

EAST TIMORISSUE

Although positive trends were seen, particularly in the conduct of the military, human rights abuses continued in East Timor in 1996.

BACKGROUND

A former Portuguese colony, East Timor found itself without institutions or local government in the aftermath of the Portuguese revolution of 1974. A civil war ensued and on November 28, 1975, the victorious FRETILIN movement declared the independence of East Timor. Under the pretext of answering a call for aid from other Timorese groups and preventing a communist threat, Indonesian troops invaded the territory on December 7, 1975. Indonesia subsequently unilaterally annexed East Timor and declared it to be its 27th province on July 17, 1976. The UN still does not recognize the annexation of East Timor. While the Indonesian government admitted that 30,000 lives had been lost, East Timor activists set the figure at 200,000. On November 12, 1991, international concern was heightened when military forces opened fire on a funeral procession in Dili, resulting in scores of deaths.

The situation in East Timor deteriorated with the holding of the 1994 APEC Leaders' Meeting in Jakarta when concurrent demonstrations in East Timor and the occupation of the U.S. Embassy drew international attention to East Timor once more. The situation remained tense in 1995 with new outbreaks of violence, arbitrary arrests, disappearances and summary executions. Due to heavy military presence, the 20th anniversary of the invasion of East Timor passed without incident.

Despite an apparent change in focus by the military from the clandestine movement in the cities to the guerrilla forces in the countryside, 1996 saw several major violent demonstrations and riots, triggered by religious or ethnic incidents. In the early stages of the demonstrations, the military applied recognized crowd control and dispersement methods rather than resorting to the use of the live ammunition. However, there were reports that the military reverted to harsher methods of crowd control as the demonstrations became more prolonged and violent. Interrogations were reportedly carried out using more professional conduct by both police and military.

The Government of Indonesia (GOI) continues to participate in the UN-sponsored Trilateral Talks with Portugal with the aim of finding "a just and internationally acceptable solution." Due to the changeover of the UN Secretary General, the December meeting between Foreign Minister Ali Alatas and Portuguese Foreign Minister Jaime Gama was postponed. East Timor remains in the international spotlight especially after the joint award of the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize to Bishop Carlos Belo and Jose Ramos-Horta, self-imposed exiled spokesperson of FRETILIN. The award has re-kindled international demands that Indonesia make sincere efforts to resolve the question.