not have the potential to match the US airforce and cover East Timor with bombs.

It is the policy of the Indonesians to kill, burn and destroy everything in East Timor.
This has been their strategy, is now their strategy and will continue to be their strategy.

They do this in the hope that they will destroy the people's possibility to resist. But when they burn and destroy everything in the areas they control, they are also in difficulties, because they too must eat. They are used to everything - beef, beer, good houses. So when they destroy everything around them, they face starvation.

But our army and people live in the forests. We are used to living, after 400 years of Portuguese colonialism, in bad conditions, and we can adapt.

So the enemy are in villages surrounded by burnt out fields, under constant attack going hungry. They begin to fight each other, disobey their officers and want to get back home. Above all they refuse to go into the forests.

Our strategy of never defending positions against large forces, and of concentrating our efforts on destroying enemy forces, of killing their human forces, increases this demoralisation.

What is the relationship between Falintil and the Fretilin Central Committee?

Falintil are the armed forces of the people of East Timor under the direct command of the Fretilin Central Committee. Senior commanders of Falintil are members of the Fretilin Central Committee.

It is therefore under the leadership of Fretilin and follows the political line of Fretilin, as the armed wing of the people of East Timor.

I want to stress that in the army, politics is, and always will be, supreme.

In all Falintil forces, we have political commissioners. Each military unit, down to a group of thirty fighters, has a political commissioner. He fights in the war, but his main task is to lead the soldiers to follow the correct military and political line. Ideological education takes place in all military units, particularly concerning the correct way for fighters to deal with the people. When, for example, guerrillas arrive at a farm and are very hungry, they must
never simply take food, but must ask the
teople for it. And if the fighters have food
and the people are hungry they must share
their food with them. If the people are sick,
they must help them as much as possible.

Another important question for political
commissioners to explain is a correct attitude
to Indonesian soldiers. Of course, the
invading forces have committed terrible
atrocities and it is not easy for the people and
soldiers to have a correct position on this
question. At the beginning, the people killed
many of the Indonesian soldiers who were
captured.

But the position of the Fretilin Central
Committee is very clear on this question. We
have to re-educate the Indonesian soldiers on
the aims of Indonesian colonial aggression.
We have to tell them to turn their guns not
against the people of East Timor, who are
their brothers and sisters, but against the
Suharto clique, who are also exploiting the
Indonesian people.

So, our political commissioners teach the
people and army to behave like revolutionary
soldiers towards the enemy soldiers.

**Are you in a position to tell us how many
Indonesian soldiers are prisoners of war in the liberated areas?**

Yes. There are hundreds of Indonesian
prisoners throughout East Timor. Many are
in re-education camps, including many
officers. Few of our people speak Bahasa
Indonesia, so we get those prisoners who
speak English to teach some of our people
Bahasa.

**And what of the ex-UDT and ex-
APODETI who supported the
Indonesian invasion? What role are
these puppets playing in the war?**

The puppets in Dili are powerless. They are
not armed because the Indonesian generals
don’t trust them any more. They are not even
in the police force in Dili. Only Indonesians
are allowed to carry arms.

Many people captured by the Indonesians
have escaped from the terrible conditions in
the concentration camps the enemy set up.
They have been welcomed back, and joined
the fight.

But the puppets are afraid to return to the
liberated areas. Not because of the attitude
of the Fretilin Central Committee, but because
of the hatred of the people for those, who
have contributed so much to the present
conditions in East Timor. But Fretilin policy
is that all people can be re-educated and re-
habilitated, and we want the puppets to leave
Dili and join us in the mountains. In fact, we
teach the people to accept this principle, not
to kill them, but to liberate everyone.

Of course, the top puppets, those most
responsible for the present situation, must be
judged by the people themselves who must
decide their sentence.

We are fighting for a society in which the
people make the decisions. We don’t want to
be authoritarian. The people have the right
to speak and say what they think.

**What is the proportion of territory and
of the population now living in the
liberated areas?**

In East Timor, it is a people’s war, so we
need people to fight. We do everything we can
to have as many people as possible in the
liberated areas. This was a strategy we
followed even before the full-scale invasion.

About 90 percent of the population are in
the liberated areas. The rest are under
Indonesian control, in very bad conditions in
concentration camps, where they are
starving, subject to rape and all sorts of
humiliation and to summary execution. The
people in these camps try to escape and join
the liberated areas. Fretilin forces do
everything possible to help them get away.

Earlier, when we were speaking about
whether people were starving in the liberated
areas, I should have stressed that the ones
really starving are those who are prisoners of
the Indonesians. They are forbidden to go
into the forests to gather food because the
Indonesians fear they will join Fretilin.
Anyone trying to go to the forests runs the
risk of being shot by the enemy.

Fretilin forces have launched many
attacks to liberate the captured population
and thousands have already been liberated.

Our strategy is to eventually reach a
situation where the Indonesians are alone in
the areas they control and literally the whole
population is in the liberated areas fighting a people's war against the invaders.

Fretilin today controls over 85 percent of the territory. And the remaining 15 percent or less controlled by the enemy includes the enclave of Oe-Cussi and the small island of Atauro, which are completely under Indonesian control.

The Indonesians control some towns like Dili, Baucau, Maubisse, Aileu, etc. But even in these towns they are under constant attack. The enemy is forced to concentrate their troops to protect these towns, and the enemy soldiers want to stay there, not fight, but spend their time in the towns.

The Indonesian troops only spend a certain time in East Timor - six months, then go back home, to be replaced by fresh troops. Of course, the ordinary Indonesian soldier doesn't want to risk being killed in those six months. They therefore avoid fighting as much as possible, wanting to return to Indonesia as heroes, rather than for burial.

The Indonesian generals sit in Jakarta or even Dili, make their plans on maps and order their soldiers to fight to carry them out. But the Indonesian soldiers are now realising, after suffering very big casualties, that they cannot win the war. They just want to live and go home.

The links between the Indonesian soldiers and their officers are those peculiar to a fascist army. The soldiers are kept completely apart from their officers. The senior officers stay in Dili and Baucau. There, the officers spend most of their time organising businesses - bars and restaurants etc. - and encourage the ordinary soldiers to spend their money there instead of sending it to their families. And so the officers make a lot of money from corruption.

So the ordinary Indonesian soldier can see he is being asked to die to defend the Indonesian generals who are making big money in Dili and Baucau while they are fighting in the mountains.

They know their families and relatives are starving in Indonesia. The soldier is one of the most privileged in a village in relation to others, so he is expected to keep an extended family - not only his immediate family, but relations. Who feeds these people if the soldier dies in East Timor?
The more Indonesian soldiers are sent to East Timor, the more will be the discontent in Indonesia.

The enemy can’t move by roads so much transportation is by sea or by air.

**How do you see the situation developing in the coming months?**

It is better for Fretilin in the present wet season.

It is difficult for the enemy to move because he relies on tanks and armoured vehicles which are difficult to move on the roads and across the flooded rivers. So Fretilin is in a better position to attack. In the wet season too, we can recover our strength, heal the wounded, and tend the crops. I hope Fretilin will be able in the coming months, to recover some of the villages the Indonesians have taken. It is logical that we will be able to do that as in the last dry season we took back many villages. We expected a big offensive by the enemy in the last dry season, but we launched one instead. That demoralised many Indonesian soldiers.

I am sure the present wet season will completely change things. We are in a good position to attack, because we don’t rely on tanks. We move on horseback or by foot.

The enemy finds it very difficult in the wet season, when it rains for weeks on end. We are used to it ...

**Turning to the question of health: there are no doctors in the liberated areas now. Many people in Australia wonder how you can survive?**

Actually, there may be an Indian doctor still in the liberated area, but I am not sure if he is still alive...

But there are many highly trained and experienced nurses who are working hard to support the struggle and train “barefoot doctors” to try to solve the problems of looking after the wounded and sick. We have many problems to resolve after this war and our nurses will be competent to solve many of them.

We are using traditional medicines. East Timor has a very highly developed system of traditional medicine. According to custom, all this traditional medical knowledge was passed on by the traditional doctor to his eldest son. He held a strong position in the village and traditional structure. Now Fretilin has been able to persuade the traditional doctors to share their knowledge with the whole people. Some of them are still conservative, but many others have joined in the campaign through the appeal made by Fretilin Central Committee, and are teaching all the young people traditional medicine.

For hundreds of years these traditional medicines, prepared from herbs, barks and roots etc... have been used to cure malaria and other diseases and infections and heal broken limbs. There are traditional medicines, for example, which can be very successfully used as anaesthetics to enable operations on wounded soldiers.

Many of the herbs I have seen used in traditional medicines in China, for example, are similar to those used in East Timor.

You know that under Portuguese colonialism, there were never enough doctors and nurses. People had to solve medical problems with traditional medicines, and that knowledge has remained intact.

**Is the anti-illiteracy campaign continuing under war conditions?**

The anti-illiteracy campaign has been intensified in the past year. It is clearly important, even from a military point of view, that people can read and write. But it is also important that they can explain and understand Fretilin ideology. Over 50,000 people are now in the anti-illiteracy courses - not just children, but all ages. The anti-illiteracy campaign is also continuing inside Falintil.

The Political Bureau of the Fretilin Central Committee is in charge of the anti-illiteracy campaign and everywhere the people are mobilised to take part in it. It is not simply anti-illiteracy, but also political education - about the nature of Indonesian aggression etc. Most primary school teachers escaped the invasion and are now in Fretilin’s ranks. They form the basis for this campaign.

In addition, we are reviving our traditional culture - songs, dances, etc. - and, in general, to think our own way, not in the way the colonialists taught us.
We also have to revive many traditional means of expression - traditional oratory, which contained a rich history of our people, of oppression and resistance. These speeches, learnt by heart, by the orators, are the basis for our future literature. Many old men and their knowledge may die in this war but we must preserve their knowledge - they are living libraries.

But, in addition, while preserving our culture, we must introduce new things, and also learn from the people. Those who have been to agriculture college know many things, but how to apply them and how to adapt them can only be learnt through working with the people.

What is the situation now in West Timor?

Fretilin respects the integrity of the Indonesian Republic. But, of course, when the Indonesians attack us, we can also counter-attack. The larger areas we can fight in, the better for us. So we will help all movements against Suharto, and we will help the liberation movement in West Timor too. We are not expansionist, like Suharto, and when the other side (in West Timor) is liberated, they will be Indonesians. We want to help them in all ways.

Suharto is trying to extinguish the fire in East Timor, but in fact he is pouring oil on the fire. Not only in East Timor, but also in West Timor. We will help them until the complete defeat of Suharto.

The next leader of Indonesia must pay attention to the problem of East Timor.

We will never surrender to Suharto, or any other leaders of Indonesia, we will fight them and help all movements fighting them.

In West Timor, we know through refugees and from other sources, that there are over 1000 West Timorese guerrillas fighting there, helped by Fretilin.