

REPORT ON EAST TIMOR ROUNDTABLE

Ottawa, February 22, 1999

I. BACKGROUND OF THE CURRENT SITUATION IN EAST TIMOR

The current situation in East Timor (as described by four East Timorese guests) can be characterised as extremely serious and fluid. According to Florentino Sarmento of the Komnas Ham, clashes between proponents of independence and those supporting integration are exacerbated by additional cleavages within the East Timorese society that have developed as a result of the long standing conflict between the East Timorese and the Indonesian government. Indeed, a "cycle of revenge" feeds ever increasing incidents of violence, especially among youth. Wide-spread lawlessness has come to characterise every-day life of the East Timorese. The Indonesian military is arming the pro-integration forces and civilians take up weapons, either in desperation or for monetary gain. A "culture of violence" spreads resulting in an increase in gross human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrest, detention, arbitrary execution, disappearances, torture, rape, sexual abuse, intimidation, and the removal of citizens from their residences. Teachers, nurses, doctors, midwives, and other essential personnel have already begun to leave troubled areas as the wave of violence intensifies, leading to a societal disintegration.

Notwithstanding past and present efforts of the Canadian government, including ODA, and Canadians in development and peace building projects, the East Timorese urged Canada to take immediate action to stem the growing instability and suffering in the region.

An outside intervention for a cease-fire followed by disarmament, perhaps coordinated by Canada, is perceived as absolutely necessary to prevent a looming civil war and to ensure at least limited level of security for the East Timorese people.

The history of good relations between the Canadian and Indonesian governments bodes well for Canada to undertake such a role. The activists also expressed a desire for Canada to continue to assist the East Timorese beyond the short time horizon. Armido Maia, the former Vice-rector of the University of Timor, appealed for Canadian assistance in launching a genuine process of reconciliation. The message was pointedly summed up by Manuel Abrantes of Bishop Belo's Peace and Justice Commission, the East Timorese are asking Canadians for help, hoping for a short term leadership and a long term friendship.

Ken Sandquist, the Canadian Ambassador to Indonesia, also contributed to painting a picture of the troubled region. He stressed the importance of Canada as an ODA donor in East Timor. Furthermore, he contended that Indonesia is unlikely to fund autonomy if separation is the ultimate goal and pointed out that East Timor is increasingly perceived as a burden by the Indonesian government. He drew attention to