

EAST TIMOR

ISSUE

Although positive trends were seen, particularly in the diplomatic field, human rights abuses continued in East Timor in 1998.

BACKGROUND

A former Portuguese colony, East Timor was invaded by Indonesian troops on December 7, 1975 in the aftermath of a rapid Portuguese withdrawal in August 1975 and a period of civil war in the territory. Indonesia's annexation of East Timor on July 17, 1976 is not recognized by the UN. While the Indonesian government admitted that 30,000 lives had been lost in the invasion, East Timor lobbyists set the figure at 200,000. On November 12, 1991, East Timorese civilians were massacred by Indonesian troops at the Santa Cruz cemetery in Dili. This year, a former governor of East Timor revealed that additional, previously unknown killings took place immediately afterwards. In 1996, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Carlos Belo, Bishop of Dili, and José Ramos-Horta, exiled East Timorese spokesperson.

President Habibie has shown flexibility on East Timor and has addressed most of the criteria established in the 1998 Commission on Human Rights (CHR) Consensus Chair's Statement on East Timor: 52 East Timorese political prisoners were released; Indonesia signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on technical cooperation with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, including access to East Timor; the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention is scheduled to visit East Timor in February 1999; the government launched a 5-year National Action Plan on Human Rights; Indonesia ratified the Convention Against Torture; and progress has been made towards a solution to the East Timor question. In addition, Indonesia has made progress in areas raised by Canada during the 1998 CHR discussions, including the National Action Plan and negotiations with Canada on an MOU on technical cooperation on human rights.

In August 1998, Indonesia proposed 'wide-ranging autonomy' as the basis for negotiations under UN auspices with Portugal, negotiations which led to the exchange of diplomatic interest sections between the two countries on January 30, 1999. On January 27, 1999, the eve of the resumption of the UN negotiations, the Indonesian Cabinet announced that it would recommend to the next General Session of the People's Consultative Assembly to "release" East Timor from Indonesia if the UN-sponsored negotiations fail to produce an agreement on autonomy, or if the East Timorese reject autonomy. The Cabinet also decided that imprisoned East Timorese leader Xanana Gusmao will be transferred to a form of house arrest from which he will be able to take part in the negotiations on East Timor. Details of Gusmao's role and of how the East Timorese are to be consulted are unknown.

Since July, Indonesia has undertaken measures to improve the human rights situation in East Timor. Police and soldiers in the territory have received handbooks on human rights, and the Indonesian military (ABRI) has apologized for some incidents in which excessive force was used. Although ABRI claimed to have reduced its troop levels in East Timor in August, leaked documents originating inside ABRI indicate the contrary. Nonetheless, ABRI has, according to many observers, reduced its visibility in Dili, improving the political atmosphere there. Large student demonstrations in Dili have met with muted responses from the security forces.