The East Timor Genocide
1975-1999

Background

The Indonesian invasion of East Timor in December 1975 set the stage for the long, bloody, and disastrous occupation of the territory that ended only after an international peacekeeping force was introduced in 1999. President Bill Clinton cut off military aid to Indonesia in September 1999—reversing a longstanding policy of military cooperation—but questions persist about U.S. responsibility for the 1975 invasion; in particular, the degree to which Washington actually condoned or supported the bloody military offensive.

The leftist military revolt that overthrew Portugal's authoritarian regime in April 1974 encouraged nationalist movements in the Portuguese colony of East Timor calling for gradual independence from Lisbon—a position also initially favored by the new Portuguese government. One of these groups, the Timorese Democratic Union (UTD), had greater support among Timorese elites and senior Portuguese colonial administrators, while the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (Fretilin), with its left-leaning, social democratic program, had the support of younger Timorese and lower-level colonial officials. In January 1975 the two groups formed an uneasy coalition. Increasingly, Fretilin enjoyed the greatest public support and led the push for rapid independence.

Early signals from the Indonesian government indicated that it was prepared to support East Timorese independence, but Jakarta soon became interested in turning the region into the country's twenty-seventh province. Fears that an independent East Timor could be used as a base by unfriendly governments or spur other secessionist movements in Indonesia had convinced hardliners in the military to press for annexation of the territory. In February 1975 the Indonesian military conducted a mock invasion of East Timor in South Sumatra. Military hardliners also backed the pro-integration Timorese Popular Democratic Association (Apodeti) with financial assistance and launched a propaganda campaign against the pro-independence groups. Apodeti, however, never had the popular support enjoyed by Fretilin or UDT.

The new regime in Lisbon was preoccupied with its own internal political controversies and could do little to ensure a steady transition toward independence. During 1974 and 1975 Indonesian authorities hoped that the Portuguese would acquiesce in Jakarta's plans to acquire East Timor. At first the Portuguese seemed responsive, but by mid-1975 it had become evident that Lisbon supported self-determination for the people of East Timor. In July 1975 Lisbon rebuffed Jakarta with the issuance of Constitutional Law 7/75, setting forth a timetable for home-rule, including the election of a popular assembly that would determine East Timor's future, with Portuguese sovereignty ending no later than October 1978.

Events in East Timor, however, did not proceed in accordance with Lisbon's schedule. The delicate UDT-Fretilin alliance had fallen apart in May, in part due to a propaganda campaign launched by the Indonesian government to inflame UTD concerns about Fretilin's alleged communist tendencies. UDT's fears were bolstered in June when Fretilin refused to attend an all-party conference on decolonization hosted by Portuguese officials on Macao due to the presence of Apodeti representatives. To Fretilin the issue of independence was not up for discussion, least of all with Jakarta. The extent of Fretilin's popularity—and thus popular sentiment for independence from Indonesia—became evident in July when the party won 55 percent of the vote in local elections. Convinced by Indonesian intelligence that Fretilin was planning a coup, UDT staged its own in August 1975 in the Timorese capital Dili in an effort to drive out Fretilin supporters. A Fretilin counterattack pushed UDT forces out of the city, however, and by September Fretilin controlled nearly all of East Timor, the Portuguese administrators having fled to the island of Ataúro. Despite having gained de facto control of the territory, Fretilin ended its call for immediate independence and now supported a plan similar to the gradual independence program proposed in June by the Portuguese.

The Indonesian government did not seize the opportunity to move troops into Dili on the premise of restoring order. Suharto was still concerned about the reaction from the West and needed more time to get the UDT and other anti-Fretilin groups to support integration. The UDT, now refugees on the Indonesian side of Timor and in need of food and shelter, had no choice but to sign a pro-integration petition drawn up by Indonesia. Meanwhile, in October Indonesian special forces began to infiltrate secretly into East Timor in an effort to provoke clashes that would provide the pretext for a full-scale invasion. When these incursions—including the murder by Indonesian forces of five journalists employed by Australian TV—failed to elicit any noticeable reaction from the West, Indonesia stepped-up its attacks across the border.

While Indonesian airborne troops—outfitted with American equipment—prepared to take Dili, Fretilin petitioned the United Nations to call for the withdrawal of the invading forces. Four days later, on November 28, Fretilin declared East Timor's independence—apparently in the belief that a sovereign state would have greater success appealing to the UN, but also thinking that Timorese soldiers would be more likely to fight for an independent state. Indonesia countered the next day with a "declaration of integration" signed by Apodeti and UDT representatives and coordinated by Indonesia's military intelligence service. The invasion, originally scheduled for early December, was apparently delayed by the visit of Ford and Kissinger to Jakarta on December 6.

Operation Komodo, a general invasion of East Timor, commenced the next day. In the following weeks a series of United Nations resolutions—supported by the U.S.—called for the withdrawal of the Indonesian troops. An estimated 20,000 Indonesian troops were deployed to the region by the end of the month. While casualty estimates vary, anywhere from 60,000-100,000 Timorese were probably killed in the first year after the violence began in 1975. In 1979 the U.S. Agency for International Development estimated that 300,000 East Timorese—nearly half the population—had been uprooted and moved into camps controlled by Indonesian armed forces. By 1980 the occupation had left more than 100,000 dead from military action, starvation or disease, with some estimates running as high as 230,000.

Source: http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB62/