

*Henny Saptatia*

## **East Timor During the Independence Crisis of 1999–2001**

### **The historical context**

Portuguese traders arrived in Timor Island in 1509, and after 47 years a small number of Dominican friars established the first Portuguese settlement at Lifau, in the present-day Oecussi enclave in East Timor. As the result of the rivalry between the Dutch and Portuguese, in 1859 the Treaty of Lisbon divided Timor, giving Portugal the eastern half of the island, together with the north-coast pocket of Oecussi in the west. Since then, Portuguese Timor, which was known as East Timor, ruled via a traditional system of local chiefs who acted as agents for the colonisers.

Timor was considered of great strategic importance at the outbreak of World War II, being a potential launching pad for a Japanese invasion of Australia. The locals made massive sacrifices. By the end of the war about 60,000 east Timorese had lost their lives. Following a military coup in Portugal in 1974, East Timor felt independence inching closer, and several political parties sprang up. Unfortunately Indonesia also saw an opportunity. The internal dispute between the two major Timorese parties, Fretilin and the Timorese Democratic Union (UDT), gave the Indonesia the excuse

it needed. On 11 August 1975, although independence-minded Fretilin was restoring order, Indonesia prepared to annex the country. The invasion commenced on 7 December 1975. Although the Fretilin forces proved their worth as guerrilla fighters, Indonesia's superior military strength won the day. East Timor was officially declared Indonesia's 27th province on 16 July 1976. The United Nations did not and has never recognised Indonesia's sovereignty over East Timor. But despite passing Resolution 3485, condemning Indonesia and recommending that the UN Security Council take action to protect the East Timorese, nothing was done.

The world was alerted to East Timor's plight on 12 November 1991, when Indonesian army troops opened fire on protesters at the Santa Cruz cemetery in Dili. The region was again in the news in 1996 when East Timorese Catholic Bishop Carlos Belo and leading Timor spokesman Jos  Ramos-Horta won the Nobel Peace Prize.

Indonesia's President Habibie announced a referendum for East Timorese autonomy. The governments of Indonesia and Portugal signed an agreement in May 1999, giving a mandate to the United Nations to conduct the ballot. The main condition imposed by the UN on Indonesia was that the increasingly active, pro-Indonesian militia groups operating in Timor be brought under control. The vote took place in late August and the atmosphere in East Timor was coloured with the violence that had been feared. When the results of the poll were announced on 4 September, almost 80% of the people of East Timor had voted for independence. Celebrations were, however, extremely short lived. The armed militia groups, with both tacit and active backing from the Indonesian military, commenced a rampage through East Timor. In the chaos that followed, tens of thousands of pro-independence East Timorese some claim over 100 000 were rounded up and either killed or removed from the region. The militia and the military by this stage indistinguishable controlled the streets, while towns, including the capital, Dili, were virtually burned to the ground. The Indonesian government attempted to play down the situation but in the face of international condemnation eventually accepted UN troops into East Timor. The Australian-led International Force in East Timor INTERFET landed on 20 September 1999. Before order was restored, many Timorese had lost their lives, half a million people had been displaced, and the country's infrastructure had been shattered.

The United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) was established in October 1999 to oversee the administration of East Timor during its transition to independence. But Up to 100,000 East Timorese remained in refugee camps in West Timor, many being afraid to return home because of past associations with the Indonesian occupation and because of coercion from militia groups still operating in West Timor.

### **Journalists during the crisis in East Timor**

Instead of presenting a story of the crisis, probably sharing a story how the Indonesian journalists were working during the crisis in East Timor would be more interesting. I offer it as a present to Ibu Elena and Bapak Alexander.

There were two categories of Indonesian journalists: those who worked for the Indonesian national media and those who worked for the foreign media which had correspondent offices or bureaus in Indonesia. Obviously, both categories had its own pressures and obstacles during their professional duties in East Timor. The pro integration group, the people favouring a return to Indonesian suzerainty, were antagonistic to those who worked for foreign media, no matter whether 'white' or 'brown'. The pro independence participants simply did not like any Indonesians, except those who worked for non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

My first experience covering East Timor conflicts was in May 1999, when working as a TV producer for The Nederlands Omroep Stichting Jakarta Office. A few foreign journalists had been already in Dili, but almost no Indonesian journalists were there, except those who worked for foreign media. Some foreign media had rented a house or blocked some rooms in secure hotels. Comfortable rooms in a good hotel were difficult to obtain. We journalists from Indonesia were limited to unsafe rooms, but fortunately an Indonesian woman who worked for BBC London was willing to share her room with me.

At that time East Timor was already tense due to the installing of the armed militia. The governments of Indonesia and Portugal signed an agreement and gave a mandate to the United Nations to conduct the ballot. We covered some stories on "militia parades and convoys," some "various manipulated traditional ceremonies," and "the many violences perpetrated by the armed militia."

The Indonesian military was still taking control of the whole province, especially the villages. The local people were resistant to voicing honest opinions on the situation; people were too afraid to talk. In order to monitor what kind of questions the journalists raised to the East Timorese and what kind stories they produced, the Indonesian military and police always offered their “protection” services to the foreign journalists. Under difficult circumstances, journalists found many ways to manipulate the militia and the military in the process of collecting information. The result was good journalism and reporting.

My second duty in East Timor took place in the beginning of August up to 3rd September 1999. The reporting covered the weeks of the referendum’s campaign; we realized much more interesting accounts. Various stories concerned the “pro independent group,” the “pro integration group which were controlled by militias,” and a special story on the “under cover Indonesian military troops.” But our most interesting story was “the pro independent guerillas which were living in a jungle eight hours from Dili” and “the process of balloting” itself.

Access to the guerillas was very difficult. Secret procedures to get permissions were supposed to be issued by hidden persons of the pro independent group in Dili. In our first approach, they did not let us go, only because they knew that the producer of NOS was an Indonesian. Nevertheless, we tried, tried and tried, and finally managed to reach the camp of the FALINTIL guerillas. The sector was led by Taur Matan Ruak (recently, a minister of defense of the Republic of Timor Lorosae). We stayed there for three nights and got a great impression of their struggle. Only one day after coming back from the jungle, we got a ‘good picture’ of a real armed conflict in Dili. Some young Timorese were killed. The militia and police got ‘crazy’ and were shooting the journalists. Some journalists were trapped between two fires. An Indonesian photographer who worked for Reuter’s agency was injured by gunshot. Two Indonesian journalists worked for Kompas Daily, one a photographer was twice wounded. But since they were wearing bullet proof vests they survived. On another day, the militia blockaded the UNAMET office where a press briefing was going on. They attacked and shot any journalist they met. The foreign journalist, BBC correspondent of Jakarta bureau, Jonathan Head, was beaten with a gun and

seriously injured on his arm. It seems that journalists who got in touch with the pro independence group and visited the guerillas' camp were wanted and were threatened with death.

### **Evacuation from Dili**

At the end of July 1999 the Netherlands Embassy in Jakarta called our Jakarta office and asking for the name list of NOS journalists who were sent to cover Referendum in East Timor. As I remember, by telephone the Dutch diplomat explained that the list would be made for evacuation purposes. Since September 1st, provocative rumors had spread in Dili. One of them was: "the announcement of the voting's result will be followed by chaos". Therefore, almost all journalists were preparing for the evacuation steps. On September 1st we made contact with a Dutch diplomat to make sure of the evacuation procedures and to determine what preparations would be needed. At that time hundreds of members of the diplomatic corps of various countries were also in East Timor as foreign observers. They too would be evacuated if necessary.

Nothing was as easy as we expected. The plan changed. A diplomat explained that the flight to the East Timor were under a joint charter flight agreement. Since it was an Australian charter flight, the Australians determined priority. An Australian diplomat informed us who would be on board if evacuation measures should be taken. First to leave would be the Australian diplomatic corps, Australian journalists and Australian citizens, then the New Zealand diplomatic corps, its journalists and its citizens, and the last one would be the Dutch diplomatic corps, Dutch journalists and Dutch citizens. And what about the Indonesian journalists who worked for the Dutch media? He answered that he could give no guarantees. Given seat availability, an Indonesian who works for Dutch media might be board. Those of us in this category were not pleased.

In our internal discussion with the NOS correspondent, we decided to make a plan B: I should leave Dili on September 3rd. I went to the Indonesia Air Force base and talked to an officer. He gave me a ticket for 40 dollars for a Hercules plane flight. It was an absolutely uncomfortable plane, crowded with Indonesian diplomatic corps, soldiers, and Indonesian journalists from national and foreign media. We flew for 19 hours from Dili to Jakarta. We left East

Timor only a day before Matt Frei, a BBC correspondent, reported that Dili and its surrounding cities were starting to be burned. Within a couple of days, all journalists left from Timor and the whole province was closed.

### **Another trip to West Timor**

One week after coming back from East Timor, a producer of Twee Vandaag (News Program of Evangelic TV- Nederlands) called me; they just arrived. Twee Vandaag planned to make some documentaries and feature stories. They needed a local producer. I accepted the offering, but in one condition. For the sake of our safety and the best production, I would take my own crew with me – an Indonesian cameraman and his assistant. Twee Vandaag agreed. We were flying to West Timor without ‘white-men’. Fortunately, my cameraman and his assistant looked like people from the eastern part of Indonesia. Nobody recognised them as Javanese. Neither Caucasians nor Javanese would be well received among the Timorese refugees.

We did some stories on ‘refugees,’ ‘conflict between West Timorese and East Timorese’, ‘military activity in West Timor related to East Timor operation’, ‘sweeping operation and killing done by military and pro integration militia toward the pro independence supporters’, ‘children who were separated from their parents’ and others.

While BBC and CNN reported that starvation was a big fear, especially for thousands of pro-independence supporters who fled to the hills and mountains in East Timor, we witnessed similar facts in West Timor. Excepting Maria Ressa, the Bureau chief of CNN Jakarta and her crew, few foreign journalists reported from West Timor. In this case, the western part of Timor Island housed more than 120 000 refugees who had willingly or unwillingly committed to pro integration. Most of them were living in terrible conditions, in camps with horrible sanitation and food shortage. And since militiamen and their families were dominated control of the refugee camps, untold numbers of refugees were living in fear of their lives.

We were able to make some stories not only in Kupang – the capital city of West Timor, but also in Atambua – a city where some of the biggest refugee camps were built. And as East Timor was closed,

we managed to reach Batu Gade the border between west and east part of Timor, which were strictly under control by armed militias and the Indonesia military.

The crisis in East Timor was not ended yet. The INTERFET, which was dominated by Australian troops, landed in Dili. UN administration took control of the whole land. The ‘embryo’ of a new country was growing up and up. Nevertheless, the social and security problems on the island of ‘where the sun rises’ (= Lorosae), were left unsolved. Although a new country called ‘Timor Lorosae’ was being born, hundreds thousands of east Timorese were still living in refugee camps in the West Timor.

A year after my last trip to the West Timor in 1999, I was sent by the Japanese newspaper Yomiuri Shimbun (Jakarta bureau) to visit Atambua. I witnessed, and again in the year 2000, that the conditions of refugee’s camp were not much better than a year before. As a writer who came without TV crew, I got much better response from the refugees. I did not tell them of my association with the Japanese media. It was understandable that refugees were suspicious of journalists of foreign media. They felt exploited and blamed, and being the objects of a bias stories, just because they were in the West Timor.

In August 2001, only one month before I came to Russia, I got a chance to return to East Timor. The NHK (Nippon Hoso Kyokai = Japanese Broadcasting Corporation) offered the opportunity to produce a “marathon” documentary both in West and East Timor. In West Timor, we focused our documentary on psychological problems of the former militia and the east Timorese refugees who were willing to be repatriated. While in Timor Lorosae, we succeeded in making some stories on ‘the campaign and election process of legislation board’ and some other feature stories. We also were able to interview the future president of Timor Lorosae, Xanana Gusmau. I had previously conducted some interviews with him when he was still a prisoner in Jakarta.

It was a great experience to witness a fragment of the story of West Timor’s independence from Indonesia. But it was painful to be in the center of the armed conflict, to witness how the wars was going on, how the numbers of refugees were increasing, how the ordinary people were suffering, and how the crisis did not end easily.