

EAST TIMOR

ISSUE

The deteriorating human rights situation in East Timor is cause for concern.

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. The territory was annexed and became the 27th province of Indonesia on July 17, 1976. While the Indonesian Government admitted that 30,000 lives had been lost, East Timor lobbyists set the figure at 200,000. The UN does not recognize the annexation of East Timor. On November 12, 1991, international concern was heightened when military forces opened fire on a funeral procession in Dili, resulting in scores of deaths. East Timor remains in the international spotlight, especially after the joint award of the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize to Bishop Carlos Belo and José Ramos-Horta, spokesperson of FRETILIN. The award has re-kindled international demands that Indonesia make sincere efforts to resolve the question of East Timor.

The May 1997 parliamentary elections in Indonesia occasioned a renewed wave of violence in East Timor which was characterized by guerilla attacks on polling stations and attacks on Indonesian security forces resulting in some 34 deaths. Following the attacks, some 120 people were arrested by the security forces. In an incident still under investigation, David Alex, prominent leader of the East Timorese armed resistance, *Falintil*, died following an encounter with Indonesian security forces on 25 June 1997. Various factors have contributed to the rising social and political tensions in East Timor: the widespread and oppressive military presence in East Timor; proliferation of Indonesian paramilitary groups and counterinsurgency forces; in-migration of Indonesians to East Timor -- partly due to official transmigration programs; and contentious economic development plans for East Timor. The military continues its practice of widespread and frequently arbitrary arrests, detentions and torture in response to guerrilla incidents. In this conflict, both sides have been responsible for committing human rights abuses.

For several years, Indonesia has participated in the UN-sponsored Trilateral Talks with Portugal with the aim of finding "a just and internationally acceptable solution." The appointment of Secretary General Kofi Annan gave new impetus to a negotiated solution; in March, the Secretary General's special representative, Jamsheed Marker, visited Indonesia and East Timor. In June, Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas and Portuguese Foreign Minister Jaime Gama resumed talks in the presence of the Secretary General in New York. In August, senior officials met again under this process. The All-Inclusive Intra-East Timorese dialogue (AIETD) also continues; the third meeting was held on October 20-23 in Austria. (The mandate of the AIETD does not permit it to address the political status of East Timor.) In the AIETD final declaration, the participants agreed to encourage visits by participants residing in the diaspora to East Timor, and by participants living in East Timor to diaspora communities in Australia, Portugal and Macao -- the purpose of these visits to strengthen the dialogue among Timorese.