

# EAST TIMOR: Ten Years of Terror

By DEREK RASMUSSEN  
Canadian University Press

"Senior church officials believe that 250,000 Timorese — more than one-third of the original inhabitants — have been killed or starved to death."

"One experienced Red Cross official called conditions worse than anything he had seen in famine-stricken Cambodia or Biafra."

"One letter refers to Indonesian troops torturing to death two Timorese conscripts with 'nails, cigarette butts, and razor blades'."

"The Canadian government has gone so far as to eagerly promote and subsidize weapons sales to the Indonesian army."

On December 7 of this year a terrible anniversary will probably go unnoticed by most Canadians — the anniversary of a decade of genocide in a place you have likely never heard of.

Nearly ten years ago the tiny Southeast Asian territory of East Timor was invaded by its large neighbour, Indonesia. Today the conflict in East Timor is rated by the Washington-based Centre for Defense Information as the most violent in the world, relative to its population.

Senior church officials in the predominantly Roman Catholic territory believe that 250,000 Timorese — more than one-

Such heavy-handed tactics aren't usually necessary as the media has been very effective in censoring itself through a policy of silence on the issue of East Timor.

Although there is little coverage of East Timor in the press, the Canadian government is not blind to the issue — Canada supports Indonesia.

In the past decade Canada has abstained from voting on UN resolutions condemning the invasion and has, most recently, voted against resolutions endorsing East Timor's right to self-determination and humanitarian assistance. According to an

East Timor), the Portuguese abruptly pulled out of East Timor. At the time, East Timor was embroiled in a month-long civil war which the Red Cross estimates claimed 2,000 lives. Fretilin (the Revolutionary front for an Independent East Timor) was left in control of the territory. Most journalists and independent observers wrote that Fretilin had a majority of popular support as a result of its literacy campaigns, health programmes and agricultural reforms.

The Indonesian military regime felt threatened by the emergence of a small progressive nation on its borders — a possible inspiration for secessionist movements within Indonesia.

Fretilin wanted Portugal to return and ensure an orderly and democratic decolonization, but before this could happen Indonesian forces invaded East Timor. Twelve hours before the invasion — largely carried out with U.S. arms — President Ford and Henry Kissinger visited Indonesia and gave approval for its position on East Timor.

East Timorese priests and refugees paint a grim picture of the Indonesian invasion and occupation, characterized by indiscriminate mass killings, torture, rape, looting, saturation bombing and defoliation using napalm and chemical weapons.

Two days after the invasion, Kingston-area MP Douglas Alkenbrack (PC) asked the only question ever put forward on East Timor in the House of Commons: "Why was the Canadian government going to invest taxpayers' money in a pulp and paper plant in Indonesia 'in view of the recent invasion by Indonesia of Portuguese Timor and of the apparent corrupt and barbaric regime of President Suharto?'"

"I do not share the honourable member's premise," was Prime Minister Trudeau's eight-word reply.

Within months of the invasion, Canada extended a \$200 million line of credit to Indonesia, implicitly sanctioning the slaughter. For the next three years East Timor was completely cut off while the Indonesian military murdered and starved to death thousands of East Timorese. In 1978 the army lifted its veil of secrecy — slightly.

Glen Shortliffe, Canada's Ambassador to Indonesia, was part of the first hand-picked party of diplomats and journalists given a "conducted tour" of East Timor in 1978. Shortliffe was shocked by what he saw. Shortliffe told reporters that the Timorese people "were in deplorable condition. They are starving in many cases; they are desperately ill; they need help in terms of immediate relief — food, clothing, basic medical care." Shortliffe wrote a report for the Canadian government but External Affairs refused to release it.

Bombing the refugees down from their mountain hiding places, Indonesian troops herded the starving Timorese into military-run "resettlement" camps. In 1979, Indonesia finally allowed the International Red Cross limited access to East Timor for the first time. Relief workers were shocked. One experienced Red Cross official called conditions worse than anything he had seen in famine-stricken Cambodia or Biafra.

At the same time, former conservative External Affairs Minister Flora MacDonald told a Kingston newspaper that her department "never considered (East Timor) important enough" to brief her on it.

More than a year after Shortliffe's visit, Canada donated a mere \$200,000 to the International Red Cross for East Timor.



Fretilin supporters rally in better days of May, 1975. Photo by the Melbourne Age, reprinted by Amnesty Intl.

third of the original 650,000 inhabitants — have been killed or starved to death since the invasion. Their infant mortality rate is now the highest in the world. According to Washington's Population Reference Bureau, 211 of every 1000 babies born in East Timor die before their first birthday.

The Indonesian military has closed East Timor off from the outside world, allowing only selected observers on carefully guided tours of the island. Recent attempts to report on the situation in East Timor led Indonesia to ban United Press International's bureau chief, Isabelle Reckweg, from working in Indonesia.

External Affairs spokesperson, the Conservative government has no plans to change their policy of supporting Indonesia.

Located 300 miles northwest of Australia in the Timor Sea (see map), the mountainous island of Timor is the same size as Vancouver Island. For 450 years East Timor was a neglected remnant of the Portuguese colonial empire, and developed into a distinct entity — linguistically, culturally and tribally different from Indonesian-controlled West Timor.

In 1975, after announcing plans to leave the last of their colonies (including Mozambique, Angola, Guinea-Bissau and