

East Timor Retrospective - Noam Chomsky



Chomsky in 1999 writes on US intervention and the Indonesian government's bloody war in East Timor since 1975.

It is not easy to write with feigned calm and dispassion about the events that have been unfolding in East Timor. Horror and shame are compounded by the fact that the crimes are so familiar and could so easily have been terminated by the international community a long time ago.

Indonesia invaded the territory in December 1975, relying on US diplomatic support and arms, used illegally, but with secret authorisation from Washington; there were even new arms shipments sent under the cover of an official "embargo". There was no need to threaten bombing or even sanctions. It would have sufficed for the US and its allies to withdraw their active participation, and inform their close associates in the Indonesian military command that the atrocities must be terminated and the territory granted the right of self-determination that has been upheld by the United Nations and the International Court of Justice. We cannot undo the past, but we should at least be willing to recognise what we have done, and face the moral responsibility of saving the remnants and providing ample reparations - a small gesture of compensation for terrible crimes.

The latest chapter in this painful story of betrayal and complicity opened right after the referendum of 30 August 1999 when the population voted overwhelmingly for independence. At once, atrocities mounted sharply, organised and directed by the Indonesian army. The UN mission (Unamet) gave its appraisal on 11 September: "The evidence for a direct link between the militia and the military is beyond dispute and has been overwhelmingly documented by Unamet over the last four months. But the scale and thoroughness of the destruction of East Timor in the past week has demonstrated a new level of open participation of the military in the implementation of what was previously a more veiled operation."

The mission warned that "the worst may be yet to come... It cannot be ruled out that these are the first stages of a genocidal campaign to stamp out the East Timorese problem by force". [1](#)

John Roosa, historian on Indonesia and official observer of the vote, described the situation starkly: "Given that the pogrom was so predictable, it was easily preventable... But in the weeks before the ballot, the Clinton Administration refused to discuss with Australia and other countries the formation (of an international force). Even after the violence erupted, the

administration dithered for days". [2](#) Finally it was compelled by international (primarily Australian) and domestic pressure to make some timid gestures. Even these ambiguous messages sufficed to induce the Indonesian generals to reverse course and accept an international presence.

While President Clinton "dithered," almost half the population were expelled from their homes, according to UN estimates, and thousands murdered [3](#). The air force that was able to carry out pin-point destruction of civilian targets in Novi Sad, Belgrade and Pancevo lacked the capacity to drop food to people facing starvation in the mountains to which they had been driven by the terror of the Indonesian forces, armed and trained by the US and its no less cynical allies.

The recent events will evoke bitter memories among those who do not take refuge, like the so-called international community, in "intentional ignorance". We are witnessing a shameful replay of events of 20 years ago. After carrying out a huge slaughter in 1977-78 with the decisive support of the Carter Administration, Indonesia felt confident enough to permit a brief visit by members of the Jakarta diplomatic corps, among them the US ambassador, Edward Masters. They recognised that an enormous humanitarian catastrophe had been created. The aftermath was described by Benedict Anderson, one of the most distinguished scholars on Indonesia. Anderson testified before the UN that "For nine long months" of starvation and terror, "Ambassador Masters deliberately refrained, even within the walls of the State Department, from proposing humanitarian aid to East Timor." He was waiting "until the generals in Jakarta gave him the green light" - until, as an internal State Department document recorded, they felt "secure enough to permit foreign visitors". [4](#)

One gruesome illustration of US complicity was the coup that brought General Suharto to power in 1965. Army-led massacres slaughtered hundreds of thousands in a few months, mostly landless peasants. The powerful communist party was destroyed. The achievement elicited unrestrained euphoria in the West and fulsome praise for the Indonesian "moderates", Suharto and his military accomplices, who had cleansed society and opened it to foreign plunder. Robert McNamara, then Secretary of Defence, informed Congress that US military aid and training had "paid dividends" - including half a million corpses. A congressional report concluded they were "enormous dividends". McNamara informed President Johnson that that US military assistance "encouraged (the army) to move against the communist party when the opportunity was presented." Contacts with Indonesian military officers, including university programmes, were "very significant factors in determining the favourable orientation of the new Indonesian political elite" - the army. [5](#)

So matters continued during 35 years of intensive military aid, training, and communication. As Indonesian troops and their back-ups were burning Dili, and the killings and destruction had reached new heights, the Pentagon announced that a US-Indonesian "training exercise" on rescue and humanitarian actions in disaster situations had ended on 25 August, [6](#) five days before the referendum. The lessons of this cooperation were rapidly put into practice.

A few months earlier, shortly after the massacre of dozens of refugees who had taken shelter in a church in Liquica, Admiral Dennis Blair, the US Pacific Commander, had assured General Wiranto, head of the Indonesian armed forces and defence minister, of US support and assistance, proposing a new US training mission. [7](#)

The degree of cooperation between Washington and Jakarta is impressive. US weapons sales to Indonesia amount to over \$1 billion since the 1975 invasion. Military aid during the Clinton years is about \$150 million, and in 1997 the Pentagon was still training Kopassus units (see article by Romain Bertrand), in violation of the intent of congressional legislation. In the face of this record, the US government lauded "the value of the years of training given

to Indonesia's future military leaders in the US and the millions of dollars in military aid for Indonesia". [8](#)

The reasons for the disgraceful record have sometimes been honestly recognised. During the latest phase of atrocities, a senior diplomat in Jakarta described "the dilemma" faced by the great powers: "Indonesia matters and East Timor doesn't". [9](#) It was therefore understandable that Washington should keep to ineffectual gestures of disapproval while insisting that internal security in East Timor was "the responsibility of the government of Indonesia, and we don't want to take that responsibility away from them". This official stance, reaffirmed a few days before the August referendum, was repeated and maintained in full knowledge of how that "responsibility" had been carried out. [10](#)

The reasoning of the senior diplomat was spelled out more fully by two Asia specialists from the New York Times. The Clinton Administration, they wrote, "has made the calculation that the United States must put its relationship with Indonesia, a mineral-rich nation of more than 200 million people, ahead of its concern over the political fate of East Timor, a tiny impoverished territory of 800,000 people that is seeking independence." The Washington Post quoted Douglas Paal, president of the Asia Pacific Policy Centre, describing the facts of life: "Timor is a speed bump on the road to dealing with Jakarta, and we've got to get over it safely. Indonesia is such a big place and so central to the stability of the region". [11](#)

In the rhetoric of official Washington, "We don't have a dog running in the East Timor race". Accordingly, what happens there is not US business. But after intensive Australian pressure, the calculations shifted. A senior government official concluded: "We have a very big dog running down there called Australia and we have to support it". [12](#) The survivors of US-backed crimes in a "tiny impoverished territory" are not even a "small dog".

The guiding principles were articulated in 1978, three years after Indonesia's invasion of East Timor, by Washington's ambassador to the UN, Daniel Patrick Moynihan. His words should be committed to memory by anyone with a serious interest in international affairs, human rights, and the rule of law. In his memoirs, Moynihan wrote: "The United States wished things to turn out as they did, and worked to bring this about. The Department of State desired that the United Nations prove utterly ineffective in whatever measures it undertook. This task was given to me, and I carried it forward with no inconsiderable success". [13](#)

Success was indeed considerable. Moynihan cited reports that within two months some 60,000 people had been killed: "10 percent of the population, almost the proportion of casualties experienced by the Soviet Union during the second world war". A sign of the success, he added, was that within a year "the subject disappeared from the press." So it did, as the invaders intensified their assault. Atrocities peaked in 1977-78. Relying on a new flow of advanced military equipment from the Carter Administration - with its emphasis on human rights - the Indonesian military carried out a devastating attack against the hundreds of thousands who had fled to the mountains, driving the survivors to Indonesian control. It was then that highly credible Church sources in East Timor sought to make public the estimates of 200,000 deaths - long denied, but now at last accepted. As the slaughter reached near-genocidal levels, Britain and France joined in, along with other powers, providing diplomatic support and even arms.

This year opened with a moment of hope. Indonesia's interim president, B J Habibie, had called for a referendum with a choice between incorporation within Indonesia ("autonomy") or independence. The army moved at once to prevent this outcome by terror and intimidation. In the months leading to the August referendum, 3,000 to 5,000 were killed [14](#) - a far larger order of magnitude of deaths than that cited by Nato (2,000) in the year leading up to the bombing in Kosovo.

Braving violence and threats, almost the entire population voted, many emerging from hiding to do so. Close to 80% chose independence. Then followed the latest phase of atrocities by the Indonesian army in an effort to reverse the outcome by slaughter and expulsion. Much of the country was reduced to ashes. Within two weeks more than 10,000 people may have been killed, according to Bishop Carlos Filipe Belo, the Nobel Peace laureate (see article by Sylvain Desmille). The bishop was driven from his country under a hail of bullets, his house burned down, and the refugees sheltering there dispatched to an uncertain fate. [15](#)

Even before Habibie's surprise call for a referendum, the army anticipated threats to its rule, including its control over East Timor's resources, and undertook careful planning with "the aim, quite simply, ... to destroy a nation". The plans were known to Western intelligence. The army recruited thousands of West Timorese and brought in forces from Java. More ominously, the military command sent units of its dreaded US-trained Kopassus special forces, and, as senior military adviser, General Makarim, a US-trained intelligence specialist with experience in East Timor and "a reputation for callous violence". [16](#)

Terror and destruction began early in the year. The army forces responsible have been described as "rogue elements" in the West. There is good reason, however, to accept Bishop Belo's assignment of direct responsibility to General Wiranto. [17](#) It appears that the militias have been managed by elite units of Kopassus, the "crack special forces unit" that had, according to veteran Asia correspondent David Jenkins, "been training regularly with US and Australian forces until their behaviour became too much of an embarrassment for their foreign friends". [18](#)

These forces adopted the tactics of the US Phoenix programme in the Vietnam war, that killed tens of thousands of peasants and much of the indigenous South Vietnamese leadership, Jenkins writes, as well as "the tactics employed by the Contras" in Nicaragua. The state terrorists were "not simply going after the most radical pro-independence people, but going after the moderates, the people who have influence in their community."

Well before the referendum, the commander of the Indonesian military in Dili, Colonel Tono Suratman, warned of what was to come: "If the pro-independents do win ... all will be destroyed... It will be worse than 23 years ago". [19](#) An army document of early May, when international agreement on the referendum was reached, ordered that "Massacres should be carried out from village to village after the announcement of the ballot if the pro-independence supporters win." The independence movement "should be eliminated from its leadership down to its roots". [20](#) Citing diplomatic, church and militia sources, the Australian press reported "that hundreds of modern assault rifles, grenades and mortars are being stockpiled, ready for use if the autonomy option is rejected at the ballot box". [21](#)

All of this was understood by Indonesia's "foreign friends", who also knew how to bring the terror to an end, but preferred evasive and ambiguous reactions that the Indonesian generals could easily interpret as a "green light" to carry out their work.

The sordid history must be viewed against the background of US-Indonesia relations in the post-war era. [22](#) The rich resources of the archipelago, and its critical strategic location, guaranteed it a central role in US global planning. These factors lie behind US efforts 40 years ago to dismantle Indonesia, perceived as too independent and too democratic - even permitting participation of the poor peasants. These factors account for Western support for the regime of killers and torturers who emerged from the 1965 coup. Their achievements were seen as a vindication of Washington's wars in Indochina, motivated in large part by concerns that the "virus" of independent nationalism might "infect" Indonesia, to use Kissinger-like rhetoric.

Surely we should by now be willing to cast aside mythology and face the causes and consequences of our actions, and not only in East Timor. In that tortured corner of the world there is still time, though precious little time, to prevent a hideous conclusion to one of the most appalling tragedies of the terrible century that is winding to a horrifying, wrenching close.

Noam Chomsky

Le Monde diplomatique, October, 1999

- [1.](#) Report of the Security Council Mission to Jakarta and Dili, 8 to 12 September 1999.
- [2.](#) New York Times, 15 September 1999.
- [3.](#) Boston Globe, 15 September 1999
- [4.](#) Benedict Anderson, Statement before the Fourth Committee of the UN General Assembly, 20 October 1980. See also Noam Chomsky, *Towards a New Cold War*, Pantheon, New York, 1982.
- [5.](#) For review and sources, see Noam Chomsky, *Year 501*, South End, Boston, 1993.
- [6.](#) AP on line, 8 September 1999.
- [7.](#) The Nation, New York, 27 September 1999.
- [8.](#) New York Times, 14 September 1999.
- [9.](#) Financial Times, London, 8 September 1999; Christian Science Monitor, Boston, 14 September 1999.
- [10.](#) Sydney Morning Herald, 25 August 1999, citing State Department spokesman James Foley. Defence Secretary William Cohen, press briefing, 8 September 1999.
- [11.](#) Elizabeth Becker and Philip Shenon, New York Times, 9 September 1999. Steven Mufson, Washington Post, 9 September 1999.
- [12.](#) Australian Financial Review, Sydney, 13 September 1999.
- [13.](#) Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *A Dangerous Place*, Little Brown, Boston, 1978.
- [14.](#) Washington Post, 5 September 1999.
- [15.](#) New York Times, 13 September 1999.
- [16.](#) The Observer, London, 13 September 1999.
- [17.](#) Shenon, op. cit.
- [18.](#) Sydney Morning Herald, 8 July 1999.
- [19.](#) Australian Financial Review, 14 August 1999.
- [20.](#) The Observer, op. cit.
- [21.](#) Sydney Morning Herald, 26 July 1999.
- [22.](#) See Noam Chomsky, "Indonesia, master card in Washington's hand", *Le Monde diplomatique*, English Internet edition, June 1998, English print edition, September 1998.